

What is the most effective way to teach Hebrew in America? In the Fall of 2007, we at The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life began to tackle that question by analyzing the viability of developing and supporting Hebrew language charter schools in New York and beyond. Charter schools, which are public schools, publicly funded but independently run, seemed like a promising vehicle for teaching Hebrew. After all, there are charter schools around the country that focus on dance, music, French, Spanish, Arabic, yoga and many other foci. How would we design a

isn't simply an immersion method, but an immersion method in which teachers continuously develop pedagogic strategies to help students internalize functional elements of language.

Ringvald, who when we first met her was the director of Hebrew and Arabic language at Brandeis University, adapted the method for use among primary school students at the Jewish Community Day School in Boston from its founding in 1995.

In February of 2008 we assembled a group of experienced public school educators to visit JCDS and determine if this Hebrew methodology would

work in the development of the School of Hebrew at Middlebury College, where she is now the CV Starr Research Professor of Languages and Linguistics.

To date, only a handful of Jewish day schools have adopted this approach. Some fear that it favors oral language over textual knowledge. But the research suggests otherwise: Whether it's Mandarin, German, Spanish or Hebrew, when students first gain oral proficiency, literacy, taught correctly, has a much greater foundation to build on. That's the way we learn languages naturally. When language instruction begins with letter recognition and phonetic decoding before the language is comprehensible, both oral proficiency and literacy suffer. Those of us who are native English speakers didn't first learn English by tasting honey that had been joyfully smeared on the letter "A" when we were three years old. We listened for months and months to the emotion-laden language of our parents with our small brains growing synapses in response before we ever produced a word. As we gained cognitive capacity, we understood more and more orally until we began to produce spoken language in the most rudimentary ways. We only learned to begin to read English at four, five or six years old after we could understand, comprehend and *speak* the language. Why in most of the settings where Hebrew is taught in the Diaspora do we try to teach letter recognition and literacy before ever trying to teach oral comprehension and facility? I think the answer is deeply embedded in the history of Jewish exile.

It is a tremendous fact of creative survival that the Jewish People, having lost its land and its natural connection to spoken Hebrew, preserved its national language primarily as a written and liturgical language. We developed educational traditions by which to do so starting with the nostalgic tradition of actually beginning a young child's learning of Hebrew by having him or her taste the honey that has been poured over the Hebrew letter Aleph. Learning began and in some quarters still begins with letters rather than heard language. Hebrew in exile was an unnatural language and therefore was preserved through unnatural means.

However, with the Zionist revolution and the resurrection, modernization and secularization of the Hebrew language in the modern state of Israel, Hebrew returned to being once again a natural spoken language. Through revolutionary discipline and force of will, Zionism's pioneers created a new reality and the return of Hebrew to being a natural phenomenon was central to that new reality. It's not clear whether the Jewish educational establishment in the Diaspora has thought through the educational implications of the success of Zionism for the teaching of the Hebrew language. Many Jewish schools still teach Hebrew as if Hebrew is not the language that Israelis use daily in their businesses and schools and theaters and restaurants and beaches, as if the new, living reality of a Hebrew speaking society in Israel doesn't exist.

To my mind, the approach to Hebrew education that calls us to first speak and then write is exactly what the founders of Zionism had in mind. Teaching Hebrew this way can rightly be called a Zionist approach. Teaching in the old way cannot. The founders of Zionism dreamed of a day when Hebrew would become a natural language. That day has arrived and we must seize it by teaching in a way that puts spoken Hebrew first. Hebrew literacy will be the better for it. ■

TEACHING HEBREW IN AMERICA: A ZIONIST APPROACH

by RABBI DAVID GEDZELMAN

school model focused on teaching the Hebrew language? Because these would be public schools, we understood the imperative that they be diverse and open to children of all backgrounds. We also knew that the best public schools differentiate instruction, taking into continuous account the strengths and challenges of every child through the use of data and assessment. As a result of our research, we chose the Columbia University Teachers College "workshop model," which begins each lesson with whole class instruction and quickly moves to small group learning to build particular skill capacities in each child, to guide the overall educational philosophy of our model. We then sought to find an approach to Hebrew instruction that would best align with the educational culture that would flow from this.

Our big breakthrough was to partner with Professor Vardit Ringvald, the co-founder, along with Arnee Winshall, of an organization called Hebrew at the Center, a dynamic program that adapts the Proficiency Approach for second language acquisition to the teaching of Hebrew. This approach enables students to function in Hebrew in four necessary skill areas: understanding, speaking, reading and writing. By adopting functionality as a core principle, the Proficiency Approach helps children internalize the target language.

Language, Dr. Ringvald said, was not to be learned through the memorization of word lists and rote learning of grammatical rules and structures. Instead, language is a relational experience to be internalized through lived experiences that imprint in authentic ways. Teaching of language is effective only if each student is assessed in a disciplined and consistent way that gives teachers the ongoing data they need to help each student move forward in mastery of real lived language. In this approach, students do not learn *about* the target language; they learn *in* the language. Translation is strongly discouraged. Teachers in this methodology never speak English to students. The connection between student and teacher is exclusively in Hebrew.

The Proficiency Approach works because it parallels the natural process by which human beings learn native language as infants, toddlers and children. Language is heard, understood, spoken, read and written — in that natural order. This

be a good fit for a workshop model based school.

Not only did the team come back highly encouraged that the Proficiency Approach was an excellent fit for our general design, but they (and we) observed students speaking and understanding Hebrew in ways that we had just not seen at other Jewish day schools. For example, a group of students, not from Israeli families, led us through the school on a tour speaking exclusively in Hebrew and conversing informally in a way that was obviously not in any way rehearsed. It was clear to us that we could adapt this approach to a public school setting.

The guidelines of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) became part of Hebrew Language Academy Charter Schools (HLA) educational goals as articulated in the Charter authorized by the New York City Department of Education. HLA opened its doors in Brooklyn, NY in August 2009. At the same time, together with our philanthropic partners in The Arevim Philanthropic Group, we founded the Hebrew Charter School Center to support the development of Hebrew Charter Schools nationwide. We were on our way to being a strong force for championing the Proficiency Approach in the teaching of Hebrew.

Seven years later, nine Hebrew charter schools with 1,700 students are open in Brooklyn, Harlem, San Diego, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., East Brunswick, N.J. and Minneapolis. Together they make up the Hebrew Charter School Center's network of schools, all teaching Hebrew per this approach. Professional educators at the Hebrew Charter School Center and at the school level have learned a tremendous amount since our first school opened as to how to best implement this approach and are learning and adapting continuously. In addition, we at The Steinhardt Foundation have worked together with Arevim to adapt this method to day camp settings with the Arevim Hebrew at Camp program. Now working together with the Foundation for Jewish Camp, we implemented Hebrew immersion programs at five day camps during the summer of 2015 and hope to ramp up the program considerably over the next few years. (See related story on page 8.)

Whether in charter schools or at camp, kids are understanding and speaking Hebrew in ways that we were told could never happen just a few years ago. We at the Foundation are so encouraged with seeing the proof of Professor Ringvald's approach that we have made a significant grant to support her

Rabbi David Gedzelman is the President and CEO of The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life.