

The Art of Layering

From its inception, #OnwardHebrew has advocated for synagogue and part-time programs to create a rich Hebrew environment. But, when the word “environment” is thought of only as physical space, its purview is narrowed to signage and children’s learning spaces. I hope it is not too surprising that #OnwardHebrew’s innovators intended “rich Hebrew environment” to mean weaving Hebrew throughout the education program - well beyond a weekly sit-in-your-seat Hebrew lesson taught by a designated teacher or tutor.

Creating a “rich Hebrew environment” is similar to the practice of “layering” in interior design - mixing and matching colors, textures and patterns to add depth and interest to the space. Interior designers explain that layering helps elevate a space, make it feel more welcoming, and gives it character and/or dimension. Individuals experiencing a room designed with layers, engage with different aspects. Some might be drawn to the soft pillows and sofas, others to the textures of baskets and bowls, and still others might feel soothed by the colors. But overall, interior designers work to create an integrated experience and emotional reaction.



I offer this example of layering to create a parallel between the results that interior designers seek in a physical space with the intentional layering of Hebrew learning in a synagogue or other part-time Jewish educational programs. I’d also like to suggest that layered Hebrew experiences have the potential to create Jewish educational depth and interest, as well as emotional connections for the learner to Hebrew, Jewish life and the Jewish community.

What does layered Hebrew learning look like? Here are three examples that add character and/or dimension in time as well as space:

HEBREW THROUGH MOVEMENT: In Hebrew Through Movement (HTM) lessons, Hebrew language is taught in short, 15 minute sessions and (ideally) 100% in Hebrew. The goal of HTM in part-time/synagogue settings is to kinesthetically introduce Hebrew words that open up the meaning of Jewish rituals, prayers, and blessings.

HOW HTM SUPPORTS LAYERING: An HTM class that learned key words from the Hebrew blessing over bread may experience a very clear “ah-ha!” next time they recite Motzi over *hallah*. That “ah-ha!” also extends to working with the printed blessing, for when they have heard a Hebrew word pronounced multiple times by their HTM teacher and know its meaning, decoding moves from a slow and laborious process to one in which learners tap into Hebrew stored in memory.

JEWISH LIFE VOCABULARY: Jewish Life Vocabulary (JLV) is usually introduced in a three to five minute weekly learning segment offered in an all-group setting (e.g., at the beginning or end of *T’fillah* or Community Time) or by classroom teachers. JLV focuses on Hebrew words that deeply connect us to our

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heritage and to other Jews - for example, *bimah* (the front part of a synagogue) *ner tamid* (the eternally burning light that hangs above the ark), or a Hebrew phrase of praise like *kol hakavod* (“all the honor to you”). Note the difference between “Hebrew heritage words” and everyday Hebrew words that translate as *table* or *chair*.

HOW JLV SUPPORTS LAYERING: JLV words are reinforced when they move beyond the setting in which they were introduced, to other programmatic times and places. For example, weeks after their introduction, an art teacher might say to their students that are meeting in the sanctuary, “Please come up to the *bimah* and stand under the *ner tamid*. *Kol hakavod* to everyone for remembering what the words mean!”

T’FILLAH: In a Hebrew rich environment, *t’fillah* offers an age-appropriate worship service that includes prayers/blessings in Hebrew and gives attention to spiritual development, as well. Some programs offer *siddurim* (prayerbooks) and others project the prayers as “visual *t’fillah*.” Some have an aural/oral approach to *t’fillah*, with no printed page. There are those who provide prayers only in Hebrew and others are comfortable providing transliteration.

HOW T’FILLAH SUPPORTS LAYERING: It’s not uncommon for those who participate in weekly *t’fillah* to learn to sing the prayers from memory (it happens unintentionally). Yes, even if some words are pronounced incorrectly (oops!), these worshipers become confident “pray-ers.” When working on decoding prayers, they use what they have learned by heart to tackle the print on the page. No, this practice is not cheating and in fact, research about learning to read in one’s native language points to the importance of knowing the language before working with the print on the page.

These examples, alone and taken together, offer

- “texture” (learning that is kinesthetic, aural, oral and print-related) and
- “color” (15 minutes of HTM, 5 minutes of JLV, 25 minutes of *t’fillah*, time to work on decoding prayers/blessings and sprinklings of spontaneous Hebrew at various times and places)

Thus, learners have the opportunity and pleasure of learning Hebrew in multiple ways. This layering emerges naturally in programs that adopt a sound-to-print focus that includes HTM, JLV and *t’fillah*. Better yet, children are no longer in a multi-year decoding model in which those who flourish as in-your-seat-learners are successful, and others ... not so much.

But more importantly than what layered Hebrew learning looks like, what can it achieve? There is evidence¹ that multifaceted and integrated Hebrew experiences have the potential to create Jewish educational depth and interest, as well as facilitate a connection to community on both a micro level (with the students’ peers) and a macro one (with the broader synagogue, families and Jews worldwide).

Whether we call it a Hebrew-rich environment or refer to it as a program that intentionally layers learning experiences, #OnwardHebrew programs are discovering the benefits of enabling children to experience Hebrew learning in a modality they enjoy and in which they feel successful.

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¹ Goodman, R and Schwartz, K (2024), *A New Hebrew Narrative*. <https://tinyurl.com/New-Hebrew-Narrative>.