

## Smashing Idols in the Spirit of Abram

By, Nachama Skolnik Moskowitz (1/2025)



According to a famous *midrash*, Abram (aka, Torah's Abraham) revolutionized theology when he realized that the idols in his father's "idol shop" did not have the god-like powers ascribed to them. Abram's wisdom, as well as his *hutzpah* in smashing the idols, opened up new lines of thought and practice for his time.

Similarly, a number of Jewish educators have been smashing decades old beliefs and practices for teaching Hebrew in part-time/synagogue settings. Much of their early efforts smashed an (almost) singular Hebrew curricular focus on decoding prayers, resulting in students' newfound energy and enthusiasm for Hebrew learning. Now these educators are beginning to smash long-held assumptions about decoding's whys, whens and hows.

Below are four of the biggest smashes beginning to take hold on behalf of synagogue Hebrew.

### *Let's Smash: Introducing decoding too early*

So ... what really is "too early?" To answer this question, it is helpful to consider our learners' educational realities, as well as one marker of developmental readiness.

Public and private school educators working with elementary age children often describe a difference in language arts teaching after third grade. They explain that up through third grade children are "learning to read," while in fourth grade and beyond they are "reading to learn." Yes, there's a bit of hyperbole in this stark division in educational foci, but bottom line, it can take three to four years of daily learning (including home-support) for young children to become skillful early readers. In contrast, synagogue programs are typically open fewer weeks per year, with often three to seven days between each learning session; holidays, vacations and child-absences increase this time gap. In addition, most part-time Hebrew teachers are not professionally trained in research-based language learning strategies, whereas licensed language arts teachers are. These realities should be influencing influence decisions around Hebrew learning in our part-time settings.

And the developmental challenge? Teachers know, and researchers have verified, that there are native English-speaking seven (and some eight) year olds who still have difficulty distinguishing between the lowercase letters b, d, p, q.<sup>1</sup> Besides seeing this challenge in children diagnosed with

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<sup>1</sup> Davidson, Helen (2012). A study of the confusing letters B, D, P, and Q. The Journal of Genetic Psychology. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254352403\\_A\\_study\\_of\\_the\\_confusing\\_letters\\_B\\_D\\_P\\_and\\_Q](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254352403_A_study_of_the_confusing_letters_B_D_P_and_Q)

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learning disabilities or dyslexia, these letters *also* confound a number of typically developing second and third graders, though by fourth grade the issue is mostly resolved. This means that Jewish educators can assume that most of their typically developing upper elementary-age learners no longer struggle with letter orientation and can more easily tackle Hebrew with its many sets of similar-looking letters like ת ח ה or ד ר ן or ן ן ן ן.

Where does this leave us with not “too early?” Over the last fifteen years, a growing number of synagogue education directors have found success introducing the AlefBet and decoding to fifth graders or older. Typically developing ten/eleven year olds have “learned how to learn” in their general studies classrooms and many have the self-confidence to ask for additional help or explanations. In addition, students who have had years of Hebrew Through Movement, Jewish Life Vocabulary and regular worship experiences are able to bring that language-based foundation to their work with Hebrew print. For example, students who have sung *Oseh Shalom* in services can tap into that knowledge to correctly decode the word בְּמִרוֹמָיו when it appears after the phrase: עוֹשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם. In addition, children who see B’Mitzvah on the near horizon are often more invested in learning Hebrew than eight-year-olds who are five years away.

#OnwardHebrew’s more than thirty “All In” programs have smashed the assumption that synagogue learners have to spend hours and hours for three to five years learning, drilling and relearning how to decode Hebrew prayers. They have learned that when students spend time building a foundation of the “sounds” of Hebrew, they rather quickly learn the AlefBet and the skills of decoding in fifth grade or later. Their successes on the *bimah* as thirteen year olds offer proof that the time needed to tackle prayers and blessings can be shortened when introduced at a later age and traditional expectations for decoding fluency redefined.

### ***Let’s Smash: Requiring students to decode a prayer smoothly and accurately before learning to chant it***

For well over a millennium, Jewish worship was traditionally led by a *shali-ah tzibur* (a reader or leader for the community). Worshipers chanted along with familiar prayers and/or said “amen” at the end of blessings. In the 9th century CE, Rav Amram Gaon put quill to paper to codify the *siddur* (prayerbook) but access to its manuscript (handwritten or printed) was limited, even following the invention of the printing press in 1440. Several hundred years later, the technology advanced enough to mass produce *siddurim* that many worshipers could better afford. Even so, books in hand, prayers continued to be recited, not slowly nor laboriously decoded. Today the tradition of recitation continues, for if one can decode Hebrew but does not know the prayers by heart, one cannot stay at synagogue speed. The prayers *have* to be imprinted in memory, whether learned unintentionally from consistent participation in worship, or intentionally via memorization.



It is a bit ironic that in spite of Judaism's long-standing oral tradition of *t'fillah* (prayer), many of today's Jewish educators and clergy expect young 21st Century learners to be able to accurately and fluently decode from the *siddur*. But Jewish prayers were not written in child-friendly, age-appropriate language. Rather, many were originally composed 500-2000 years by rabbis, using Hebrew that current Israeli fifth graders would find difficult to pick up and read smoothly.



In addition, research findings from general education's "science of reading"<sup>2</sup> explain why fluent and accurate decoding may not be a fair goal for our learners. There are at least three prerequisites that enable a learner to read well in their native language (and yes, there's a difference between reading and decoding). To develop into a skilled reader, a person needs to: 1) know all the letters and vowels, 2) be able to hear the separate sounds within words, and 3) be very familiar with the target language. Today's synagogue learners have gaps with #1, are not drilled on #2, and most do not have the sounds of Hebrew language floating in their heads (#3).

This last prerequisite explains why students who do not have a Hebrew language background benefit from first learning to recite prayers and blessings before being asked to decode them. This background gives them a basis to know if their blending of letters and vowel signs "sound right," just as they do when first tackling English words.

### ***Let's Smash: Requiring students to decode a Torah verse accurately before learning to chant it***

There are no vowel signs nor trope marks in a Torah scroll - the person reading on behalf of the congregation has to be able to sing the verses from memory. Yes, they need to know how to decode the letters and vowels and use the trope signs to help them chant accurately. Still, the learning process could be less laborious if students started with the chant, instead of spending hours on decoding practice. True, learners might incorrectly learn some of the words, but there are research-based techniques for dealing with such errors.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Let's Smash: Expecting learners to decode Hebrew fluently and accurately before working with a B'Mitzvah tutor***

Let's start by acknowledging that B'Mitzvah tutors seem to always work magic - no matter at what level a student begins working with them, most thirteen-year olds do quite well when they ascend the *bimah* for their B'Mitzvah. While decoding is part of that process, much of the Hebrew

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<sup>2</sup> Hanford, Emily (2019). At a Loss for Words: How a flawed idea is teaching millions of kids to be poor readers. American Public Media. <https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2019/08/22/whats-wrong-how-schools-teach-reading>.

<sup>3</sup> OnwardHebrew (2024). Fossilized Errors. Conquering the Challenge of Hebrew Decoding. 49-52. <https://tinyurl.com/Conquering-Decoding>. [Also printed on pages 21-23 of this Toolkit]

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is eventually committed to memory and the learner matches what is in their head to the print on the page.

This begs the question - if a learner can competently recite the *G'vurot* blessing, do they really need to slow the process back down and decode it fluently and accurately, letter-vowel-letter, beginning to end? Or, asked another way, if a child confidently and competently prays in Hebrew AND can find their place on the page if asked, how much time and effort needs to be spent on fluent decoding?

While this may seem a hard expectation to smash, it is important to remember that decoding fluency is built via a time-intensive skill-based learning process. If educators have the courage to smash that expectation, synagogue curriculum could focus on more compelling Jewish ideas. In just the last few years, the list of educational priorities has expanded to include: finding avenues for integrating social-emotional learning with Jewish values and texts, tackling the recent challenges to Israel education that emerged post-October 7<sup>th</sup> 2023, as well as helping our families take pride in their Jewish heritage and identities in the face of an uptick in anti-Semitism. Taming the expectations for Hebrew decoding opens the door for this and more.

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There are synagogues across North America that have redefined their Hebrew learning goals and expectations in a way that decreases the decades-long obsession with decoding and the multi-year teaching and re-teaching that ensues. They are able to cultivate students who talk of Hebrew in enthusiastic terms and

- Feel confident and competent as Hebrew learners
- Feel competent and confident as “pray-ers”
- Are able to understand hundreds of Hebrew words, whether learned through Hebrew Through Movement lessons or those infused into English sentences (“After *t’fillah*, come up and meet me under the *ner tamid*.”)
- Feel a positive connection to Hebrew

And, yes, these students are able to decode.



The *midrash* of Abram smashing his father’s idols has the power to inspire Jewish educators and clergy to rethink long-held assumptions about, and expectations for, Hebrew education in a part-time/synagogue setting. To quote Rabbi Tarfon, “The day is short and the work is great...”<sup>4</sup> In the spirit of Abram, which long-held Hebrew teaching belief(s) might you like to smash this year?

*Illustrations:*

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<sup>4</sup> Pirke Avot 2:15