

# 6 Ways to Introduce Hebrew to Young Children

by Ellen J. Rank

In *Pirkei Avot*, Rabbi Abuyah compares one who learns during childhood to ink written on fresh, new paper. The paper absorbs the ink and retains it forever. In contrast, learning postponed is like writing on paper that has been repeatedly erased—the image is never clear and little is retained.

A considerable body of research in second language acquisition supports Rabbi Abuyah's idea. Professor of Linguistics Rod Ellis summarizes age-related studies in second language acquisition this way: "Both the number of years of exposure and starting age affect the level of success in second-language learning ... starting age determines the levels of accuracy achieved."

Not only do young children absorb language more readily, but early language instruction helps to foster the child's cultural identification.

Below are six easy ways to introduce pre- and early readers to the Hebrew language and to bring modern Hebrew to life in your classrooms. The use of Hebrew posters and music, as well as the inclusion of Hebrew in everyday classroom routines, will help make the language fun and accessible to young children.

## 1. Use Hebrew conversationally in everyday classroom interactions.

- At the beginning of class, welcome students in Hebrew with either **בִּקְר טוֹב** (*Boker Tov*—Good Morning) or **שְׁלוֹם, יְלָדִים** (*Shalom, Y'ladim*—Hello, children). Encourage students to respond with **בִּקְר אֹר** (*Boker Or*—Morning light) and **שְׁלוֹם, מוֹרָה/מוֹרָה** (*Shalom, morah/moreh*—Hello, Teacher) respectively. Consider having students take turns welcoming the class at the start of each day.
- When you want students to stand or to be seated during class, use simple Hebrew directives such as **בְּבִקְשָׁה לָקוּם** (*bevakashah lakum*—please, stand up) and **בְּבִקְשָׁה לֵשֶׁבֶת** (*bevakashah lashevet*—please, sit).
- Pepper English sentences with Hebrew words. For example, use common Hebrew nouns, such as **יְלֵד** (*yeled*—boy), **יְלֵדָה** (*yaldah*—girl), **יְלָדִים** (*y'ladim*—boys/children), **יְלָדוֹת** (*y'ladot*—girls), in everyday speech.
- Take the roll and ask other routine questions in Hebrew. Encourage students to answer in Hebrew, saying, for example, **אֲנִי פֹה** (*ani po*—I am here) or **לֹא פֹה** (*lo po*—not here) for a student who is not present.
- Use the Hebrew numbers 1 through 10 when the proper occasion arises. Hold up your fingers to indicate the value of the number. For example, if you would like to form groups of three, say: "We need **שְׁלֹשָׁה יְלָדִים** (*sh'loshah y'ladim*—three children) in each group." Encourage

students to repeat the Hebrew and to use Hebrew numbers whenever possible.

- Call on students using their Hebrew names. (If students do not know their Hebrew names, see if they are on record at your school, or ask the parent.) This will not only help your students feel more comfortable with spoken Hebrew, but will also reinforce a sense of Jewish identity and belonging.

## 2. Bring *b'rachot* to life.

Lead students in reciting *b'rachot* before they eat a snack. To help students understand which blessings are for specific foods, invite students to hold up their snack and say the appropriate blessing.

Bread

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, הַמוֹצִיא לֶחֶם מִן הָאָרֶץ.

*Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the world, who brings forth bread from the earth.*

Desserts, baked goods

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא מִיַּי מְזוֹנוֹת.

*Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the world, who creates baked goods.*

Fruits or nuts that grow on trees

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הָעֵץ.

*Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the world, who creates the fruit of the tree..*

Fruits, vegetables, or nuts that grow out of the ground

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הָאֲדָמָה.

*Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the world, who creates the fruit of the earth (vegetables).*

Drinks and other foods including candy and animal products

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהַכֹּל נִהְיָה בְּדַבְּרוֹ.

*Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the world, by whose word all things come into existence.*

## 3. Play Hebrew games.

- Teach the Hebrew for parts of the body, such as רֹאשׁ (*rosh*—head), יָד (*yad*—hand), and בֶּטֶן (*beten*—stomach), by playing שִׁמּוֹן אֹמֵר (*Shimon Omer*--Simon Says). Invite volunteers to be Shimon and lead the game.
- Play card games with *Shuffle It in Hebrew*. The Hebrew words on the playing cards are ideal for sight reading and to teach initial Hebrew letters. Click [here](#) for a selection of card games based on *Shuffle It in Hebrew*.

#### **4. Sing Hebrew songs and play Hebrew music.**

- Include simple Hebrew songs in daily routines. For example, open or close your lesson with the song “*Shalom Haverim*.” Ask students to suggest hand motions to accompany the song. If you are not familiar with this or other easy children’s songs, invite the music specialist or cantor to teach you and your class a few songs.
- Play the music from *Shiru Shalom Ivrit* and *Z’man Lashir*. These catchy sing-along CDs help create a lively Hebrew atmosphere in the classroom.

#### **5. Label classroom items with their Hebrew names and display Hebrew posters.**

- Affix Hebrew labels on the wall (קִיר–*kir*), window (חַלּוֹן–*halon*), and door (דְּלֵת–*delet*) of the classroom. Do the same on objects such as chairs (כִּסֵּי–*kisei*), desks (שֻׁלְחָן–*shulhan*), and the black or white board (לוּחַ–*lu’ah*).
- Post Hebrew posters around the room. For example, *Ulpan Alef* posters display playful drawings—such as the family, food, clothing, and in the park—with their Hebrew names. Hang up *alef-bet* posters and Jumbo Hebrew Letter Cards to help familiarize students with the *alef bet*. Hang an Israeli flag and a map of Israel.
- To encourage students to learn Hebrew words related to their individual interests, ask students to draw an illustration of a favorite animal, sport, or hobby. Teach students a key Hebrew word to describe their illustrations. Have students label their illustrations using the key Hebrew words. If, for example, a student draws a dog, the illustration would be labeled כֶּלֶב (*kelev*). Ask each student to present his or her illustration to the class and to use the Hebrew term when describing the illustration. Display students’ work in the classroom.

#### **6. Read Hebrew books**

Create a bookshelf devoted to illustrated Hebrew children’s books. If possible, include books, such as those by Dr. Seuss, that are familiar to the children. Consider reading a few pages aloud in Hebrew to the class. Be sure to point to the illustrations to help students understand the story.

Students will find joy in the Hebrew language when instruction begins early and is centered in an environment that is rich in the sights, sounds, and flavor of Hebrew.