

## 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 growing 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. The results: students’ are reporting positive feelings for Hebrew learning! These educators are now 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 **educational realities** should be influencing Hebrew teaching decisions 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 learning disabilities or dyslexia, these letters also confound a number of typically developing second or third graders, though by fourth grade the issue is mostly resolved. This means that

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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)



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 hearing a line of Hebrew, or learning to recite prayers and blessings, before being asked to decode a passage. This foundation 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. While learners might incorrectly learn some of the words, 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 is

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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*. Pages 49-52. <https://tinyurl.com/Conquering-Decoding>.

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 7th 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.

# # #

There are over 70 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