



ACTIVITY

Hebrew Language

Materials Needed

- Video clip
- Screening device and Internet connection
- Copy of Wieseltier quotes

Time Needed

45 minutes

Goals

- To appreciate how knowledge of Hebrew is essential to creating a thriving Jewish community
- To consider how Jewish illiteracy can negatively impact Jewish life/ community/ civilization in the future

Before you Get Started

Look at the list of Enduring Understandings:

- Judaism is a civilization, and not primarily a religion.
- A civilization is constituted by its history, literature, language, social organizations, folk sanctions, standards of conduct, social and spiritual ideals, esthetics and values. All of these elements form a civilization.
- Jewish communities share the content of the civilization and the drive for sustaining it, but they also each bring to the table their unique local perspective and interpretation, which in turn contributes to and enriches the collective global civilization.
- The local and global dimensions of Jewish Peoplehood, as perceived through the prism of developing and sustaining Jewish civilization, represent two sides of the same coin.
- The work of building and strengthening Jewish civilization at the local Jewish community level is central to the future of Jewish peoplehood.
- The contribution of every Jew in every community can be significant to the development of the Jewish People's collective enterprise.

Which one would you like to emphasize through this activity?

Directions for Activity

1. Ask participants to talk about the languages they already know and can speak. What languages do their parents speak? And which languages would they like to learn? Once they share their personal experiences, have them share what value there is in knowing another language. How does it help them understand a different culture and the values within that culture?
2. Show participants the clip by Avraham Infeld speaking about the Hebrew language (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N64-ltNAN6s>)
3. Ask participants to think of other Hebrew words they might know which do the same thing, some examples might include:
 - Shalom (peace is from the root sh-l-m, to be “whole”)
 - Teshuvah (repentance from the root l-sh-v, “to return”)
 - Aliya l’Torah (honor in synagogue from root ah-l-ah “to go up”)
4. Consider the excerpts by Leon Wieseltier who is an American writer, critic and former editor of The New Republic. In his article, “Language, Identity and the Scandal of American Jewry” (2011) he

offers a biting critique of American Jewry for being illiterate in Jewish language and therefore not competent at accessing Jewish tradition and ill equipped to contribute in a significant way to Jewish life.

Our language is our incommensurable inflection of our humanity; our unique way of presenting, not least to ourselves, what our unique way is through the world. Our language is our element; our beginning; our air; the air peculiar to us. Even our universalism comes to us (like everybody else's universalism) in a particular language...

5. Get reactions from the group – do they agree, disagree? Can they think of examples when this played out in their own lives?
6. Broaden the discussion. What is at stake if we lose our connection to Hebrew language? Bring in the following perspective from Wieseltier's and ask the participants for their reactions.

The American Jewish community is the first great community in the history of our people that believes that it can receive, develop, and perpetuate the Jewish tradition not in a Jewish language. By an overwhelming majority, American Jews cannot read or speak or write Hebrew, or Yiddish. This is genuinely shocking. American Jewry is quite literally unlettered...The assumption of American Jewry that it can do without a Jewish language is an arrogance without precedent in Jewish history. And this illiteracy, I suggest, will leave American Judaism and American Jewishness forever crippled and scandalously thin... the quantity of the Jewish tradition that is slipping through our fingers in America is unprecedented in our history. And it is the illiteracy of American Jewry that makes it complicit in this oblivion...

7. Put Wieseltier's perspective in conversation with Sarah Benor's JHub talk entitled, "Yiddish, Ladino and Jewish English: Do American Jews Speak a Jewish Language?" Benor is a socio-linguist who argues that American Jews are creating their own language, a kind of Judeo-American and are contributing to the long tradition of Jews who have developed new languages based on the cultures in which they live.

Note to Educator

Did the enduring understanding that you set out to teach surface during this activity?

Additional Resources

Full version of Leon Wieseltier's article, "Language, Identity and the Scandal of American Jewry" (2011)
 Jewish Language Lexicon