

The Hebrew Teacher: Guru, Drill Instructor, or Role Model?¹

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INTRODUCTION

All teaching is surely more an art than an exact science, and for any individual to spell out precise ways in which he or she practices that art is to run the risk of appearing to argue that there is only one correct way to skin a cat. During the course of studying fifteen different languages with more than fifty different teachers, I was given ample opportunity to observe the fact that effective language instruction has no single template. Some of my teachers were animated and dynamic, literally bristling with excitement and energy. Others were quiet and resolute. I was taught deductively by some and inductively by others, while the precise method of yet other teachers could not easily be labeled. Some gave frequent short exams and quizzes, while others gave only a final test at the end. Some made assignments that were clear and specific, while others merely suggested that we “take a look at” chapter five or a verbal system to be analyzed in the next class.

But several characteristics were common to all of the teachers of language with whom I have been privileged to study. Each one was natural, playing to his/her own strengths, fighting in personal suits of armor that fit them better than anyone else. And each successful teacher I have known had a love affair with language, insisting and modeling respect for the subject and the literature it conveyed. Far more than the details of grammar and syntax, they cared about the word pictures or referential fields that a stale dictionary entry cannot list adequately, the modes of expression employed by the target language. Because all of my teachers viewed language as more than a set of facts merely to be memorized like so many multiplication tables, they also stressed the role of language in revealing larger images of society and culture, politics and religion. In short, for them, language was a symbol of life, a conveyor belt of culture!

Most people entering the classroom to teach biblical Hebrew probably bring with them experiences and pedagogic models similar to what I have just described. And yet, because no one can be successful as a pale reflection of someone else, it is imperative that each of us hammer out in our own minds just how we wish to teach. Knowing that there are multiple effective methodological alternatives makes the teaching of biblical Hebrew both easier and harder. Easier, because no one need be saddled with a method that is personally uncomfortable. But also harder, because each of us must ultimately create a personal style that belongs to no one else. This also implies that no one can blame failure on a particular textbook or method. The tools, the texts, the methods are available. It remains for each of us to choose wisely for ourselves whatever it takes for success.

With these caveats in mind, I believe that whatever method an individual instructor may develop, there are three indispensable components for teaching and learning biblical Hebrew. **How** they are mixed into the gumbo of learning may differ from person to person. But **that** they must be added to the mix should not be doubted.

I. Ha-Rav/ha-Talmid²

The relationship between a teacher and a student is considered sacred in both Judaism and Christianity. Throughout the biblical book of Proverbs, one finds admonitions to acquire practical wisdom addressed from father to son.³ Clearly, more than a biological relationship is envisioned here. In the New Testament, one thinks of the way in which Timothy or Titus may be described as the “child” (1 Tim 1:2, 2 Tim 1:2, Titus 1:4) of Paul.⁴ In the same time frame, statements like those cited in Proverbs and elsewhere are interpreted by the Tanna'im as references to one's teacher, and the great medieval commentator Rashi explicitly states that Deuteronomy 6:7 refers to one's students as well as to one's biological offspring.⁵

Clearly the teacher/student relationship develops best when it is a two-way street. All of the great teachers I have known were learning every day, each still a student as well as a teacher. Many times I watched as an acknowledged master listened to a student explain a concept that he/she had just learned for the first time, and I observed the teacher respond with delight: “That's a great way to

explain it,” or “That’s exactly what I mean,” or even “That’s an example I hadn’t thought of.” What a thrill it was for me as a student to know that once in a while even I could phrase something in a way that was new and fresh to the teacher! And now that I am the teacher, the same thing often happens in reverse. I learn not only from my colleagues and peers, but also from my students. Every teacher can experience this kind of learning by remaining open and by refusing to lose the thrill of discovery that comes with adding even a small piece of information to one’s store of knowledge. It is what Rabbi Meir called “studying in order to teach.”⁶ But something even more valuable happens in these moments as well. Quite often the simplified explanation given by a student reaches members of the class more directly than the complicated way in which an experienced teacher may have phrased the same principle. The rabbis knew this as well, as the following statement indicates: “Whoever learns from a partner⁷ one chapter, one halakhah, one verse, one [Torah] statement, or even a single letter, must treat him with respect/honor.”⁸

The rabbis also believed that if students are indeed our “children,” their success becomes paramount. Rabbi El‘azar ben Shamu‘a said it well: “Let the honor of your student be as dear to you as your own.”⁹ All teachers who take this injunction seriously realize that they have not taught until the students have learned. In fact, students are the only true measure of a language teacher, and their level of achievement is the only meaningful product of all teaching methods. Thus, if we want to know whether someone is a good teacher, we must meet his/her students, regardless of how fervently s/he defends a favorite method or style of teaching.

Of course, not every student is going to be a delight. In fact, the Tanna’im noted that there are four types of students (*Pirkei ‘Avot* 5.18), all of whom I am sure modern teachers still recognize:

[a] a **sponge** absorbs everything.

[b] a **funnel** takes in at one end and lets out at the other.

[c] a **strainer** lets the wine flow through and retains the sediment.

[d] a **sieve** allows the flour dust to pass through and retains the fine flour.

The true teacher must teach them all, and it is probable that no single method will work equally effectively with all four types. Sometimes even the greatest teacher will be unable to find a way to teach certain students. But the

attitude of the teacher in giving honor to students and seeking their best interest at all times, even those who are difficult to reach, must remain constant.

Honor flowing from the teacher to the student should not be taken to imply that teachers must be at the mercy of their students no matter how poorly they prepare or learn.¹⁰ The other side of the coin is equally important: in addition to the biblical commandment to “honor” one’s biological parents, both the Bible and the rabbinic writings are also sprinkled with numerous statements urging upon students the necessity of finding a good teacher,¹¹ and then of respect and honor for the teacher. The primary teacher of all is God, but many biblical texts also emphasize the role of the faithful human teacher¹² or render severe condemnation of false teachers.¹³

Yet it is all too true that in many places the teaching of a language, especially at the beginning level, is considered somehow unworthy of a mature teacher, the senior scholar who longs to speak of theory and theology, the really “important” matters. As a consequence, introductory language classes are frequently taught by teaching assistants or by the youngest, least experienced person on the staff. So while our students hear our grandiose statements about how important acquisition of a language is and they hear our rather dramatic rationale for learning a **biblical** language, they surely also see that language instruction is not considered a plum teaching assignment by the senior staff. In such cases, I suspect that they note what we **do** instead of listening to what we **say**.

At my own institution, I have embraced the opportunity to teach beginning Hebrew. My reasons are both personal and professional.

[a] If, as I believe, Hebrew is a crucial tool for students of the Bible, its teaching at the beginning level is a job for the best teachers on the staff, not something to be foisted off on inexperienced grad students or young assistant professors. And though I do not claim to be the best teacher in our department, I am the oldest and most experienced in language. So I consider the teaching of beginning Hebrew both my responsibility and my privilege.

[b] When I teach Hebrew, I receive instantaneous feedback. Listening to my students recite daily, I **know** how I am doing as a teacher. I may be forced to make a mid-course correction--to speed up, slow down, review, postpone a new concept, etc. And I may need to rethink the efficacy of my latest brilliant examples. But I do not have to wait for an exam, coming after several weeks of lectures, to tell me whether I am connecting or not. It is important to understand

that when no connection is being made, both the sender [me, the teacher!] and the receivers must be checked. So while I am frequently checking to see how the students are doing, I am also compelled to examine my own performance on an almost daily basis.

[c] When I teach Hebrew, I am the first to spot the stars of tomorrow. This is not to assume that language acumen is the **only** indicator of future brilliance, but I have found it to be one of the most accurate, and I think I know why. While a modicum of linguistic ability is necessary for success in language learning, it is plainly the case that language success requires the attitude of the marathon runner rather than the sprinter. Students who have, or acquire through a teacher's inspiration, the mental toughness to keep going week after week, who do their work consistently every day, and who commit to class attendance and participation, are the ones who make the grades and master the subject. In fact, I am tempted to say that I prefer a student who is persistent to one who is natively smart; a student who is both tops the list. My former students include deans, department heads, well-published Judaica scholars, widely known field archaeologists, quite a few ministers, priests, and rabbis, and even a few medical doctors and attorneys who "just" teach a Sunday School class somewhere. Those who are doing well now all stared down the demon grammar and wrestled him to submission by sheer grit and determination. Their success is not surprising to me!

[d] When I teach Hebrew, I know that I am part of a gift that can keep on giving throughout the lifetime of my students, and this possibility keeps me motivated. In a remake of the old "give a man a fish" illustration, it is fair to ask how much good we are doing by giving students a lecture instead of teaching them how to use a critical tool. And I think it is fair to ask how many lectures the average student will actually remember and use! Yet some of them, though admittedly not all, will use and benefit from their language skills for a lifetime. I can think of no promotion higher than being a part of something like that.

[e] Every class is different, and each student is unique. As I mentioned earlier, in testimony to their recognition of the difficulties inherent in teaching and learning, the rabbis spoke of the sponge, the funnel, the strainer, and the sieve. Surely they would agree that no teacher may use only one method to reach such a dizzying variety of learner types. And this variety of presentation and explanation means that we need not become bored with teaching the same subject over and over again. Each class demands something unique and specially designed for the

people in it, not merely some hackneyed and plodding journey through a maze of forms and exercises.

II. Motivation

To teach Hebrew successfully, I believe the teacher must find a way to connect with the **reasons** why students are in class to begin with. And just as we noted regarding one's **style** of teaching, **motivation** for learning is also an individual matter. I have had students whose burning desire it was to translate the Bible with missionary zeal, students who wanted to do well enough on a bar mitzvah not to embarrass Uncle Harry from Dallas, and students who faced old age wanting to be able to converse with God in Her own language.¹⁴ But all of the successful students I have had in thirty-five years of teaching Hebrew found from somewhere inside themselves a reason to survive the monotony, the long hours, the frustration, and the setbacks. In each case, it was a personal reason powerful enough to give the student hope to believe that the gain was worth the pain. Said another way, it was their ability to focus on the long-term goal that enabled each successful student to endure the short-term, immediate frustrations that bedevil every student of language.

No one can tell someone else **why** he or she should learn Hebrew. But if a student has a desire to learn Hebrew for any reason, it should be considered a teacher's sacred duty to fan the flames of that desire by every means possible. And I believe the best way to **quench** the fire of desire is by continuing to teach Hebrew the way most of us learned it. The routine is well known. Memorize these words. Learn these rules. Identify these forms. Translate these meaningless English sentences into "biblical Hebrew," which you don't understand yet and which modern scholarship assures us Moses himself did not write so clearly. Spend at least one full semester on these numbing exercises before you ever get to open the text of the Bible to an exciting narrative. Or as we say in my part of the country: "Tote that barge! Lift that bale!" One wonders how any of us learned.

Mere exhortation to study is not enough. People from very different backgrounds find their own compelling reasons to study Hebrew. Since I am almost exclusively involved with Jewish and Christian students, I want to say a word about different kinds of motivation for each group.

A powerful statement about a **Jewish** reason for learning Hebrew is found as the ninth of the “Ten Principles for Reform Judaism” written by the Central Conference of American Rabbis.

We are heirs to a holy tongue. We echo our people’s belief that the Hebrew language is endowed with a particular measure of *kedushah*. Despite overwhelming odds, the Jewish people preserved Hebrew in the face of centuries of exile. Hebrew binds us to Jews in every land, and especially to our brothers and sisters in the State of Israel. Hebrew connects us with ancient and modern Jewish ideas which are difficult to render in translation. We shall strive to read Hebrew, to speak it, to let it help articulate our prayer and inform our study. The more familiar we are with Hebrew, the more at home we shall feel within our people’s heritage.¹⁵

As a Jew, I often use a far simpler metaphor. Hebrew is not a foreign language to me; it is the conveyor belt that carries my history, my culture, my liturgy, and my traditions. To alter a popular ditty: “A Jew without Hebrew is like a day without sunshine.” Similar illustrations apply from other languages too. Everyone in my family spoke French. So during my French classes, while most students were struggling with paradigms and forms, I was anxious to get home every day and converse with my parents and grandparents. French was not a foreign language to me for the same reason that Hebrew is not. It too was my family tongue and the conveyor of my culture, not just another subject for which I had to earn a grade.

Of course, few biblical Hebrew students will have a comparable laboratory to which to return each day. Yet for Jewish students, there is a wonderful motivational tool at hand that surprisingly few teachers bother to utilize. In almost any synagogue in the country, students can hear Hebrew sung and read fluently, indeed can hear more Hebrew in one service than they might hear in a month of classes. At LSU, we are allowed to use the small chapel of one of the local synagogues in which to hold Shabbat services using as much Hebrew as we can. Our design in holding such services is to demonstrate one end line aim of Hebrew language instruction. Here students encounter not only numerous passages from the Hebrew Bible itself, but also prayers, meditations, and blessings framed in biblical Hebrew or in a very similar dialect. Of course, the first few services each year go slowly and require a lot of explanation from the teacher.

Three things are surprising about this experience. First, even beginning students catch on quickly in an atmosphere that surrounds them with the sounds of the language uttered in an environment for which it is uniquely suited.

Second, an astonishing mix of Jewish laypersons have often joined us for these services. Some say they are reminded of the way in which their grandparents prayed. Several are Israelis who prefer to worship in Hebrew. Most are professional people whom one would never suspect of any interest in Hebrew. We have a professor of veterinary science and a prominent attorney, both of whom love to sing the haftarah; an Israeli psychiatrist who chants Torah beautifully; even a quintessential Jewish mom, married to a non-Jewish husband, who has doggedly taught both of her sons to sing and pray the services in Hebrew.

Ah, but you say, My students and I are not Jewish! Then you should know that the third surprising result of our Shabbat morning services is the participation of non-Jewish students. When I first began this custom three years ago, I invited only my Jewish students. As word got out, the non-Jews in the class began coming to me privately one by one to ask if they could also be included. Now it is considered an essential element of our Hebrew learning experience. Some of the more advanced non-Jewish students choose to prepare and read one or two haftarah portions each semester, and some of them learn trope to be able to sing these portions. And all who attend testify that the experience boosts their ability to read Hebrew, and I am certain that it fans the flame of interest in Hebrew as a language that is part of a living tradition of worship and study.

I began teaching Hebrew in 1967. Since that time, it has been my privilege to teach hundreds of students at all levels--graduate and undergraduate, adult education in local synagogues, young children in Sunday school, and b'nei mitzvah candidates. By far the majority of my students have been non-Jews. And it has been my personal experience, by no means a scientific sampling, that Jews and Gentiles have different reasons for wanting to learn Hebrew. First, as I discussed above, almost all of my Jewish students have also shared a desire to learn the Siddur in order to worship comfortably with others. These are the students who have a sense of Hebrew as somehow belonging to them, a part of their identity that they wish to discover and cultivate. Second, most Jews have a deep interest in modern Hebrew, hoping to visit Israel or wishing to converse with family members who know the language.

These reasons carry little weight among non-Jews, the overwhelming majority of whom are Christian. Virtually none of our Christian students have any

familiarity at all with the Siddur, and thus they do not take Hebrew with the desire to learn to worship with it. And few if any of them are interested in learning to speak or read modern Hebrew. But there is a third point that is most telling. For my Christian students, Hebrew remains a “foreign” language, and the learning of Hebrew is at best a secondary goal. They want to learn Hebrew in order to do something else that they consider more important--interpret the first part of their Bible. In fact, in my present assignment at LSU, after several failed attempts to generate interest in modern Hebrew, we have been gratified to discover that by offering **biblical** Hebrew, our enrollments have burgeoned, with almost 95% of the increase coming from Christians who are interested primarily in learning to translate and interpret the Hebrew Bible so as to buttress their understanding of their own faith.

Although Christian students may not find a direct correlation between Jewish worship and their own personal interests, there are at least two laboratory opportunities for non-Jewish students of biblical Hebrew. In some of our upper division English Bible courses, enterprising Hebrew students (Jew and Christian!) can follow in Hebrew some of the passages being discussed in class. In addition, not a few Christian students report that they can follow in Hebrew when their pastors read the portions from which they preach on Sunday. Sometimes they are pleasantly surprised to learn that a local pastor knows quite well what the original text says, and other times they realize that their own grasp of Hebrew indicates clear ideas that are missed. Both of these opportunities are available, and students can be encouraged to use Hebrew as often as possible, learning in the process that their new and growing knowledge has a practical application.

Many years ago, a friend sent me a quotation from John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. His words capture perhaps one basic element of Christian motivation to learn Hebrew:

Do I understand Greek and Hebrew? Otherwise how can I undertake not only to explain books which are written therein, but to defend them against all opponents? Am I not at the mercy of everyone who does understand, or even pretends to understand, the original? For which way can I confute his pretense? Do I understand the language of the Old Testament? Critically? At all? If not, ought not shame cover my face?¹⁶

Now I do not profess to be a scholar of Wesley, but here is a man I would like to have met. Critical scholarship done from the original text, in the eighteenth

century no less. I continue to be gratified and pleasantly surprised at the number of Christian students who hold the Hebrew Bible dear to their hearts for reasons that I may never understand fully. Yet I believe strongly that part of my job as their teacher is to enhance their enthusiasm by providing as many encounters with actual biblical texts as I possibly can. I also believe Christian teachers of Hebrew can and should find ways to integrate the rigors of the classroom into the day-to-day business of Christian faith and practice, including Bible study, preaching, and Christian education in local churches.

Year after year, many of the top students in my classes are motivated by the desire to serve in some form of Christian ministry as pastors, teachers, or biblical scholars. Some hope to get a head start on seminary requirements, all seem set on adding Hebrew as an exegetical tool for biblical study. And their long-term goals serve them well during the dog days of language learning. Indeed, when irregular forms and new vocabulary begin to pile up, it is often the ability to see beyond the present moment of struggle that stokes the fires of learning. These are the students who are willing to pay the price needed to move from being grammar's slave to its master, the point at which Hebrew ceases to be a labor and becomes a reward.

I do not avoid the tough passages like Isaiah 53 or 7:14. These "Christianized" texts are often the true reason Christian students wanted to learn Hebrew to begin with, and whether I think certain Christian proof-texts are important or not, I can assure my colleagues that all of my students have asked about them. Rather than seeking to avoid them, I have tried to seize upon this interest as my best opportunity to create a non-threatening environment in which sensitive passages can be discussed outside the glare of a confrontation between two faiths or two individuals. Often I am able to demonstrate the viability of such passages in Jewish life long before they were appropriated for the construction of a new religion, and just as often my Christian students gain a deeper appreciation of why certain passages grew to such importance in early Christianity.

In this vein, I have learned not to avoid discussing the New Testament **methods** of appropriating Hebrew Scripture. Here we can discuss passages like Isaiah 40, with its Tiberian vocalization that the LXX and the NT do not follow. Here we can discuss why in Galatians 3:16 Paul makes such a big point about the Greek singular "spermati" translating a Hebrew singular/collective. These sessions need not turn into a Jewish vs. Christian fight over which is **the** correct

interpretation. They can be used, instead, to help students use language to understand the reasons for the development of two very different points of view.

In addition, I teach the massora as a rabbinic commentary on the text, including the *te'amim* and the trope. Of course, it is impossible to teach the whole of the massora, but already in comments about Isaiah 40, it is fairly simple to demonstrate how the Tiberian vocalization of the MT often yields a sense quite different from what most English versions intimate. And I don't think biblical Hebrew teachers should forget that the use of musical values for the *te'amim* was designed to make the learning of Hebrew easier, not harder. Showing a class something as simple as how the book of Jonah can be sung is an important tool to help them grasp the Hebrew text.¹⁷

I also try consciously to link the Bible and the Siddur. Of course, my Jewish students find this helpful, for they often know from memory a prayer that contains phrases or even a single word from our biblical text. But non-Jews too can find these links helpful. Not only can they be enriched culturally, they will also discover numerous points of contact between their liturgy and Jewish prayers.

In sum, the first task of any language teacher is to discover what motivates his or her students. It is not to change that motivation or to belittle someone else's goal. My own experience teaches me that we can have a "both/and" rather than an "either/or," if we understand and stoke the fires of motivation in all students regardless of their initial purposes.¹⁸

III. METHOD

"Method" in language study must be concerned both with teaching and with learning, with teachers and equally with students. It should be obvious that much of what has been said above about motivation is tightly bound with the methods of study and instruction being utilized. To begin, here are my own personal "Ten Commandments" for Hebrew students:¹⁹

[1] Do not fall behind quietly and do not suffer in silence. Experience teaches that students who fail to ask questions because of shyness suffer at their own hands. If you do not understand what is being covered in class, it is a safe bet that others in the room feel the same. So ask. You have the right to require your

teacher to continue giving explanations and illustrations until you understand well enough to master each lesson.

[2] Do not ignore the written explanations and examples that are given in the book. Trying to translate new sentences by thumbing back and forth from the vocabulary list to the exercises is a time waster. Learn the new words that are given in each lesson. Study the examples. Then, and only then, you may turn to the exercises. Try to translate a sentence without help, even if you do not remember a word or two. After you have given your best effort, use the vocabulary lists and examples to fill in what you have missed.

[3] Do not write an interlinear English translation on the same page as your lesson assignments or your Bible. When your eyes see writing both in Hebrew and English, they will automatically fix upon that which is familiar and you will lose the visual aspect of learning Hebrew. At first, you may not be able to recite quite as smoothly in class, but working from Hebrew rather than from English is crucial to your development. So when you do your translation assignments for class, do not begin with an open translation in front of you. Only after you have worked out your own translation should you compare it with a published version.

[4] Read everything aloud. You must listen more than once to the CD that is made especially for your book. And you must participate as you listen. Repeat what you hear on the CD or from your instructor and, when you are studying at home alone, practice reading everything aloud.

[5] Copy into your own Hebrew hand the assignments from the book and the biblical passages that you are translating. And make your own charts of conjugations and declensions. The discipline of writing in Hebrew will become an important avenue for your mastery of the language.

[6] Find one or more study partners. Learn from and teach the others in your group. This practice will help keep you from becoming discouraged simply because you cannot decipher one or two items in an assignment.

[7] Remember that learning a language is different from taking a lecture course. You cannot wait until late in the semester before starting to “cram” for a final grade. The more time you invest in Hebrew early in the semester, the better you will discover the end of the semester to be for you.

[8] Do not skip lessons and do not skip study days. In fact, you will be better served by studying Hebrew two or three times every day, twenty to thirty minutes per session, than by blocking out time for one long (90 to 120 minute)

session. Above all, make certain that your study is done without distractions. The total amount of time spent is not nearly as important as [a] the number of times you think about and grapple with Hebrew and [b] the level of concentration that you bring to each session.

[9] Start at once to thumb through your Hebrew Bible. Find a verse that you learned as a child and see if you can recognize one or two words. It is surprising how quickly the number of familiar words will grow, and your level of interest can be raised as you succeed in recognizing familiar ideas.

[10] Remember that you must do the learning. Your textbook, the CD, an excellent instructor, a study pal or group--all these are important. But in the end, you and you alone are responsible for the learning.

While students adhere to the “Ten Commandments” above, I believe teachers can benefit from observing the following seven practical hints:

[1] **Teach the function words.** I can give a two-hour speech at a law school without ever using the words egg, toast, or silverware. I can speak at length about breakfast and never say tort, suit, or cross-examination. But no matter what the subject, it is virtually impossible to speak more than a few sentences on any subject without using function words like tomorrow, yesterday, afterwards, consequently, or the little tiny words like who? what? when? why? where? how? I may also add here the short and simple words like the, and, a, an, of, to, for. Hebrew has its own special function words that are sprinkled throughout every paragraph of biblical literature. Mastery of them makes the entire task of learning the language infinitely easier.

[2] **Demand that base forms be mastered.** Perhaps the nicest thing about Hebrew forms is that one set of endings and one set of prefixes apply to all verbal conjugations. Thus, derived conjugations should not be taught as if they were totally strange. All that is necessary is for the student to learn a new stem before adding the appropriate suffixes or prefixes (or infixes) that have been mastered in learning the Qal. Constant review of these base forms is essential and can be done in the process of explaining derived forms.

[3] **Teach the basic syntactic constructions.** If a person knows about 1,000 words and 14-15 basic constructions, it is possible to converse rather fluently or to read comprehensively in any language I have ever studied. Biblical Hebrew narrative is no exception to this rule; if basic constructions are emphasized sufficiently, unusual expressions may be left for more advanced classes. But it should be emphasized that at the beginning level, function is more

critical than vocabulary.²⁰ For example, if an advanced student is confronted with Genesis 1:1, I would expect that s/he translate it accurately and well. I would not be happy to hear a beginning student tell me that s/he knows ברא means “create,” that שמים is “heavens,” and that ארץ is “earth,” although “I can’t tell what the sentence means.” I would be far happier for a beginner to make something like the following attempt: “In **reshit**, Elohim **bara**’-ed the **shamayim** and the **’aretz**.” This effort would demonstrate that the student knows the function words, has spotted a simple verbal sentence with its VSO, recognizes ברא as a verb, and senses that שמים and ארץ are nouns used as direct objects. I can quickly supply definitions for specific words, but if I have to explain the basic construction involved, that would take far longer.

[4] **Emphasize the way in which the target language thinks.** The second century Tanna’ Rabbi Yehudah ben Ilai gave the following guidelines for translating the Hebrew Scriptures into Aramaic: “He who translates a verse literally is a liar, while he who adds anything is a blasphemer.” The grandson of Ben Sira also knew well the pitfalls of translating Hebrew into another language. “The fact is that there is no equivalent for things originally written in Hebrew when it is a question of translating them into another language” (1:23-26). And yet the primary goal of most biblical Hebrew students is to translate the Bible for themselves. To do so, it is imperative that they understand the differences in the ways Hebrew and English express ideas.

Example: English has its own way of using tenses. When telling a joke, we might easily begin: “A Rabbi walks into a bar with a parrot on his shoulder.” In so doing, we are using what grammarians call the “historical present,” although every native speaker of English understands instinctively that what is being described has already happened. The function of the VAV in biblical narratives plays into this theme. English uses its conjunctions to join things, Hebrew uses its conjunctions to link either things or sequences. Scholars may argue about whether the biblical Hebrew verb describes tense or aspect, but it is not at all necessary to burden beginning students with the academic argument about whether the “va-yiqtol” form is an alternate preterite or whether the VAV followed by the strong daghesh is itself part of the orthography of an alternate past tense patterned after a comparable Akkadian form. Biblical Hebrew simply sets its time with respect to the speaker or narrator and links subsequent verbal expressions with its conjunction. The so-called “VAV-Conversive” may be explained as a green light telling the student to continue the narrative in the time frame indicated by the

initial finite verbal form. Lacking a new verb to signal a change in sequence, the reader stays with the control form even when the form of subsequent verbs looks different.

Example: Find an unforgettable way to teach that Hebrew does not need to express the copula in a simple noun sentence. This fact was underscored by a first semester student who was translating from an assignment in *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew*.²¹ Looking carefully at each word, she slowly spoke exactly what she saw before her in Hebrew: “You / the / man,” before blurting out triumphantly, “You the **man!**” Hearing this common phrase, often shouted out raucously at sporting events, the class erupted into laughter. But the point was made more forcibly by this silly coincidence than by all of the sober explanations I had given earlier. The class never forgot again, and I have been trying each new semester to recreate the context in which another student will serve as my foil for the perfect illustration of this Hebrew concept.

Example: Stress the fluidity and full semantic range of Hebrew words, especially prepositions. לפני means “before” in time, but “in front of” in space; אחר is “after” in time, but “behind” in space. Genesis 24 attests a particularly rich variety of meanings for Hebrew על and אל. In one phrase, אל means “toward” (v. 29); in another it clearly means “into” (“She emptied her pitcher into the trough” in v. 20). Both words mean “near” or “next to,” as seen in the parallel phrases אל באר המים (v. 11) and על עין המים (v. 13). על means “concerning” in the phrase על הדבר הזה (v. 9); “upon” in verses 15 and 22.²² But students who restrict their idea of על to “[up]on,” will be treated to quite a humorous image by the phrase describing the servant “standing on the camels on the well” [על הגמלים] [על העין] in verse 30!

[5] **Give meaningful tips on learning vocabulary.** As a young man serving as interim rabbi for a congregation in Connecticut, I inherited a class of six wiggling boys preparing for bar mitzvah. To help them with vocabulary, I commented that the Hebrew word for “tent” was a “swear” pronounced O-hel! At the next class, when a boy stumbled over “tent,” I proudly reminded him that it was a “swear,” only to have him ask, “Is it ‘sh-t’?” So I can testify that not all vocabulary tips are equally valid. But my greatest Hebrew teacher, the incomparable Cyrus Gordon, ז”ל, shared with one of my classes the single best suggestion I know about vocabulary learning. On a single sheet of paper, number 1-25 both on the right and the left margin and fill in on one side the Hebrew words to be learned, placing the English on the other side. After folding the sheet

in the middle, the English equivalent of each Hebrew entry is learned fully, then the Hebrew equivalent of each English entry is mastered. Once both columns of each list can be reproduced accurately, Gordon told us, “tear up the page and discard it.” Of course, many words had to be written on more than one page, and it was tempting to retain all the old sheets in a file. But the point of the exercise was that words had to be in the brain, not in a file.²³

[6] **Use tutors.** In each class at LSU, we have several Jewish students who have some experience with the language, at least enough to know the alphabet and to read aloud. Alongside of them, the majority have never seen a Hebrew letter and are truly starting not from scratch, but from itch. I require students to form small partnerships for study, with at least one non-beginner in each group. The Jewish kids are told that their grades will depend upon their maintaining the distance between themselves and the itchers with which the course began. Whenever a student recites well in class,²⁴ I will often ask, “Who is your tutor?” It is not unusual for healthy rivalries to build from one group to another, and it is gratifying to observe the group leaders swell with pride when their help enables a member of their group to recite well.

In addition to these group leaders, we also use advanced students to hold regular tutorial sessions. We offer six sessions each week, and each student is required to attend two of those. The benefits are threefold.

[a] Students will often ask a young tutor questions they are reluctant to ask in front of the whole class. And they often need a place to air their complaints about the class or the teacher without fear of reprisal. The tutors are thus an invaluable source of information to the instructor about the mood and spirit of the class.

[b] The tutoring sessions help students come to class far better prepared to recite. This speeds the process and allows us to cover a lot more material over a semester.

[c] The tutors begin to learn Hebrew! Forced to explain to others, they push themselves to understand better than ever before, and this is a great boon to their mastery of Hebrew.

[7] **Guarantee grades.** Surely the single most frequent cause of early drops is discouragement about low grades in the new writing system, new vocabulary, etc. And yet frequent quizzes early in the semester are necessary to provide a gage of progress for both teacher and students. To offset this frustration, I make two offers. First, regardless of one’s average on daily recitation and

quizzes, the semester grade can be the mark earned on the final exam. Some students catch on more slowly than others, but if they do so in time to do well on the final, which is cumulative, I will give them the higher of their daily average or the final exam grade. Second, I guarantee a grade of “C” to any student who [a] attends every class [NO exceptions, NO excuses, or the deal is off!] and all tutorial sessions; [b] prepares every daily assignment; and [c] passes the final exam. When I say “every,” I mean it literally. I have never had a student who met all three of these requirements who scored lower than a “C” on the final exam.

Conclusion

I close with an admission that mastery of Hebrew is a lifelong task, but also with my deep belief that it is a task that returns one hundred fold on whatever investment one makes. So to students of Hebrew, I leave two final words from the Mishnah, the first a quotation from the famous Rabbi Tarpon (*Pirkei ‘Avot* 2.21): “You are not required to complete the task, but you are not at liberty to cease from it.” And then these words from the venerable Rabbi Hillel (*Pirkei ‘Avot* 2.5): “Do not say, ‘when I have time I will study,’ for perhaps you will not [ever] have time.”

For those of us who teach Hebrew, the words of the great Abraham Joshua Heschel should become a lifelong motto:

The teacher is not an automatic fountain from which intellectual beverages may be obtained. He is either a witness or a stranger. To guide a pupil into the promised land, he must have been there himself. When asking himself: Do I stand for what I teach? Do I believe what I say? he must be able to answer in the affirmative. What we need more than anything else is not “textbooks” but “textpeople.” It is the personality of the teacher which is the text that the pupils read; the text that they will never forget.²⁵

¹ This article is an expanded version of a paper given October 10, 2002, at Wake Forest University, as part of their celebration of 100 years of teaching Hebrew there. I wish to thank Professor Kenneth Høglund for his kind invitation to participate and also for the honor he has shown me in choosing my textbook, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* (Warren Center, PA: Shangri-La Publications, 2002), for use with his current Hebrew classes.

² On the historical relationship between teacher and student in Judaism, see Shaul Stampfer, *HaYeshivah HaLitait BeHithavutah* (Jerusalem, 1995), especially 28, 50, 127, and 146-49. Note also Stampfer’s disagreement with Yeshayhu Tishbi [“YeshivotLita,” *HaEncyclopedia HaIvrit*, vol. 17 (1979), 689] on precisely how widespread havruta-style

learning was in yeshivot. Aliza Segal's study, "Havruta Study in the Contemporary Yeshivah" (ATID, 2000), raises a number of important pedagogical issues and also includes a brief historical review. It is available at www.atid.org/journal.htm

³ 1:8,10, 15; 2:1; 3:1; 4:1, 10, 20; 5:1, and elsewhere.

⁴ Or whoever one believes to be the author of these three epistles.

⁵ "We find everywhere that students are called 'sons' ... and just as students are called 'sons,' the teacher is called 'father.'" I have written about some of the methods of instruction envisioned in the book of Deuteronomy in "Deuteronomy's Definition of Jewish Learning," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 31:2 (2003): 109-16.

⁶ הלומד על מנת ללמד in the Baraita of Rabbi Meir (*Pirkei 'Avot* 6).

⁷ Note, חבר, a "study partner," not a teacher!

⁸ *Pirkei 'Avot* 6.3.

⁹ *Pirkei 'Avot* 4.15.

¹⁰ Note the reference to "rebuking the students" (לזרוק מרה בתלמידים) by teachers who felt that certain questions were impertinent or off subject or who had not prepared in advance for a class session. Cited from Adin Steinsaltz, *The Talmud: A Reference Guide* (New York: Random House, 1989), 21.

¹¹ "Get a teacher for yourself" (*Pirkei 'Avot* 1.6).

¹² See 2 Chron 17:7-9.

¹³ E.g., Isa 9:15; Mic 3:11; Mal 2:7.

¹⁴ In 1974, while I was a young assistant professor at the University of Massachusetts, a prominent 73-year-old businessman enrolled in my Hebrew class, citing concern about his approaching death and his desire to converse with God.

¹⁵ Available at <http://www.rj.org/> is also the following statement: "Hebrew has long been called *leshon ha-kodesh*, 'the holy language' or 'the language of holiness.' Since Hebrew is the language of the Bible and other Jewish classical texts from Midrash and Talmud to the prayerbook, learning Hebrew helps us unlock the holiness present in those documents reflecting God's relationship to the Jewish people."

¹⁶ Quoted in an 1840 lexicon by a Dr. Roy, this reference was furnished to me by R. D. Branson.

¹⁷ Doubters need only to hear my students, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, preparing for a test by singing the trope of Jonah to themselves.

¹⁸ I am well aware that numerous students have enrolled in Hebrew classes with me over the years hoping to acquire a tool with which they could convert Jews, including me. Almost all of these students dropped out quickly when the work piled up. But my experience has been that whenever honest students have truly paid the price to master Hebrew, along the way they have also developed the ability to respect Judaism as a meaningful pathway to the divine, a pathway that, though different from theirs, has its own independent integrity. So while I reject the ignorant flat-world fundamentalist who views only his beliefs as the center of the theological universe, I do not fear the well-educated Christian who has paid the price to master our sacred texts and our liturgy, a mastery that routinely generates respect. Said another way, the Bible and the Siddur are well capable of speaking for themselves and consistently demonstrate their value to those who seek to understand them. Jews and non-Jews alike are well served by their study.

¹⁹ Taken from my *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew*, ix-xi.

²⁰ On which see more below.

²¹ Sentence 17 on page 43.

²² Note also that יד is simply “hand” several times, but in the phrase שני צמידים על ידיה it is clearly “wrist.”

²³ I must testify sadly that almost none of my students really believes Gordon or me, and I routinely see students lugging piles of paper into class. Their vocabulary is on those sheets, but far too often not in the brain. The few who took Gordon’s suggestion quite literally were the exception and also boasted the best vocabularies.

²⁴ Or sometimes, when a simple word or construction is missed!

²⁵ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (New York: Schocken, 1972), 237.