

Hebrew learning in synagogues: A call for change



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(the online article has active links)

No need to go running for the ice buckets, but I'm officially throwing out a challenge to all involved in synagogue/part-time Jewish education **to lower the emphasis on, and decrease the amount of time devoted to Hebrew decoding**. We are a quarter of the way into the 21st century, but still holding onto a last-century Hebrew learning goal – the fluent and accurate “reading” of Hebrew prayers. No, I'm not suggesting that we stop teaching the *Alef-Bet*, nor Hebrew decoding skills. Rather, I am challenging us to expand our Hebrew learning goals.

Let's start with three definitions:

- **Reading** is a process by which a person gains meaning from print. Synagogue professionals often talk about teaching children to read Hebrew, but as will be explained below, that's an unfair goal in a part-time setting.
- **Decoding** is the sounding out of words letter-by-letter, syllable-by-syllable. Children in synagogue education programs spend much of their time doing this. It's a yawner!
- **Reciting** is a memorized process, whether purposefully done (like memorizing a poem) or a product of repetitive hearing. Recitation has the potential to empower those who utter the words and those who listen.

How does someone become a fluent reader in their native language? Research on the “science of reading” explains that fluency develops because of a process called orthographic mapping. Emerging readers start by learning the letters and slowly decoding words, but soon, a bit of “magic” happens as pronunciation and meaning get linked with the sequence of the letters. Words become mapped in the brain and are instantly accessible to the reader - no need to decode them anymore. A typically developing third grader's brain has mapped 3,000-8,000 words and by twelfth grade, that same child has instant access to over 80,000 words. Mapping enables fluent, accurate and meaningful reading. Interestingly, orthographic mapping does not seem to be a taught process, though certain preconditions allow words to be snapped into memory. [For details, check the articles, “At a Loss for Words” <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/hebrew-learning-in-synagogues-a-call-for-change/> and “How Hard Can it Be?” <https://www.onwardhebrew.org/blog/how-hard-can-it-be>]

Not surprisingly, students in synagogue settings do not have the prerequisites to achieve orthographic mapping in Hebrew, especially when the time is short and prayers and blessings offer a high level of linguistic difficulty. The goal of “fluent and accurate reading” is a misnomer; our synagogue learners cannot be expected to read Hebrew.

Is fluent decoding a good goal for synagogue education? While we know plenty of children who can decode Hebrew well-enough, conversations with education directors tell of too many sixth graders who struggle with smooth decoding. Unfortunately, both the end-goal (decoding) and the means (more decoding), have remained relatively unchanged over the years. The definition of insanity - doing the same thing repeatedly and expecting different results - explains why we have not yet solved the decoding conundrum.

In addition, reading research offers some important perspectives on those who struggle with decoding:

- **When students with deficient decoding skills** (*like our part-time Hebrew learners*) are given difficult reading materials (*like traditional Jewish prayers written by and for adults 500-2000*)

years ago), the results are “unrewarding early reading experiences.” Thus, it is easy to imagine that in Jewish educational settings, unrewarding early Hebrew learning experiences taint feelings toward Hebrew in general and prayer in specific. Strike one.

- **When learners struggle to decode** (i.e., are not yet reading fluently), their working memory gets overwhelmed, making it hard to focus simultaneously on the print and on comprehension. Their brain is on overdrive as they slowly and sometimes painfully string together the letters while trying to make sense of the words. It may be reasonable to extrapolate that learners sloggng to decode prayers may not have the mental energy to connect with the more uplifting spiritual or communal aspects of *t’fillah*. Strike two.

So, if practicing the skill of decoding can be unrewarding at best and uninspiring at worst, how might our learners become competent and confident pray-ers? One clue to this question’s answer is wrapped up in Jewish history. For two millennia, prayer was an aural/oral tradition. A designated prayer leader led the service and worshipers recited along, or simply responded “amen.” In more recent decades, with prayerbooks in hand, many synagogue educational programs began to expect that learners master the decoding of Hebrew prayers first, before learning to recite or sing them. This uncontextualized decoding is difficult and uninspiring. Strike three.

There is wisdom in introducing prayer as a spiritual experience (*kavannah*) in children’s native language, as well praying traditional Hebrew prayers (*keva*) via aural/oral repetition prior to introducing print. This sound-to-print (S2P) learning honors language development in our children who spend years hearing and speaking English before learning to read. Part-time Jewish educational programs can help children become competent and confident pray-ers by enabling them to not only hear and recite prayers/blessings, but also to match the words and prayers they know by heart to the print on the page.

Is S2P realistic in part-time Jewish settings? In early 2018, a new paradigm for Hebrew learning and engagement began spreading throughout North America, one that introduces Hebrew sounds before teaching children to decode (i.e., the print). Called [#OnwardHebrew](#), its 58 educational programs (touching over 8,000 children) have been expanding the goals of Hebrew learning beyond the printed page. They create Hebrew-rich learning opportunities by:

- teaching Hebrew language kinesthetically via [Hebrew Through Movement](#)
- infusing “[Jewish Life Vocabulary](#)” into English sentences (“*Kol hakavod*, Michael. You did a great job”)
- scheduling regular, meaningful Hebrew [worship experiences](#)

“All In” #OnwardHebrew educational programs introduce decoding in fifth grade or later, building upon a foundation of Hebrew language and sounds, with teachers learning to shift their traditional teaching approach to one that honors S2P learning. [Directors report](#) that #OnwardHebrew students exhibit energy and excitement for Hebrew learning and show confidence and competence when participating in *t’fillah*. They also have more time for compelling and relevant Judaic learning.

And so, a call for change! Hebrew has the potential to touch our children’s hearts if we expand our learning goals, moving beyond an almost singular focus on prayers. I challenge educators and clergy to invite stakeholders to new conversations about [Hebrew learning goals](#) and to reconsider their [assumptions about successful Hebrew learning](#).

I also challenge colleagues to discover ways to create a more symbiotic relationship between Hebrew recitation and decoding. If a child can recite/sing *G’vurot*, can we not count that as an equal success to decoding it? And once a child can recite *G’vurot*, how can we help them complement their oral mastery of the blessing with the printed words on the page? This is relatively new territory – it needs all of our brain power.

The gauntlet has been thrown down! On behalf of our learners, will you accept the challenge?