

Language of the
Hebrewman
Is Hebrew still relevant?

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KOACH
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The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism

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The following materials have been created by **KOACH** for the enhancement of your on-campus programming. They are designed to be adjustable based on your interests and the available time. This packet contains: background materials, copy ready text sheets, and a facilitator guide. The background materials and facilitator guide will help you build conversations around the text and create connections between the text and contemporary life.

Questions? Send them to: estrin@uscj.org.

The Language of the Hebrewman

by Ehud Banai

1. Speak up, the language of the Hebrewman
2. Loud and clear! The language of the Hebrewman.
3. It is the language of the prophets,
4. Of the sign up on the wall.
5. It is old and sacred
6. it will open up your soul.
7. Speak up, the language of the Hebrewman
8. Loud and clear! The language of the Hebrewman.
9. From the deepest mess of downtown Babylon,
10. it will take you to the next train to Mount Zion.
11. It will get you up, it will make you fly,
12. the language of the Hebrewman will take you high.
13. You know Abraham spoke the language of the Hebrewman
14. (And also Jesus from Nazareth and Maria Magdaline)
15. Einstein, Jeremiah, the Dylan and the Kohen,
16. they know something about the language of the Hebrewman.
17. And when the Lord said, "Let there be lights",
18. it was in the language of the Hebrewman.
19. And when Moses said, "Let my people go!",
20. it was in the language of the Hebrewman.
21. Speak the language of the Hebrewman.
22. Vehaya bayom hahu, or hadash gadol ya'ir
(And it shall come to pass on that day, a new great light shall shine,)
23. le'at niftach ha-sedek, le'at nofel ha-kir.
(gradually the crack opens, gradually the wall shall fall)
24. ukshe-tagi'a ha-sha'a, yavo ehad beshem ehad,
(And when the hour comes, one shall come in one name,)
25. yakiru ve-yed'u kol ha-olam safa ahat.
(the whole world will recognize and know one language.)
26. Speak the language of the Hebrewman.
27. Vehaya bayom hahu, yavo ehad beshem ehad,
(and it shall come to pass on that day, one shall come in one name,)
28. yakiru ve-yedu kol ha-olam safa ahat
(the whole world will recognize and know one language.)
29. le'at nivneh ha-bayit, kav le-kav, ot le-ot
(Gradually the house is built, line upon line, letter upon letter.)
30. al na tomar li, "Bye Bye", emor rak "Lehitraot".
(do not say to me, "Bye Bye", say only "Lehitraot".)
31. Speak the language of the Hebrewman.
32. And let us all say, "Hallelu-Yah"
33. let us all say, "Amen".
34. A day will come, when everybody
35. will speak the language of the Hebrewman.



The Language of the Hebrew Man.

Background Material

The Language

Consisting of 22 consonants, (five of which have a different form when they appear at the end of a word) and written from right to left, modern spoken Hebrew is the only colloquial speech in the world based on a written language – that of the Torah and old Hebrew texts. Though not normally written, the vowels or points, located below the consonants, are ascribed to the Masoretic scholars.¹

The History

12th century BCE: Hebrew develops into an independent language (though the actual alphabet looked different). It is a part of the Canaanite group of the Semitic languages.

1st century BCE: The written form of the Hebrew alphabet, as we know it today, develops from the Aramaic alphabet. Since Aramaic was the common language of the time, Hebrew is also influenced by the grammatical structures and rules of Aramaic. At this time, it is likely that Hebrew was being used only within scholarly circles and for ritual and prayer.

200 CE: An updated form of Hebrew, Mishnaic or Rabbinic Hebrew develops. It is used in the Mishnah and later for Midrash and the Hebrew sections of the Talmud. Greek, Latin, Persian and Aramaic words begin to show up in common usage. Hebrew continues to be used primarily for ritual and in scholarly circles.

1880: At the same time as Zionism rises, modern Hebrew is beginning to emerge.

Early 1900's: Eliezar Ben Yehuda (1852-1922) reinvigorates the idea of utilizing Hebrew as a spoken language. After immigrating to Palestine in 1881, he promoted the use of Hebrew as the language of instruction in Jewish schools and in the home. Throughout the remainder of his life he created thousands of new words. Modern Hebrew is based on biblical Hebrew, though it is filled with additions from throughout history. The syntax of modern Hebrew is based on that of the Mishnah.

1948: With the establishment of the state of Israel, Hebrew becomes the official language.

¹ This was the invention of the rabbis of the **School of Tiberias** (in the **ninth century CE**). By doing this they attached their understanding to the words and names in their texts of the Torah.

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Facilitator Guide

The Facilitator Guide is designed to direct you through several discussion options. Although it is designed as a progression, you need not follow from beginning to end. Each section can stand on its own or be combined with another. Use the packet in its entirety or choose components based on the time you have available and the students in your group.

Getting Started

Below are different icebreakers/entry conversations. Choose the one most appropriate to your group to move people into the conversation about the use of Hebrew.

- 1) Have people introduce themselves and say why learning/using Hebrew is/is not important to them as individuals or to the Jewish people. You can expand upon this by pointing out it was essentially a dead language that was revived only about 130 years ago.
- 2) Begin a discussion on the various ways/places that Hebrew is utilized and its impact in that venue.
- 3) If you can sell it, create and read a fake press release that covers the following basics: Due to the reduced usage of Hebrew outside of Israel, educators around the country are considering eliminating the learning and use of Hebrew. Ask them what they think.

Hebrew in the Torah

Take a few minutes to provide some background on the traditional views of the use of Hebrew in our history and to discuss what, if any, relevance this has on the continued use of Hebrew.

The Torah and Rabbinic texts teach us that there was only one language – Hebrew – prior to the Tower of Babel (around 3,000 BCE). When God spoke the universe into existence, it was with Hebrew; when Adam named the animals, he used the Hebrew he had learned from God; Adam's children taught it to their children down through the generations to the Tower of Babel.

See the appendix for a text sheet and facilitator's guide if you desire a more in depth look at this section.

The Language of the Hebrew Man by Ehud Banai

This song became popular in Israel during the late summer of 2004. Contained within it are amazing connections to the history, use and feelings surrounding the use of Hebrew.

If you don't have the CD, the song is accessible at:

http://karaites-use.org/Sukkoth%20Site/sukkoth_music_and_prayer.htm

Note: If you play the song from the CD there is an additional line found in our text sheet in parenthesis.

- We suggest that you play the song through a couple of times and then simply have the group brainstorm to see what they think about the song. Does it bring up any connections for them (modern, historical, biblical)?
- Depending on which connections the group comes up with, go through the song with them and talk about some of the historical connections and their possible implications.
- Finally, below are some “big picture” discussion points about the song that can be developed into conversations.

Discussion points:

- This song was written by an Israeli. Who was it written for and why (real answer- for Israelis)? Why is it predominantly in English? Why is the chorus in Hebrew? Note on the CD insert the English is transliterated into Hebrew letters.
- Who is the “hebrewman”? Israeli, Jew.
- What kind of music does this sound like? Reggae/Rastafarian. What is their movement about? Freedom. How might this tie into the song?
- Take a look at the chorus: “Speak up, the language of the Hebrewman”. What can we learn from it? Pride in being Jewish. How might speaking Hebrew show pride? What about Jewish emancipation in Europe in the 1840s?
- A Midrash on the story of Migdal Bavel (Tower of Babel) teaches us that at the end of time we will once again speak one language. What were the people punished for? (Discuss some of the classic answers - Arrogance to think they could reach God, be God like, etc.). How do we work on returning to a place where we once again are able to speak one language? Alternatively – what was that one language? Classically it is understood to refer to Hebrew, but perhaps the “language” was cooperation, peace, etc and it was that we lost the ability to live together in peace.

Line	Historical Reference	Notes & Possible Questions
3	prophets –	at minimum the early prophets probably spoke Hebrew
4	Daniel and the Lion's Den	
5		What impact does it being old have? Does old imply sacred or is sacred something different?
6		How does it open up your soul?
9		What is Babylon? Center of Jewish Thought, Talmudic times - Talmud written there, center of commerce, scholarship, thought. Modern day Tel Aviv, Migdal Bavel – Tower of Bavel, By the Rivers of Babylon – yearning to return home/Israel.
10		What is Mount Zion? Spiritual Center; place of worship. Jerusalem What is the train? Physical return from Galut to Homeland. Spiritual way home. There used to be a train from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem
14		This line is not in some versions. Why?
17	Creation Story	
19	Moshe to Pharaoh	
21	Several of these next lines alliterate like the Aleinu Prayer	Are they supposed to sound like Aleinu? If so what are the themes of Aleinu they might draw on? What is “great light”? Messiah?
22	Crack – that Moshe hid in?	Moshe was in a crack in the rock on Mount Sinai so that he was not to see God's face. If the crack is opening are we getting closer to being able to see God?
		What is the wall? - Jerico, Security Fence? Both are a different word in Hebrew but the idea is the same What does the wall represent? – things that separate us from each other, us from God
28		What is the house? National home, Temple, Torah learning What are the lines & letters? Torah – why referred to that way?
29		Israelis today say Bye. What does this represent? Americanization of Hebrew. Desire to return to purity of Hebrew (note: words have infiltrated Hebrew for 2000 years).
31-32		Hebrew words have become a part of English also.
33		Who is “everybody”? Jews, whole world • If whole world – are we being arrogant?

These are the connections that we came up with – it is likely there are others as well & we would love to hear about them. Email us at estrin@uscj.org.

Another conversation

The Language of Prayer:

Traditionally, most prayers have been recited in Hebrew. In some cases there is halakhic (Jewish law) precedence and in others it is simply traditional. The Reform Movement and to some extent the Conservative Movement, have integrated the use of the vernacular into their services. Outside of Israel most divrei Torah and announcements are made in the vernacular.

Questions to consider:

- What are the benefits/drawbacks of prayer in Hebrew vs. the vernacular?
 - Historical
 - Societal, unification
 - Personal connection & understanding
 - Makes our prayers holy, separates our prayers from daily speech (unless speak Hebrew – then what?)
- If utilizing the Hebrew is important, how do we make prayer accessible to those who are not fluent in Hebrew?

Additional Texts to look at:

Mishna Sotah 7:1 – on the language various prayers can be recited in.

Appendix

Hebrew in the Torah ~ Facilitator's Guide

This section is designed to provide the traditional Rabbinic understanding of the history of Hebrew. Depending on how much time you want to take for this section, you can utilize the texts in classic *hevruta* (paired learning) or simply as an overview to talk about the traditionally understood use of Hebrew in our history.

The texts in this section show that the Torah indicates that there was only one language – Hebrew – prior to the Tower of Babel (around 3,000 BCE). When God spoke the universe into existence, it was with Hebrew; when Adam named the animals, he used the Hebrew he had learned from God; Adam's children taught it to their children down through the generations to the Tower of Babel.

We call it *L'shon HaKodesh* which means *The Holy Language*. There are many references to the special status of Hebrew in the Jewish literature.

Midrash Bresheet Rabbah 18:4 (on Bresheet 2:23):

Discussion points:

Note: When Adam called her *isha*, it was because she was made from *ish*. This makes sense only if the two words are related. Only in Hebrew (among the ancient languages) are the words for “man” and “woman” grammatically related (Mizrachi).

- If God spoke Hebrew to create the world, Adam spoke Hebrew and the Torah was given in Hebrew, what does that say about the status of Hebrew?

Other related texts

- Rashi on Bresheet 2:23, 3:20
- Midrash Bresheet Rabbah 31:8 (on Bresheet 6:14)
- Midrash Bresheet Rabbah 38

Tower of Bavel (Bresheet 11:1-9)

Discussion points:

- According to Rashi (11:1) the “one language” was Lashon HaKodesh (Hebrew)
- Did the Tower of Bavel really exist?
 - In the land of Sumer there still exist structures called “Ziggurats,” meaning high places made from sun dried bricks. They have names such as “Temple that Links Heaven and Earth” and “Temple of the Stairway to Pure Heaven.”
- Assuming that either the story is true or it is in Torah to teach us a lesson. What can we learn from it regarding the use of one language?

Other related texts

- Tanchuma 18 & 19
- Yerushalmi Megilla 1:9

Midrash HaGadol Bresheet 14:13 (on Bresheet 14:13)

Discussion points:

- Rashi claims that Avram is called the *ivri* because he came from across (*meever*) the river (*ivri* and *ever* have the same root – ayin, vet, resh) and had the courage to cross the river to attack a mighty army. Which explanation do you prefer and why?
- Why might it be significant to show that Avram spoke Hebrew?
 - Possible answer – post Bavel and need to show that the language did not cease rather was simply one of many instead of the only language.

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Hebrew in the Torah

Midrash Bresheet (Genesis) Rabbah 18:4 (on Bresheet 2:23):

לזאת יקרא אשה כי מאיש לוקחה זאת. מכאן שניתנה התורה בלשון הקודש. רבי פנחס ורבי חלקיה בשם רבי סימון אמרי: כשם שניתנה התורה בלשון הקודש כך נברא העולם בלשון הקודש.

On this he called [her] *isha* (woman), for from *ish* (man) he took it [the rib]. From here we know the Torah was given in Lashon HaKodesh (Hebrew). Rabbi Pinchas and Rabbi Chalkiah in the name of Rabbi Simon said: Just as the Torah was given in Hebrew, so was the world created with Hebrew.

Tower of Bavel (Bresheet 11:1-9)

א וַיְהִי כָל־הָאָרֶץ שָׁפָה אֶחָת וּדְבָרִים אֶחָדִים: ב וַיְהִי בְנִסְעָם מִקֵּדֶם וַיִּמְצְאוּ בְקֵעָה בְּאֶרֶץ שִׁנְעָר וַיֵּשְׁבוּ שָׁם: ג וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל־רֵעֵהוּ הִבֵּה נִלְבְּנָה לְבָנִים וְנִשְׂרָפָה לְשִׂרְפָה וְנַתִּי לָהֶם הַלְבֵנָה לְאַבֵּן וְהַחֲמַר הִיָּה לָהֶם לְחֵמֶר: ד וַיֹּאמְרוּ הִבֵּה נִבְנֶה־לָּנוּ עִיר וּמִגְדָּל וְרֵאשׁוּ בְשֵׁמִים וְנַעֲשֶׂה־לָּנוּ שֵׁם פֶּן־נִפּוּץ עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ: ה וַיֵּרָד יְהוָה לִרְאוֹת אֶת־הָעִיר וְאֶת־הַמְּגִדָּל אֲשֶׁר בָּנוּ בְנֵי הָאָדָם: ו וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה הֵן עַם אֶחָד וְשָׁפָה אֶחָת לְכָלָם וְזֶה הַחֲלֹם לַעֲשׂוֹת וְעַתָּה לֹא־יִבְצָר מֵהֶם כָּל אֲשֶׁר יִזְמוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת: ז הִבֵּה נִרְדָּה וְנִבְלָה שֵׁם שְׁפָתָם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ אִישׁ שְׁפַת רֵעֵהוּ: ח וַיִּפֹּץ יְהוָה אֹתָם מִשָּׁם עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ וַיַּחֲדְלוּ לִבְנוֹת הָעִיר: ט עַל־כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמָהּ בָּבֶל כִּי־שָׁם בָּלַל יְהוָה שְׁפַת כָּל־הָאָרֶץ וּמִשָּׁם הִפִּיצָם יְהוָה עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָאָרֶץ:

The whole earth was of one language and of unified words. And it came to pass, in their migrating from the east they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. Each man said to his fellow, "Come let us make bricks and burn them in fire." And the brick served them as stone, and the bitumen served them for plaster. And they said, "Come let us build us a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed across the whole earth." God descended to see the city and tower which the sons of man built, and God said, "Behold, one people and there is for language for all of them, and this they begin to do! And now, should it not be withheld from them all they proposed to do? Come, let us descend and there confuse their language, that they should not understand one another's language." And God dispersed them from there over the face of the whole earth and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Bavel, because it was there that God confused the language of the whole earth.

Midrash HaGadol Bresheet 14:13 (on Bresheet 14:13)

He is called "Avram the *ivri*" because he spoke the Hebrew (*ivrit*) language.