

A reflection on the 2024 “New Hebrew Narrative” study: What does it mean to “feel safe” when learning Hebrew?

In 2024, #OnwardHebrew commissioned a study in which two researchers interviewed 22 fifth, sixth and seventh graders from four different #OnwardHebrew “All In” synagogue programs. The goal was to discover what children had to say about their Hebrew learning.

Among the themes uncovered by the researchers was that children reported that Hebrew learning was a “safe” endeavor. Yes, safe. Quite a few students indicated that they did not feel judged by their Hebrew teachers, nor did they feel stressed when learning Hebrew.

On the one hand, developing students’ personal sense of safety is not explicitly mentioned in #OnwardHebrew’s guidance documents and professional development materials. On the other hand, Hebrew Through Movement (HTM) was developed based on brain-friendly¹ learning principles, one of which is that when a student is in a threatening or stressful environment, learning can be impaired. The very nature of HTM is low-stress, relaxed and fun. But, lest one concludes that this “safe” theme emerged due to the power of HTM, in the four synagogue programs from which interviewees were chosen, Hebrew Through Movement lessons stopped at the end of second or third grade, at least two and potentially five years prior to the study’s interviews.

So, what can we make of the conclusion that #OnwardHebrew’s approach lowers the tension and stress felt often in learning situations? There are traditional Hebrew teaching practices that #OnwardHebrew programs ignore, as well as practices baked into the sound-to-print / rich Hebrew environment approach that likely lead to the learners’ feelings of safety.

Here is what is not happening in “All In” #OnwardHebrew programs:

- Hebrew learning is not defined primarily as learning the AlefBet and decoding.
- Children are not spending three to four years practicing Hebrew decoding.

On the other hand, here is what is happening in most (though not all) “All In” #OnwardHebrew programs:

- There is a rich Hebrew learning environment that:
 - Weaves Hebrew learning throughout the program, not relegated to an hour here and forty-five minutes there.

¹ The brain functions well when it doesn’t feel threatened, when stress is lowered. The HTM strategies incorporate many practices that lower stress including encouraging social connectedness among learners and not calling out a student who doesn’t follow the Hebrew commands correctly.

- Offers each learner a positive experience in one or more aspects of the Hebrew curriculum; it's no longer one-size ("decoding-or-bust") fits all.
 - Expands the number of people students encounter in the program who teach and/or reinforce Hebrew, including educational leadership, clergy and their other teachers.
 - Enables children to gain "sounds" of Hebrew (i.e., general pronunciation, knowledge of specific words and simple grammar, the flow of Hebrew prayers and blessings) prior to being exposed to the task of learning to decode.
 - Opens to learners the meaning of key Hebrew words in prayers and blessings, as well as basic (very basic) language.
- The AlefBet and initial decoding are taught in fifth grade or later:
 - Offering learners the opportunity to first master the basics of reading in their native language, rather than struggling with print in two languages simultaneously
 - Enabling Hebrew decoding to be taught in less time, as compared to the multi-year experienced by younger students
 - Providing students the opportunity to experience Jewish prayers in their "natural environment" (i.e., a worship service) before tackling the task of learning to decode in a learning situation.

In addition, for all the negatives of the Covid pandemic, the necessities of the time pushed synagogues to rethink the time and place of Hebrew. Since then,

- One-on-one teaching is more prevalent; virtual learning has come into its own. As a result, children's individual learning needs can be taken into account - leading to less stress.
- When learning is online, parents don't have to fight midweek traffic and can more easily say yes to other after-school activities of interest to the child - leading to less stress.
- Teachers do not have to deal with overlapping behavior issues that emerge in regular-sized classes - leading to less stress.

So, yes, between #OnwardHebrew's sound-to-print approach and some of the other shifts in synagogue/part-time education, we celebrate the news that the children interviewed in 2024 feel safe in their "All In" #OnwardHebrew Hebrew learning situations. Hopefully, this finding will open the door for more synagogue/part-time educational programs to explore the possibility of adopting/adapting #OnwardHebrew's sound-to-print approach. This finding also challenges those already involved with #OnwardHebrew to help teachers and tutors more intentionally integrate low-stress, brain-friendly learning approaches into their teaching repertoire.