



Dr. Alan Mintz

Is Teaching Ivrit B'ivrit Worth The Trouble?

My answer to this question is a vigorous "Yes!" Yet any reaffirmation of Hebrew as the proper classroom language for teaching Judaic subjects in day school must acknowledge that this is an ideal under fire. Teaching in Hebrew is a tough challenge for today's non-native speaking teachers who, unlike their predecessors of a generation ago, were not trained in Hebrew-rich environments like the Hebrew colleges. There is always the concern, shared at times by parents and educators alike, that "meaning" in core areas will be sacrificed in the awkwardness of communicating in a foreign language. Finally, there is American society itself, which has never fostered language study and has given Americans to believe that anything truly important will be given them in translation.

First, a little historical background. The idea of *Ivrit B'Ivrit* was put forward over a century ago not merely as a pedagogical technique but as a matter of ideological passion. The Zionist revolution had two planks, territory and language, and it was only the latter that could be cultivated in the Diaspora. Hebrew, especially for the followers of *Ahad Ha'am* in America, played the role of a portable homeland. By insisting on modern spoken Hebrew as the language of Jewish education, these pioneering Hebraist educators pulled off an extraordinary coup: They turned Sunday schools into Hebrew schools. The heyday of Hebraist education in America was 1920-1960. During this time, the Hebrew colleges were founded, central boards of Jewish education supervised the intensive Hebrew curricula of community-sponsored afternoon schools, and Hebrew summer camps were set up. The exemplars of this movement were the Yeshiva of Flatbush and the Massad Camps, institutions where Hebrew was so pervasive

that even the small talk in hallways and the chatter on the baseball field took place in the Holy Tongue.

We now live in a different world; it hardly needs to be pointed out. Yet even if the challenges are greater, the goal of teaching *Ivrit B'Ivrit* continues to make a strong claim on us. The rationale has of course changed;

to emerge.

Hebrew is the world language of the Jewish people and the essential medium of Jewish culture and religion. As such, it is a value in itself, a message as well as a medium.

The effortful investment in teaching in Hebrew is justified because it gives



we are no longer in the grip of the same ideological imperatives that impelled earlier educators. In fact, one of the great tasks confronting Jewish educational thinking is the reframing and reformulating of the rationale for Hebrew in terms that make sense to us today. In this job of rethinking, four themes are likely

students the one lifelong key needed to unlock the treasures of Jewish culture and experience, both ancient and modern.

Teaching classical texts in Modern Hebrew create an unbeatable synergy in which more Torah knowledge and more language skills are attained

than if each were taught separately. When students begin to recognize that the root stems they are manipulating in their spoken language are in many instances the same as the ones they are recognizing in the texts they are reading, then they are experiencing something very important about the nature of Jewish civilization.

When students are taught in Hebrew by non-native speakers of Hebrew, like themselves, they learn the important lesson that Hebrew is not just the language of the state of Israel and its citizens but a possession of the Jewish people everywhere, even if it is not spoken perfectly.



Yet even if you enthusiastically subscribe to these objectives, it can be a daunting chal-

lenge to put them into practice. Without spending considerable time in Israel—and then only under the right conditions—it is very difficult for an American-born teacher or administrator to attain the facility necessary to fluidly manage a classroom in Hebrew. It is for that reason we have developed the Ivriyon, a five-week Hebrew immersion program specially designed for day school teachers. Supported in part by AVI CHAI, the Ivriyon is a project of the Jewish Theological Seminary and held on its New York campus. It is open to day school teachers K-12 from schools of all stripes and denominations, as long as the schools are committed to Hebrew-rich instruction in Judaic subjects.

Ivriyon focuses on the language skills necessary not only to convey material in Hebrew but also to make a classroom come alive. Participants take turns presenting lessons and playing the role of students and giving each other supportive feedback while Hebrew-language experts offer suggestions for more effective communications. The participants learn how to ask questions that elicit responses and give students the necessary language to represent their feelings and ideas in Hebrew. They further learn how to writer correct work sheets and exercises. Grammar deficiencies are individually assessed and worked on. Ivriyon takes the discipline and promise of immersion seriously. Within an atmosphere of total commitment to Hebrew speech during every minute the program is in session (five days a week), it becomes possible to think in Hebrew and let the faculty of fluency develop.

Ivriyon is not the solution to the challenge of teaching Ivrit B'Ivrit but it is an important resource in approaching that valuable goal.

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