

Teaching Hebrew to Seniors Materials, Methods and Positive Results

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In April 2010, five women were called to the Torah, each as a Bat Mitzvah. Not unusual these days except for the fact that the women on the bimah were all senior citizens, residents of Sarasota's Kobernick House and, most significant of all, the students ranged in age from 82 through 97.

The women gathered once a week for one hour, to study the Hebrew language. They learned to read Hebrew and to understand the meaning of the words. They progressed from reading Hebrew words with vowels and punctuation (as found in the Chumash) to reading Hebrew as it appears in the Torah. As their teacher, I was pleased and happy as well as proud and astounded, all at the same time. In the process I learned that there are specific materials and techniques that can guarantee success when working with elderly students.

The Survey - Creating a Climate for Success

There are many factors that determine why a senior would consider studying Hebrew, as well as many reasons why she/he might feel reluctant to do so. As a teacher I've learned not to assume but to help students identify their motivation as well as their fears. So before designing the lessons, I ask students to respond to questions about their Hebrew History. The survey consists of 15 statements and students check any and all that apply. Items range from specifics such as:

"My parents sent me to Hebrew school but I don't remember much."
"I know the names of each Hebrew letter."

From the specific information about previous study, the survey questions move into the emotional so that the teacher can ascertain those issues that might become roadblocks to success. Significantly, more than 90 percent of my senior students agreed with the following:

"I had a difficult time in Hebrew school. The teacher often embarrassed the students."
"I'm a bit nervous about class. I don't want to look bad in front of the group."

Past experience matters and negative experiences contribute to a fear of failure. Because long-term memories sharpen as we age, long ago embarrassments are so fresh that a senior may be reluctant to begin again. As a result, the first and most important challenge for the teacher is to acknowledge old wounds and then, to create a climate where students are free from competition and are rewarded for helping and supporting one another.

Materials that Work

The challenge for any teacher who works with seniors, is to select those materials that are basic and not baby-ish. This is especially important for those students whose early experiences with Hebrew were less than positive. Materials designed for children often evoke early memories of past failures. In addition, these materials can be less interesting to adult students.

The National Jewish Outreach Program (NJOP) offers a variety of materials that are not age-specific, but offer large print text and are easy to use. The Hebrew Reading Crash Course text is excellent and is available free of charge from their New York office. Memorization is not required (something that is more difficult to do as we age) and Hebrew letters are presented by the sounds that they make. The text presents vowel sounds in tandem with the sounds of the consonants and by Lesson Three students are reading and translating basic Hebrew words. Because success is immediate, even the most reluctant and fearful students are highly motivated to continue.

The NJOP materials include a large plastic Alef-Bet chart and the chart appears in the text as well. Flash cards of letters and vowels allow students to work together to match create letter blends and sounds.

Sure Fire Methods

The best textbook cannot guarantee student success. Methodology, or how to use the text in tandem with additional participatory activities are key to designing lessons that complement the special learning needs of senior students.

To organize the class sessions I found that I was most successful when I introduced three separate activities in a one-hour class and combined these activities with a short introductory review. Class begins with a short meditation, where we clear our minds and focus on the positive. For example, I say, “Think of our last class. Remember something that you did well. A word you read well, a word you translated. Think of how you helped another student. Remind yourself that you can do it. You ARE doing it. You are learning Hebrew.”

Next, I ask the students to turn in their texts to our previous lesson and take a moment to find sentences that they can read smoothly. In this way class begins on a positive note and someone who has missed the previous class, can return to the last page studied and participate along with all the others.

Class includes text reading, presentation of new lessons and hands-on activities to reinforce reading and translating skill. For example, many seniors have learned specific Hebrew phrases, such as the “Sh’ma”, by heart. Mastering Hebrew basics requires that students read each word. We accomplish this by placing each word on individual index cards and arranging the phrase in order, so that students can read, pronounce and translate the phrase word by word.

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The Hebrew language is our “lashon kodesh” our “holy tongue,” and each Hebrew letter offers a special spiritual meaning. Many seniors who have had experience with Hebrew study as children, learned the language only by rote. For some of our students that study occurred as long as 80 years ago! In recent years the spiritual meaning behind each letter has become a part Hebrew language study. Seniors enjoy learning the “why” behind the shape of the “Alef,” and the fact that in ancient times “Alef” once made a sound. I’ve found that a brief focus on the history of the Hebrew language also enriches the lessons.

Positive Results

Often Hebrew study results in a Bar or Bat Mitzvah ceremony, however that has not been our only goal. The result of Kobernick’s Hebrew Language Study Program has been the delight of older adults who discover that the Hebrew language is not illusive, but vibrant, alive and accessible to everyone.

Resources

The Hebrew Reading Crash Course – National Jewish Outreach Program, www.njop.org

The Hebrew Alphabet – A Mystical Journey, by Edward Hoffman, Chronicle Books, San Francisco, CA, 1998

The Personal Hebrew History Survey – Rabbi Barbara Aiello – rabbi@rabbibarbara.com

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