

WHY MIGHT YOU WAIT TO TEACH HEBREW DECODING?

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We live in a time when decades old assumptions about Hebrew and Jewish learning in synagogue/part-time settings are being turned on their head. The time devoted to formal learning has been decreasing and many alternative models have moved from “pilots” to “givens.” As noted in a number of recent articles, [#OnwardHebrew is transforming Hebrew learning in part-time/synagogue settings across North America](#) – introducing aural Hebrew language via [Hebrew Through Movement, Jewish Life Vocabulary](#) and regular [t’fillot](#), before teaching Hebrew decoding/reading in the year or two prior to Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

There is no doubt that children can learn the Hebrew phonetic system in second or third grade; they have been doing it for decades. **However, for too many young students, frustration starts mounting in the year immediately following the introduction of the letters and vowel signs, not because the children are not smart enough and not because their brains can’t figure out phonics in a system that uses different symbols.** They face three key challenges: decreased time, lack of foundational knowledge and diminished motivation.



DECREASED TIME: Over the last 10-15 years, the days and hours per week for Hebrew learning has decreased in part-time/congregational programs across North America. There is no doubt that [this structural change demands a rethinking of Hebrew goals, learning assumptions and approaches](#). From just the standpoint of time, it does not seem realistic to ask our students to achieve the same goals as earlier generations who had many more hours per week and year. In our part-time settings, we simply do not have time to teach communicative language, nor writing, nor reading for meaning. On the other hand, we can offer rich and engaging Hebrew learning opportunities.

LACK OF FOUNDATIONAL KNOWLEDGE: Early English readers who confront the printed word “cat” will sound it out “c-at” and realize that they have heard the word many times before, can pronounce it accurately and know what it means. It is a lightbulb moment! On the other hand, children learning to decode Hebrew who confront the printed word [בְּמִרְמָיו](#) can get stuck (“*Bimm...* wait, is that third letter a D sound or an R? Is that an ‘oh’ in the middle, or is that an ‘oh’ at the end?”). Thus, [#OnwardHebrew’s push to delay decoding is to offer years during which students can build foundational knowledge, i.e., aural/oral repertoire of Hebrew prayers, blessings and general vocabulary](#). The word [בְּמִרְמָיו](#), when found in context of [עוֹשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם](#) (*oseh shalom*) becomes an easy [sound-to-print](#) progression just like the word “cat” was all those years ago. The student recognizes the phrase/word from having participated in many worship experiences and can pronounce it accurately. If students were lucky enough to learn the [meaning of Oseh Shalom’s key words via Hebrew Through Movement](#), they will also have a context for understanding its meaning.

DIMINISHED MOTIVATION: An eight year old is often excited to enter the “club” of those who learn to read Hebrew. However, years of “the same, the same” – even with great textbooks and creative teachers – can wear down the early excitement, creating diminished motivation. On the other hand, students who are a year away from their Bar or Bat Mitzvah bring a maturity for the learning process

and stronger motivation for achieving performance goals. In a one-on-one setting, they can learn to [decode/read Hebrew letters and vowel signs in 12-15 hours](#), followed by the normative number of meetings his/her synagogue requires with a B'Mitzvah tutor. ***So, rather than spending years of Hebrew and prayer rote practice, #OnwardHebrew's compacted approach for learning Hebrew builds foundational knowledge while suddenly opening up time for more compelling Jewish learning.*** In an era where Jewish educators talk about Jewish learning for “thriving” and “meaning-making,” transforming the Hebrew learning approach has the [potential to benefit the entire Jewish educational enterprise](#).

A few words of advice from those who have been down this path:

JOIN THE CONVERSATION: Learn as much as you can by grabbing a cup of coffee (hmm, maybe ice cream!) and then spending an hour or so on the [#OnwardHebrew](#) site, clicking on articles and videos. Join the [#OnwardHebrew Facebook group](#), paying attention to the postings; feel free to ask questions or offer your own comments.

EXPAND THE CONVERSATION: Stir #OnwardHebrew conversations among stakeholders – clergy, teachers, committee and board members – by sharing and discussing the articles and videos you feel would resonate.

PICK SOME LOW HANGING FRUIT: With your stakeholders, decide if you are ready to pilot one or more of the #OnwardHebrew elements – [Hebrew Through Movement](#) (makes sure your teacher(s) sign up for the online seminar!) [Jewish Life Vocabulary](#) (LOTS of resources here – keep clicking around!) and [Hebrew t'fillot](#). Each of these easily complements any of your other current Hebrew learning goals, curriculum or textbooks. Keep in mind that there is potential crossover between these elements. For example you can anchor JLW in the Hebrew *alef-bet*, [introducing one letter a week and teaching two to three Hebrew words that start with it](#). Thus, a child in your program from first grade onwards would have had six years of seeing most of the letters prior to learning to decode. OR, integrate Hebrew sight words into your Hebrew Through Movement lessons (the picture on the right is from an [HTM lesson on Sh'ma](#)). Taken together, #OnwardHebrew's low hanging fruit are examples of rich Hebrew learning, even without the introduction of decoding until children have gained years of Hebrew vocabulary.



CONSIDER WHEN TO TEACH DECODING: Do not rush this decision - it takes open conversation with stakeholders and the implementation of some experiments or pilots. For example, if a child enters your program in fifth or sixth grade not having yet learned to decode/read Hebrew, consider using “[Let's Learn Hebrew Side-by-Side](#)” as the approach, making sure to evaluate its effectiveness.

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Kol hakavod for considering the question! Stay in touch with the #OnwardHebrew community if you need help!