

## Learning from the Game of Dominoes

There are at least two ways to play the game of dominoes. The first is the version my Granny played – tiles laid out on a table, with two to four players taking turns matching colored dots to colored dots. Everyone understood and played by the rules. The second is the way my brother played – working alone or with a friend to line upright tiles in an intricate pattern, then watching in awe after the first tile was lightly tapped. As each tile fell, it hit another and the energy moved throughout the system, sometimes moving in a straight line and sometimes branching off to create multiple moving paths.

For decades, we have been playing my Granny's version of dominoes when it comes to Hebrew learning in synagogue settings. Long-held assumptions influence the rules for teaching Hebrew and everyone (well almost everyone) plays by the rules ...



- Valuing Hebrew decoding skills as the core focus for Hebrew learning in synagogue settings; all other Hebrew foci are often seen as icing on the cake.
- Expecting that our learners must decode Hebrew fluently and accurately at the point they begin working with their B'Mitzvah tutor.
- Assuming that if learners are not achieving the expected decoding goals that they need more (years)(hours)(minutes) of decoding drills.
- Insisting that the correct way for learners to tackle prayers or their Torah portion is to first drill the Hebrew letter-vowel-letter before they are taught (or allowed) to recite or chant them.
- Considering Hebrew learning as what is scheduled in a bounded time block (for example 9:30-10:25 on a Sunday morning, or on a weekday afternoon from 5:10-5:30 learning one-on-one or 4:15-5:45 in a class setting).
- Not questioning the percentage of time devoted to Hebrew learning in our settings, as compared to the other learning priorities. Once children begin learning more than one day a week, Hebrew time can equal or overtake the time spent on Jewish subjects.

This list could go on and on. And while I loved my Granny and her version of dominoes was fun, it plays out relatively linearly and flat (literally and figuratively) in offering a description of what I often call 20th Century Hebrew learning.

**On the other hand, my brother's version of dominoes offers Jewish education a model for a dynamic, multi-faceted approach to Hebrew learning that:**

- **Honors the way children learn their native language** - first listening, then moving through a progression of understanding, speaking, and reading/writing
- **Is integrated throughout the learning program**, creating a rich and engaging Hebrew environment, one that is not post-holed to one or two specific time slots

- **Offers Hebrew learning goals that tap into multiple learning strengths of our learners** - aurally learning and orally reciting prayers/blessings, learning Hebrew language kinesthetically, decoding the printed page, and at times learning in a large group and sometimes one-on-one.
- **Returns to Judaism's historical roots of reciting** prayers and blessings
- **Opens doors to praying as a spiritual experience**, rather than one that requires close attention to the letters and vowel signs on the page
- **Shrinks the time devoted to Hebrew learning in a part-time setting**, clearing the way for other Jewish learning priorities



As applied to Hebrew education in synagogue settings, the thinking behind my Granny's version of dominoes leads to what I often label as traditional or 20th Century learning. That's not to say that all traditional Hebrew learning focuses only on decoding. Over the decades, there have been attempts along the way to teach other foci, like modern Hebrew. But, as one of my colleagues notes, there is an obsession with Hebrew decoding that is hard to shake. Clergy, educators and even parents expect that by the time children begin working with their B'Mitzvah tutors, they can decode accurately and fluently.

But, perfect decoding is not a fair goal for learners in part-time/synagogue educational settings. The skill takes too much time to develop and depends on proficiencies that our native English speaking learners do not have in regard to the Hebrew language. In spite of the reasons "why not," it is hard for synagogue professionals to break away from decoding because "that's the way we have always done it" or perhaps because alternatives are hard to imagine.

Trust me, change is possible. For over a dozen years, Jewish educators across the country have moved from a decoding-focused learning model to one that is multi-faceted and embedded in a Hebrew rich environment. They tell us that their learners feel *competent* understanding Hebrew language in controlled settings, appear to *enjoy using Hebrew in prayer*, and have expressed a sense of *belonging* to people and places beyond themselves when Hebrew is taught dynamically, as my brother's version of dominoes.

So, *todah* (thank you) to my brother and others who love playing dynamically with dominoes. It's my hope that those of us faced by the conundrum of Hebrew in our synagogue settings will embrace the metaphor and its power.

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