

Benefits of Hebrew Literacy

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Hebrew is a problem. That's right, you heard me. Hebrew is a problem.

For half of the congregation – not only Congregation B'nai Israel, but just about any Reform synagogue – praying in Hebrew is a normal, natural, authentic way of approaching God. Yes, this half also finds meaning in English prayers. No, not all of these folks read Hebrew well or understand it. In fact, sometimes those newest to Judaism are most eager to pray in Hebrew.

For the other half of the congregation, give or take, praying in Hebrew is meaningless or worse. Not having been raised on Hebrew prayers, one may feel alienated when the congregation is praying in a foreign language, however sacred. Not understanding Hebrew, and knowing that most of the people who can pronounce the Hebrew also don't know what the words mean, may make the prayers seem inauthentic. Worst of all, when the congregation is praying in Hebrew, many well educated adults feel grossly incompetent. If the Temple is supposed to be our spiritual home, it ought not to be a place where we feel out of place or ignorant.

Unfortunately, this division leads many in the congregation to be unhappy with worship services, approximately half of the time.

Hebrew wasn't always a problem in Reform Judaism.

Praying in the vernacular – beginning in Germany, in German – has been a hallmark of Reform Judaism from the beginning. When Jews reached America's shores, and the movement we know as Reform was being shaped for the New World, two great leaders clashed. Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, the great founder of the congregational Union and of our seminary, sought to establish an American Judaism that would be comfortable for all. His rival, Rabbi David Einhorn, advocated for a more radical reform. The institutions that Wise founded thrive to this day. In the late 19th Century, though, Einhorn prevailed. Einhorn's prayer book would become the basis for *Union Prayer Book*, which united Reform congregations for three-quarters of a century. Those who wished to retain more traditional practice, including more prayer in Hebrew, would find spiritual homes

outside Reform Judaism. Wise's dream of one form of Judaism for all American Jews was not to be realized.

The radical reformers saw little value in Hebrew prayer. Long before the Catholic Church would move away from the Latin rite, Reform rabbis sought to shape a worship service that would be fully comprehensible to the worshiper whose only language was English. Yes, a vestige of Hebrew would remain – the *Shema*, the watchword of our faith; and the *Kaddish*, perhaps as a nod to the generations being memorialized. David Bauman likes to joke that the closing hymn had to be English: *Ein Keiloeinu*. He's not wrong. I can't tell you how many people have insisted to me that services were entirely in English when they were growing up. Then, when I ask, "What about the *Shema*? Or *Ein Keiloeinu*? They look at me, puzzled. Some Hebrew was so familiar that it might as well have been English. In addition, some other prayers were intoned in Hebrew by the choir; as long as the congregation wasn't supposed to join in, nobody minded. Consider *Avinu Malkeinu* on the High Holy Days. Nobody sang along with the Barbra Streisand version. (And of course, I'm joking in that regard, too. The beloved melody was written for a male soloist by Max Janowski.)

In any event, until the 1970s, Reform Jewish worship services were almost exclusively in English; nobody gave a second thought to the portions that were in Hebrew; and Hebrew wasn't a problem.

Then, the Bar Mitzvah, and the Bat Mitzvah, took Reform Judaism by storm. Let me offer some background.

In his column for this month's *Chronicle*, our President, David Bauman, wrote about one of the most significant innovations brought about by the radical reformers. They abolished the Bar Mitzvah. Yes, that was an accomplishment in their eyes, for the American Reform founders thought the very idea of a thirteen year old adult, Jewish or otherwise, to be laughable. Moreover, not having conceptualized the Bat Mitzvah, they were eager to do away with a milestone applicable to males only. They also had discovered a phenomenon unknown to their European predecessors: Many American youths left formal Jewish education after Bar Mitzvah. By pushing the recognized milestone later, to Confirmation at the end of tenth grade, the Reform rabbis would retain students to a more mature age, enabling them to indoctrinate young Jews more thoroughly.

Though Hebrew doesn't seem to have been an explicit factor in the decision to move from Bar Mitzvah to Confirmation, the abolition of the Bar Mitzvah was either the result of a decline in Hebrew literacy, its cause, or both. No longer would young Jewish boys need to learn how to offer the Hebrew blessings over the Torah, read a brief selection from the scroll and chant from the ancient Hebrew words of the prophets. Hebrew wasn't part of the curriculum of Reform religious schools, beyond learning the *Shema*. Over time, students began to learn blessings over Sabbath and Chanukah lights, wine, and bread, but little else.

What changed?

Well, for one thing, a version of Wise's dream of one form of Judaism for American Jews is increasingly becoming a reality. In the 21st Century, American Jews who are not Orthodox are identifying more and more as Reform Jews. What that means is that large numbers of members of Reform congregations today grew up in Conservative Judaism. Those who are new to Reform eagerly sought out communities that would welcome their non-Jewish spouses, converts to Judaism – and, more recently, gay, lesbian, and transgender Jews. They did not seek to leave behind some of their most beloved Jewish rituals.

Warm memories of becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah came with these newcomers to Reform Judaism. Even those whose memories were less positive sought to mollify their parents by arranging Bar or Bat Mitzvah for the older generation's grandchildren.

Just as important, the State of Israel had been born. While some Reform Jews were anti-Zionist at the outset, opposition to Israel nearly evaporated in most of the United States after World War II and the Holocaust. The Civil Rights Movement, with its Black Pride initiative, inspired Jews to ask themselves: "Ought we not to accentuate what makes us distinctively Jewish?" Israel's stunning victory in the Six Day War instantly transformed the perception, and especially the self-perception of American Jews. Jewish pride blossomed. No longer did we think of ourselves as weak, or of being Jewish as something about which to be quiet. Instead, we began to wear stars of David. Missions to Israel multiplied.

By the late 1970s, American Reform Jews began to be led by rabbis who had undergone a year of their rabbinical training in Jerusalem. More hebraically knowledgeable, and more Zionist, these rabbis were eager to capitalize on the renewed interest in Bar and Bat Mitzvah. Reform Rabbis seized the opportunity

to enhance Hebrew education and literacy. Though it would take a generation for Bar and Bat Mitzvah to become virtually universal in Reform Judaism, the change was irreversible. And if those thirteen year-olds were going to stand on the pulpit and read from the Torah, they were going to need to know how to read Hebrew. Hebrew made significant inroads in religious school curricula, with Hebrew education ultimately becoming universal in Reform Judaism.

But what to do about the previous generation, which had never learned to read Hebrew? And what of those who would join us as adults, either as converts or as members of Jewish families? Yes, adult Hebrew classes would be offered, but most of those folks wouldn't bite, kept away by lingering ideology about Hebrew being foreign less than by fear of failure. It's not impossible, but neither is it easy, to teach an old dog, or a middle aged Jew, new tricks.

The generation of rabbis preceding my own, together with Reform Jewish educators, turned to the vehicle that had transformed Hebrew literacy for the younger generation: Bar and Bat Mitzvah. On one level, the notion of an Adult Bar or Bat Mitzvah is either redundant or an oxymoron: A young person becomes Bar or Bat Mitzvah, obligated to perform the commandments, upon reaching the age of 13, ceremony or none. On the other hand, Adult B'nai Mitzvah offered the many people an incentive to learn Hebrew, with an exciting goal at the end.

This Shabbat, Congregation B'nai Israel celebrates, as four adults become B'nai Mitzvah. Just as we might say that a thirteen year old is entering the first phase of Jewish religious adulthood, adult B'nai Mitzvah have achieved the first phase of Hebrew literacy. They can pray with the congregation, with a genuine feeling of competence. They can make out some of what they see when they travel to Israel. They can, at least to some degree, participate when they visit a synagogue that is not Reform, not in an English-speaking country, or both.

For these four adults, Hebrew is no longer a problem. Ellyn plans to form a new adult B'nai Mitzvah Chavurah in the fall. Actually, it won't be an entirely new chavurah, since Jealene, Dale, Rebecca and Richard, together with Glenn, promise to be its first members. Also, Kathy Bauman and Meg Marion will begin a new beginning Hebrew reading class on Sunday mornings when Religious School starts again in late August. Let the benefits of enhanced Hebrew literacy, for individuals and for the congregation, ever increase.

Amen.