

# #OnwardHebrew Takes Off

## Fall 2018 Survey - Executive Summary<sup>1</sup>

*"Almost everyone I have spoken to at our temple, thinks it is a phenomenal idea.*

*Most comments (from them) include, 'Why did no one think of this before?'"*

Respondent, #OnwardHebrew 2018 survey

#OnwardHebrew burst onto the Jewish educational scene in the Fall of 2017 with the goal of radically transforming the decades-old, less-than-effective approach<sup>2</sup> to teaching Hebrew in part-time/congregational settings. In contrast to most students' current experiences - with years of less-than-inspiring Hebrew decoding practice - #OnwardHebrew advocates sound-to-print learning, paralleling the way children acquire their mother tongue, i.e., building an oral/aural foundation (i.e., hearing *sounds*) prior to learning to read (i.e., tackling *print*).

In its first year of existence, #OnwardHebrew quickly expanded beyond its initial leadership team of seven, to hundreds of Jewish educators and clergy who have participated in workshops, shared conversations and joined the initiative's Facebook group. On a formal level, almost 20 congregational education programs applied for and achieved "On-the-Way" or "All In" status with the four #OnwardHebrew elements (see *the textbox*).

The large interest and speedy adoption of the #OnwardHebrew principles across North America inspired the development of a Fall 2018 survey against which future progress will be measured. Reaching out to educator groups through Facebook and other social media, 86 valid surveys were attained, representing 86 different educational programs, most of which (but not all) had adopted one or more elements of #OnwardHebrew. The information from the respondents provide evidence of #OnwardHebrew's early impact, as well as potential trajectory.

Students in educational programs that are "All In" with #OnwardHebrew are immersed in rich Hebrew learning that expands beyond the walls of a typical classroom period. These students:

- Learn Hebrew via "Hebrew Through Movement" (HTM)
- Participate in regular Hebrew *t'fillah* (worship).
- Hear Jewish Life Vocabulary (JLV) intentionally infused in English sentences
- Learn to decode/read Hebrew *after* they have spent years learning Hebrew aurally/orally.

### SUMMARY OF FINDINGS:

1. *#OnwardHebrew is an initiative still in its infancy*, beginning to spread from a small group of initial "innovators" to a larger number of "early adopters."<sup>3</sup> Education directors who are intrigued with #OnwardHebrew have generally started with low-hanging fruit (e.g., Hebrew Through Movement, Jewish Life Vocabulary, and more frequent and intentional Hebrew worship opportunities).

<sup>1</sup> With thanks to Dr. Isa Aron for her assistance in editing both the Executive Summary and Full Report.

<sup>2</sup> Schachter, "Why Bonnie and Ronnie Can't Read (the Siddur)." *Journal of Jewish Education*, 71:2, pages 74-91. Moskowitz, "Maybe We Should Blame Guttenberg," <https://www.onwardhebrew.org/blog/maybe-we-should-blame-guttenberg>

<sup>3</sup> This language is based on E.M. Rogers's "Diffusion of Innovation" theory, offering five adopter categories: Innovators, Early Adopters, Early Majority, Late Majority, and Laggards. <http://sphweb.bumc.bu.edu/otlt/MPH-Modules/SB/BehavioralChangeTheories/BehavioralChangeTheories4.html>

2. *Almost two-thirds of the education directors who responded to the survey, especially those connected to the Reform movement, expressed enthusiasm for the #OnwardHebrew learning approach.*
3. *Respondents indicated high student and teacher enthusiasm for key elements of #OnwardHebrew.* There is new energy for Hebrew learning in part-time settings.
4. *The biggest two challenges for those adopting #OnwardHebrew are convincing stakeholders that*
  - a) *aural/oral literacy should be well-established* before introducing the skill of Hebrew decoding/reading and b) that *print is more efficiently taught in a one-on-one setting*, rather than in an all-class environment. The survey results illustrate that most responding educational programs have not moved their decoding instruction to a later grade, nor created one-on-one learning opportunities.
5. *The potential of #OnwardHebrew's reach is large.* Of the 86 survey respondents, 62 noted that their educational program had adopted Hebrew Through Movement (HTM). These 62 report a combined total of over 5,000 HTM students this Fall, alone. While 5000 sounds impressive, the number is undoubtedly low - the 62 HTM respondents represent less than 20% of the 350+ educational programs that have enrolled teachers in the JECC's online HTM seminar since its introduction six years ago.



Photo: Jewish Education Center of Cleveland

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

#OnwardHebrew is a new initiative that is standing “on the edge of possibility,” ready to transform a tired, decades old learning model in part-time/congregational educational programs. In the last year, the Jewish Education Center of Cleveland, with the input and direction of #OnwardHebrew’s leadership team, has provided a number of supports including a robust, resource-filled website and a “join-the-conversation” Facebook group. However, survey results hint at the need for more attention to supporting transformational change and more intentional involvement of stakeholder groups (clergy, parents, teachers). With almost a third of the survey’s respondents asking for someone to contact them regarding #OnwardHebrew, it is clear that more personal attention is needed to accelerate the initiative.

### **#OnwardHebrew...join the conversation!**

**Website:** <http://OnwardHebrew.org>

**Facebook:** <https://www.facebook.com/groups/144174356227118/>

**Twitter:** #OnwardHebrew

**Instagram:** OnwardHebrew