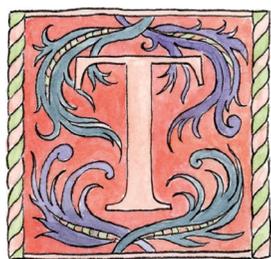


# The Trouble with Reading Hebrew



THIRTY YEARS AGO, I supplemented my graduate fellowship by teaching bar and bat mitzvah students for a Conservative synagogue in New York. I quickly confirmed what I had long assumed, based on the odd bar or bat mitzvah I had attended there before: Most of the b'nai mitzvah chanted their haftarah by rote, because they couldn't read Hebrew and didn't know the *trop*, the ancient Masoretic cantillation signs that follow the syntax of the even more ancient text. You could tell: The rote learners sounded like time-traveling tourists to ancient Israel, working from a well-thumbed Berlitz phrase-book — which, in a way, they were.

Now, it's one thing not to teach *trop*. But teaching the text by rote seemed like telling an illiterate he would be declaiming the first 10 pages of *Huckleberry Finn* in public in nine months and working to help him memorize it, rather than teach him to read.

Had the children not attended years of Hebrew school? I asked the principal what was happening with the Hebrew reading program.

I offered a few useful suggestions from my own experience, which were received with the geniality and warmth we associate with Lord Voldemort.

Never mind, I thought. Six months at half an hour a week was tight to teach reading and *trop*; each student's haftarah and its blessings; the Torah blessings; and a few prayers. But I was a competent teacher and an experienced Torah reader. In my teens, I had chanted the weekly reading at our Orthodox London synagogue. I also designed my own *trop* learning tool: There wasn't much available in those days.

It worked. Everyone learned what they had to, some very well — others well enough. I thought every bar and bat mitzvah student should use my training system, which teaches *trop* using examples only from the student's haftarah. That meant creating more than 60 different workbooks. I even started to market the books. But then I finished a Ph.D. on William Faulkner, abandoned literary academia for management consulting, and abandoned management consulting for editing. When I left the corporate world, I had more time for my own projects. I became convinced that all b'nai mitzvah should know how to read Hebrew and chant haftarah — an aspiration that, ideally, might reach half of all American Jews, at least the half who know the Hebrew alphabet. Perhaps, I thought, my offline system should be resurrected: There's something to be said for teaching Jewish texts from a book.

I asked our Hebrew-school principal to send me three b'nai mitzvah students to prepare. None of my students could read fluently. It was just what I had seen years before. They could sound out the letters and vowels. But they couldn't read.

What was going on? Below are my "findings," something I put in quotation marks because this is an essay about my personal experience bolstered by many conversations, rather than anything one could call a formal research project. That said, all but one of those who suggested I ought to gather data formally also said that they agreed with the general claims made here. In addition, as you will read below, I plan to conduct a five-year longitudinal experiment to test what I believe today.

I knew it wasn't a question of the Hebrew-school principal's competence: She was highly experienced and deeply committed. I assumed she oversaw competent teachers. And the kids seemed generally engaged and smart, up there on the bimah, delivering funny, intelligent, often heartfelt speeches.

I plunged into the Internet and contacted about 15 rabbis, b'nai mitzvah tutors, Hebrew-school teachers and principals, program managers at Jewish nonprofits, and some well-informed old friends from London. Given that I was adding London, I also contacted people in Canada, South Africa, and Australia: Perhaps things were different somewhere in the English-speaking world.

They were not. Generally, in Anglophone countries, Hebrew-school students to the left of Modern Orthodox—essentially, Conservative, Reform, and their international counterparts—do not learn to read Hebrew accurately, let alone fluently, unless they go to Jewish day school. Even this exception does not hold everywhere: In England, most Jewish children go to state-funded Jewish schools and still don't learn. Canada does somewhat better than elsewhere, perhaps because the country has a long tradition of bilingualism, and certainly because it has a far greater proportion of Jewish students in day school. This means the pool of non-readers is small and there are plenty of certified day-school teachers to teach Hebrew school—and, consequently, higher communal expectations. Based on preliminary inquiry, South Africa is a bit like Canada and Australia a bit like London.

But positive *structural* conditions cannot be imported to America, where, over a period of years, perhaps a hundred hours of Hebrew-school students' learning time are devoted to reading. I found five reasons Hebrew school students can't really read Hebrew.

- First, some schools don't try. In my conversations, I heard "supplementary school" nearly as often as "Hebrew school." This is a nod to the fact that some schools focus their limited time on

---

*That is the challenge: getting students to the point where they read Hebrew fluently enough that they develop a kind of muscle memory.*

---

Jewish and Israeli culture, history, Bible stories—anything and everything other than Hebrew reading. They want to give kids positive Jewish experiences and so avoid rote teaching that might well alienate, the power of early experience being what it is.

- Second, Hebrew school is now, for many, at best a twice- or even a once-a-week affair. But language learning needs *little and often*. Otherwise, students forget part of what they learn from one week to the next. They forget much of the rest over the long summer.
- Third, the commitment to Hebrew reading to the left of Modern Orthodoxy is not absolute. A Conservative school might set about teaching second- or third-graders to read—only to find them a fair part of the way back to square one the following October. Instead of saying, "We must try a different way," the school may emphasize something else, even while taking a less intense second run at the effort. Eventually, reading gives way to learning a modest number of prayers, with memory quickly taking over from decoding.
- Fourth, there is little real accountability. You don't fail out of Hebrew school. You don't lose your shot at a good college if you do poorly. You don't get into trouble if you don't do your homework—if there is homework. There are teachers good at setting and maintaining expectations. But they are rare.
- Fifth, more often than not, there is little outside reinforcement. Parents certainly want their children to read Hebrew. But there are generally no prayers at home; rarely is there Friday-night dinner

with candles lit and kiddush recited (although this appears to be becoming more common), and a great many parents go to shul just three times a year and to the b'nai mitzvah of friends. The children live in a culture in which secular studies matter, but Jewish culture and observance are “kosher style.”



Is there a solution?

Some believe we don't need one. Two of my London friends thought reading without understanding was pointless. What the current generation of students wants, one told me, is authenticity, not nostalgia: Chanting words whose meaning you do not know to a musical system you do not understand—that's playacting for the parents' benefit. One American professional who is passionate about spoken Hebrew told me it was worse than pointless: Settling for reading without understanding rather than teaching Americans to speak Modern Hebrew (at which point teaching reading becomes easy) kept Jews from a skill that would make them more committed Zionists. He thought this downright dangerous.

Nevertheless, not teaching reading is certainly an option. There is a trend toward “b-mitzvahs” that don't require Hebrew. I found one program called B'naiture, which specializes, as you might imagine, in “wilderness coming-of-age journeys.” One person told me it's quite good. More important, here as in many other alternative programs, Hebrew reading is an optional extra.

Yet for as long as synagogues continue to ask b'nai mitzvah to chant their haftarah, Hebrew reading must be taught at some point. The trend is toward more, not less Hebrew, as the Reform movement rediscovers the aleph-bet as a kind of metaphysical plutonium producing a spiritual nuclear reaction. So these alternative programs aren't what professionals call a scalable solution. As for those who dismiss chanting words whose meaning one does not know, there is a reason traditional Catholics have fought so hard to keep the Latin mass.

Where does this leave us? My conversations and reading generated three main possibilities:

- Take Hebrew reading out of the Hebrew-school curriculum once and for all: Leave it to the bar and bat mitzvah tutors, for a time when the children must begin one-on-one preparation and everyone is as invested as they will ever be. All Hebrew schools will then be supplementary schools that can focus elsewhere in the universe of Jewish and Israeli culture.
- Have synagogues contract with experienced reading tutors and add an hour of one-on-one tutoring to the first semester of Hebrew school, during which children will learn to read Hebrew with what I call “slow fluency.” It's a commitment, but only for the first semester, when the children are not yet overburdened with extracurriculars. If parents are told their children may otherwise never learn to read, many will bite. As for the money: Any Hebrew school that can turn out even slow-fluent readers will find the funding required.
- Finally, if the Hebrew schools believe that they can reliably teach Hebrew reading in the class setting, they could recommit to doing so. There *are* very good Hebrew-school teachers whose students achieve slow fluency by the end of the first year. But they are very far from universal. This would need to change.



My rude awakening came after six weeks with the students I had signed up to prepare for bar and bat mitzvah. Here's what happened.

Over the first three of those weeks, each had made respectable progress, but they slipped back between lessons. Misreadings crept in. I was doing “lots and infrequently” instead of little and often. So I cut the homework up into six pieces to be audio-texted to me six days

a week. (On the seventh day, they rested.) It took me 30 seconds per student to listen, and 30 seconds to text something encouraging with corrections. It didn't matter where anyone was. It worked beautifully.

Three weeks later, I was congratulating myself on the fact that my fastest-moving student had achieved slow fluency in six weeks. We were now reading difficult Hebrew from Isaiah. But as is the way with such things, it was then that I suddenly realized that all of the solutions offered above would work—but only temporarily.

Why I realized it only then, I cannot tell. But it became clear to me that, in almost every case, students will begin to forget when the lessons stop. The slow fluency that the solutions above will achieve might be a significant improvement over what is happening today, and it results in better b'nai mitzvah experiences for the students—children feel great pride in learning new skills, and it enhances their confidence generally. But the skill doesn't last.

If it is to last, Hebrew schools must get students to continue practicing Hebrew all the way to their bar and bat mitzvah at least. *That* is the challenge: getting students to the point where they read Hebrew fluently enough that they develop a kind of muscle memory, always available to them. Perhaps that level of fluency will keep some engaged. For the others, it will be there for them whenever they step into a synagogue or if they come back to Judaism after a long gap.

So why isn't that happening, at least sufficiently, in most Hebrew schools? Follow-up conversations confirmed that a bias against rote learning, anxiety about not giving students a positive Jewish experience, and an awareness of all the other things one can do with one's few hours a week combine to push this idea outside the solution set.

I believe this is a mistake.

Doing this is not a technical challenge: It can be done with a prayer book that proceeds from easier to more difficult Hebrew, adroit use of Israeli children's books, easy-reading Hebrew newspapers designed to assist in aliyah, and so on. I also think it is long past time we got over our allergy to rote learning. *Repetitio est mater studiorum* is an idea so deep in ancient Roman culture that I can't track it to a source.

Can students and parents be kept on board? I believe so. This part of the curriculum will of course have to be taught by energetic, charismatic, experienced teachers. But there is a powerful return on one's investment. You get all the advantages that come with fluent Hebrew reading as a permanent cultural possession (something most Hebrew schools still think worth investing in) and the double implication of the Roman proverb: Repetition doesn't just help you remember things, it trains your memory, too.

Am I right? There is certainly a possibility that Hebrew schools simply have too little time for fluent Hebrew reading to be an option at all. But I do not think so. To find out, I am now working with a Hebrew-school principal to develop a program that will begin with intensive reading for second-graders and devote a significant amount of time in every grade thereafter until b'nai mitzvah tutoring begins. Of course, everything will be done to make sure the programs don't seem like Hebrew reading programs. But that is what they will be. I'll come back with a mid-project review in two or three years.



In *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Indiana Jones seeks the Ark of the Covenant ahead of Belloq, Hitler's unscrupulous French archaeologist-for-hire. At one point, Belloq says to Indiana Jones, "Do you realize what the Ark is? It's a transmitter. It's a radio for talking to God!"

Belloq is wrong. It's not the gold-clad acacia box that allows you to talk to God—it's the words on the tablets inside, delivered by God to the Children of Israel after they have marched out of Egypt to Mount Sinai. A rich Jewish relationship with God begins with the Torah and continues with the Talmud, the study of whose 2,000 pages kept a landless people intact through thick and very often appallingly thin. If, God forbid, the worst should happen, text study will do so again. Basic Hebrew literacy is the key to the door of this staggeringly rich tradition. Shouldn't every Jew have the opportunity to turn it and step through? \*