

# Put Some Past in Your Future

## Hebrew and the Contemporary Jewish Experience

Hebrew and Arabic writing go  
from east to west,

הַכָּתָב הָעֵרָבִי וְהָעִרְבִי הוֹלְכִים  
מִמְּזָרְח לְמַעֲרָב

Latin writing, from west to east.

הַכָּתָב הַלָּטִינִי, מִמְּעֵרָב לְמִזְרָח

Languages are like cats:

שָׂפוֹת הֵן כְּמוֹ חֲתוּלִים;

You must not stroke their hair  
the wrong way.

אָסוּר לְבֹא בָהֶן נֶגֶד כּוּוֹן הַשְּׁעֵרוֹת.

—Yehuda Amichai, *Temporary Poem of My Time* שִׁיר זְמָנִי

Translation by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav

Though this book is written in English, as we saw in the introduction even a very basic understanding of Hebrew roots and how they work can enrich our Jewish lives, wherever we live and whether or not we use Hebrew on a daily basis.

This chapter digs much deeper, unpacking the ways in which Hebrew can be an asset in all our Jewish doings, so much of which are wrapped up in our ongoing dialogue with words and texts. We'll explore this

idea not just in theory but through concrete discussions of particular words—their roots, meanings, and significance.

Hebrew is one of the few aspects of Jewish life that can truly transcend all historical periods and all religious, political, and ethnic schisms. It's a bridge builder that connects our Jewish lives and worlds. As we examine so-called religious terminology throughout this chapter (Torah, holiness, halachah, aggadah—Jewish normative and narrative traditions), it should become clear that these are not the sole property of religiously observant Jews, but rather are key ideas that can inform and inspire all kinds of Jewish doing.

## Language and Life, Tongue and Text

We live in an age of riotous cultural diversity and global variety at our fingertips. But it's also a period of breakdown and blurring of all sorts of boundaries, with the proliferation of fusions of every type. Indeed, if you're thirty or under, this is the only reality you've ever known.

Every aspect of our lives, whether culture, religion, or language, for better or worse, has become some sort of *mélange* (pardon my French). One clear implication of this is that any quest for authenticity is misguided and ultimately unachievable. What this means is that achieving some familiarity, or interface, with Hebrew can greatly enrich our Jewish identity and experience. It can help us *do* Jewish better.

In the current climate of easy diversity and fusion, it often feels like we can effortlessly be global citizens. But even today, there's a limit to how much we can get to know the rest of the world, or even a single culture, without really investing in it and in its inner code: its language.

### MAKE YOURSELF A(T) HOME

When it comes to our own spiritual lives, we really only have two choices: to be a “tourist,” or to be a “local.” The difference is the language. Tourists don't really need to know the language. They come and go with “hello” and “goodbye” and perhaps (for the adventurous) “How much does this cost?” But to feel more at home, *to be* more at home, language is essential.

Many American Jews try to get around in their own spiritual tradition like American tourists get around in foreign countries—solely through

English. A trip abroad is just for a short while, we say; how much can one invest in being a tourist? But connecting to the innermost parts of our heritage is not like getting around the streets of Paris. It is the difference between hitting a few tourist highlights over the course of a short visit and buying a house, settling in, and really getting to know the neighbors, their haunts, talking to them in their own tongue, learning their best-kept secrets of where to eat, etc.

Living your cultural or spiritual life as a tourist, a foreigner, without any way into the language, and therefore always in perpetual translation, makes it difficult to get beyond superficiality, partialness, and living life at a distance. For even the best translations are only approximations of the originals.

Learning a language sounds really hard at the outset, and it's not always clear what the reward will be for the investment of time. Fortunately, when it comes to Jewish identity and connection, just getting acquainted with some Hebrew roots can open up access to culture, spirituality, and the mother lode of all Jewish culture and morality: text.

<p>Living your cultural or spiritual life as a tourist, a foreigner, always in perpetual translation, makes it difficult to get beyond superficiality.</p>	<p>Imagine if you could never read Jewish sources, but could only read commentaries on them and from those try to figure out what the originals actually said and meant. Translation is the same: all translations, no matter how good, are a sort of commentary on the original in a different language. That's actually the best-case scenario, a generous interpretation. A harsher approach is expressed in the Italian phrase <i>traduttore, traditore</i>, "translator, traitor," or the Hungarian, a <i>fordítás, ferdítés</i>, "translation is distortion."</p> <p>WHAT GETS LOST IN TRANSLATION</p> <p>Literary critic Leon Wieseltier discusses the importance—and dangers—of translation:</p>
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Translation has always represented an admirable realism about the actual cultural situation of the Jews in exile. Whatever the linguistic delinquencies of the Jews, their books must not remain completely closed to them. Better partial access than no access at all, obviously.<sup>1</sup> However:

We are a community whose books and whose treasures—our books *are* our treasures—are accessible almost entirely in translation. Have we forgotten that every translation is also a conversion? In every translation something is lost even as something is gained; and it is hard for me to imagine that more is gained than is lost. . . .With American Jewry, ignorance is no impediment to pride. Quite the contrary. Pride will make up for ignorance, and hide it behind the ferocity of tribal expression.<sup>2</sup>

Living a life in translation can be problematic when we're talking about a life inspired by such a textually oriented tradition. The great Hebrew poet Chaim Nachman Bialik (better known to some as the great-great-grand-uncle of celebrity Mayim Bialik) once wrote, possibly paraphrasing Coleridge, that learning Judaism in translation is like "kissing his lover through a veil."<sup>3</sup> For him it was a form of poetry, which may be the most extreme example of where important things get lost in translation, because of its intense focus on the texture, the very music of the language itself as the bearer of meaning. Indeed, it is poetry's near fusion of form and content that makes it so difficult to reproduce faithfully in another language.

Recognizing the inherent difficulty of translating poetry is not only important for literature majors—it is a crucial insight for all Jews interested in exploring questions of identity. This is so because of the nature of the Jewish textual tradition, referred to in shorthand as "Torah" (see below for a more detailed explanation of the use of this term).

The broad idea of Torah is best seen as a type of poetry, in the sense of a deep fusion of form and content. How so? Let's look first at how the Torah (the book) sees itself.

Toward the end of the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses receives this commandment:

"Therefore, write down this poem [*shirah*] and teach it to the people of Israel; put it in their mouths, in order that this poem [*shirah*] may be My witness against the people of Israel. When . . . many evils and troubles befall them—then this poem [*shirah*] shall confront them as a witness, since it will never be lost from the mouth of their offspring. . . ." That day, Moses wrote down this poem [*shirah*] and taught it to the Israelites. . . .

When Moses had put down in writing the words of this Teaching [*Torah*] to the very end, Moses charged the Levites who carried the Ark of the Covenant of Adonai, saying: “Take this book of Teaching [*Sefer Torah*] and place it beside the Ark of the Covenant of Adonai your God.” (Deuteronomy 31:19–26)

Here, God dictates a *shirah*, “poem” (or song) to Moses. In this passage, “poem” and “Teaching” seem interchangeable; the main rabbinic interpretation<sup>4</sup> here is that in this context, the word *shirah*, meaning “poem,” refers to the entire five books of the Torah.

The result of the interchangeability of these two words is that all Torah text—prose, history, narrative, legend, even the “begats”—should be considered “poetry.” This brings us back to the importance of original language and the depth and nuance of meaning in the text.

The biblical commentator Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (1816–1893, Lithuania), often known by the abbreviation “Netziv,” emphasizes that the whole Torah is indeed like poetry in several ways. First, the Torah is “allusive rather than explicit”: it leaves more unsaid than explicitly stated.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, unlike descriptive prose, which carries its sense on the surface, the Torah, like poetry, “hints at deeper reservoirs of meaning.”<sup>6</sup>

If this is true of poetry, and therefore of the entire Torah, which is likened to poetry, then it is also true of many other areas of our tradition and heritage. And if Robert Frost’s adage is true that “poetry is what gets lost in translation,” then we stand to lose a great deal indeed if we rely only on translations as our source of Jewish inspiration.

In her book *The Grammar of God: A Journey into the Words and Worlds of the Bible*, Aviya Kushner explores the inherent difficulties in trying to understand the Bible in translation. Mourning the way this loss of poetic content shuts down possibilities for interpretation, she writes, “The Hebrew text I grew up with is beautifully unruly, often ambiguous, multiple in meaning and hard to pin down; many of the English translations are, above all, certain.”<sup>7</sup>

For instance, after Cain murders his brother Abel, God punishes him with ceaseless wandering. Cain says: *gadol avoni min’so* (Genesis 4:13). The key word here is *avon*, which could mean either “sin” or “punishment.” This ambiguity allows three possible translations:

1. “My punishment is too great to bear!”—Cain, not acknowledging his sin, complains of the severity of the punishment.

2. “My sin is too great to bear!”—Cain expresses remorse and guilt over the gravity of his sin.

Or, since there is no punctuation in the Bible, this phrase could be read as a question:

3. “Is my sin too great [for You] to bear?” Cain cries plaintively for divine mercy: “Will You not forgive me?”

Any possible translation is itself a choice, eliminating all the other implied possibilities.

And just as it’s true that translation dulls our understanding and experience of *language*, that’s no less true about Judaism itself.

This reflection on the nature of translation is in some ways a uniquely Jewish discussion.<sup>8</sup> Islam officially forbids the possibility of translating the Qur’an. Muslims believe Muhammad received his divine revelation in Arabic, and thus it can only be transmitted in that tongue; every rendering into a foreign language is a human “interpretation” (*tafsir*), and thus a potential distortion of the truth.

The Christian approach is the diametric opposite: the more the merrier. God’s words can be transmitted in any vessel.<sup>9</sup> The New Testament, for instance, has been translated into more than fifteen hundred languages, and there are biblical texts in more than thirty-three hundred different languages.<sup>10</sup> Many Christians even believe that certain translations, such as the King James Version, are themselves divinely inspired.

Judaism, as in many areas (such as iconography) offers a golden mean between the Christian and the Muslim views: translations are valid and necessary, but there is irreplaceable meaning and value in the original.

So far this has all been about books. Not everyone finds inspiration for their Jewish life in a single book or even from a whole library. But if talking about the centrality of Torah and scripture sounds overly pious or religious, make no mistake: our ocean of sacred literature is so broad and deep as to encompass worlds of content, including a lot of things that are not so sacred (from tying shoes to interest rates to life on other planets and more). As the humorously named character Ben Bag-Bag states in *Ethics of the Fathers* (Pirkei Avot 5:24), “Study it, and review it,<sup>11</sup> for everything is contained within it.”

In our ongoing act of interpretation and application, we place demands on that text even as we may allow it to place its demands upon us.

Regardless of one's faith commitments or denominational membership, or lack thereof, those treasured texts—religious, heretical, historical, poetical—are the foundation and backbone of who we are as a people. And a Jew never merely reads the text: Jews are not *kor'ei Torah*, “readers of Torah,” but *lom'dei Torah*, “learners” or “students of Torah.”

But we don't stop there. In our ongoing act of interpretation and application, we place demands on that text, even as we may allow it to place its demands upon us. That is actually a Hebrew pun, because the word for “demand” is *lidrosh*, which also means “to interpret,” and gives us the uniquely Jewish phenomenon of midrash. Some are familiar with midrash (plural: *midrashim*) as stories told about biblical characters that don't appear in the biblical text itself, such as Abraham destroying his father's idols or the demonic character of Lilith in the Garden of Eden, who is mentioned in postbiblical literature.

Jews are not *korei Torah*, “readers of Torah,” but *lomdei Torah*, “learners of Torah.”

But the act of midrash is much more than simply filling in details or backstories in the Bible. Midrash is both a genre of Jewish literature and a process, a mode of creative interpretation and application of traditional texts in light of changing contemporary insight and needs.

Come to think of it, that isn't a bad definition of Jewishness itself. For if we just had the text, broad and deep and glorious as it may be, we would be straitjacketed by fundamentalism. There would be no way to apply it and update it, making it relevant to new conditions, challenges, and opportunities. In a world where scriptures, faiths, values, even religious legal systems abound, the creative, constructive form of reading known as midrash is possibly the most original and uniquely Jewish contribution to human civilization.

Make no mistake: midrash is not an exclusively religious activity. On the contrary, nonobservant or freethinking or humanistic or rebellious Jewishness is some of the most authentic and powerful midrash there is. Midrash, though, is intimately tied up with the original words and texts. Without Hebrew, it's much harder to “do midrash.” And without midrash, Jewish creativity, resourcefulness, and inspiration are diminished—which is to say that with or without Hebrew, we can *be* Jewish of course, but without some connection to Hebrew, it is much harder to *do* Jewish.

For instance, certain central biblical figures are not just literary characters, but figures essential to our own self-understanding. Their personality and spirit, and the lessons we are meant to learn from them, become more comprehensible with some understanding of the Hebrew roots and meanings of their names, along with the midrashim associated with them.

## י-ש-ר / ע-ק-ב: What It Says about Us That Jacob Became Israel

WORDSHOP

3

Let's take one of the most significant proper nouns in the Hebrew language: *Yisrael*, Israel. To understand this name, we have to understand its bearer's original name, *Ya'akov*, Jacob, and the transformation he underwent. A close look at the two Hebrew roots of these names, with some unexpected examples from throughout the Bible, provides a fascinating look at the age-old question of "what's in a name?" As opposed to Juliet Capulet and her Montague rose in Shakespeare's literary imagination, biblical names capture an essence and a destiny that echo throughout the ages.

*Ya'akov*/Jacob means something like "heel holder," after he grabbed onto his older brother's heel (עֲקֵב, *'akev*) at birth (Genesis 25:26), a word that comes from the root ע-ק-ב (*ayin-k-b*).<sup>12</sup> Later, Esau riffs on this root, and his brother's name, lamenting after having Isaac's blessing stolen from him: "Was he, then, named Jacob that he might supplant me<sup>13</sup> [*Ya'akov vaya'akveini*] these two times?" (Genesis 27:36). The two times are of course the earlier sale of the birthright for a mess of pottage and the theft here of the blessing.<sup>14</sup>

Later, in the famous scene of Jacob wrestling with an unknown figure at the ford of the Jabbok River, Jacob holds his opponent until he receives a blessing, which comes in the form of a new name, *Yisrael*, Israel, together with the explanation "for you have *striven* [*sarita*] with beings divine and human [or "God and men"], and have prevailed" (Genesis 32:23–33).

The root ש-ר-ה (*s-r-h*), meaning "strive" (in the form *sarita*<sup>15</sup> meaning "you have striven"), also has the sense of "rule," as in the name Sarah ("princess"; see Genesis 17:15), and the noun *sar*, "ruler" or "prince" (as in *sar shalom*, "the prince of peace" [Isaiah 9:5]). The medieval commentator Rashi explains that this means that Jacob/Israel shall no longer gain his blessings *b'okvah uvirmiyah*, "through deceit and trickery" (the "Jacob" root), but *bisrarah uvgilui panim*, "through mastery [or "lordliness", *s'arah*, the noun form related to that root] and openness."

This connects with a completely different possible interpretation of the name Israel, hinted at in various sources. The first three letters of the name *Yisrael* are י-ש-ר (*y-sh-r*),<sup>16</sup> which is a root of its own, meaning "straight, honest." Since the root of Jacob's name is linked to deceit, it's not a far stretch to see his new "corrective" name as connected to "straightness," or "honesty."



The explicit link between these two roots is made in several places. One is in Micah 3:9, where Israel is addressed as *beit Yisrael*, “the house of Israel,” who pervert *hay’sharah*, “equity.” Another is the famous phrase in Isaiah 40:4: *V’hayah he’akov l’mishor*, “the crooked shall be made straight” (literally, “let the rugged ground be made level”). Likewise there is the additional name *Y’shurun*, or Jeshurun (cf. Deuteronomy 32:15, 33:5,26), a synonym for Israel, that even more clearly signifies this root sense of י-ש-ו, meaning “straight.”<sup>17</sup>

So Jacob the trickster underdog becomes Israel, the striver who prevails; from crooked “supplanter” to the “true one” of God. And we go from being *b’nei Ya’akov*, “the children of Jacob,” a clan, to *b’nei Yisrael*, “the children of Israel,” a nation in the making.

We can thus see both the difficulties and deficiencies of translations of these two “simple” words “Jacob” and “Israel” and the incredible textured richness of allusions and associations with these epithets, which are so significant in our own history, identity, and self-perception as a people. And it all is expressed in the roots.

## WHAT WE SPEAK ABOUT WHEN WE SPEAK ABOUT TORAH

We have seen that Torah is a type of poetry that loses much of its unique meaning and value in translation. In fact, all aspects of our Jewish lives can be seen as a type of Torah, a “body of meaning” that requires a midrashic relationship to stay fresh, innovative, and connected to our lives. To understand this, we need to recast our idea of Torah and what it entails, because for many the word conjures only images of a parchment scroll or a single antiquated book.

When we speak about the deep significance of original language and about meanings and allusions that get lost in translation, the term *Torah* itself is a good example. This is a term (like *tzedakah*, as we saw earlier) which is so well known that we’re often unaware of how badly misinterpreted it often is. There are two issues here: the actual definition of the word, and the scope of the idea.

Torah ≠ Law      A very common mistranslation of *Torah* is “the Law.” We have English Bible translations to  
Torah = Teaching      blame for that, probably influenced by Christian

references to the Old Testament as comprised of “the Law and the Prophets” and by prejudices about Judaism being a “legalistic religion.” If Jews are indeed “legalistic” (however we understand that), then the central institution of Judaism must be “the Law,” right?

But here’s where the importance of the root comes into its own. The three-letter root of the word *Torah* is תִּרְה (y-r-h), which has a core meaning of “teach,” as in the word *moreh* or *morah* (masculine and feminine forms), meaning “teacher,”<sup>18</sup> or “guide” as in Maimonides’s great work *Moreh N’vuchim, Guide for the Perplexed*. So *Torah*, the textual heart of Judaism, is best understood as “the Teaching,” a guide for life that includes the components correctly understood as laws but is also far broader than that.

Given that basic definition of *Torah*, we can now better understand the scope of the term.

One sense of *Torah* is a specific book, as in the Passover song “Echad Mi Yodei’a” (“Who Knows One?”): “Who knows five? I know five—five are the books of the Torah.” Those would be the books of the Pentateuch (in Hebrew, the *Chumash*, from the word *chamesh*, meaning “five,” as in the Greek penta). Those five books are represented by the letter “T” in the Jewish name of the Bible: *Tanakh*, or תנ”ך, an acronym for תּוֹרָה, נְבִיאִים, קְטוּבִים *Torah, N’vi’im, K’tuvim*—the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings.

Torah is one book,  
and five books, and  
not a book at all.  
It is many books,  
and beyond books.

Taken together, these are also known as the **Written Torah**, *Torah shebichtav*. This means that the term “Torah” refers both to the Pentateuch and the Bible, which comprises the twenty-four books from Genesis through to 2 Chronicles (in the Jewish ordering).

And this is only the first level of the nesting-doll-like structure of what Torah actually means within Judaism.

For alongside the Written Torah, there is also the Oral Torah, *Torah sheb’al peh*.<sup>19</sup> Whereas the Written Torah is a wider concentric circle than the just the “first five books” Torah, at least its contents are clear. The boundaries of what constitutes the Oral Torah are much fuzzier.

Ask what the Oral  
Torah is, and you  
will be directed to  
a bookshelf—with  
stacks of books!

Conceptually, the Oral Torah refers to the commentary that accompany the Written Torah and guide its interpretation. These are teachings, legal and otherwise, that were transmitted orally from generations of teachers to students, and not committed to writing until about two thousand years ago.

Here's a deep irony: Over the last two millennia, the Oral Torah has become embodied in books—orders of magnitude more books than the Written Torah. And it keeps growing: any book written today that is a commentary, expansion, or codification or in any way can be considered part of the sacred literature of Oral Torah. Oh, the bibliography!

### WALK AND TALK; NORMATIVE AND NARRATIVE

The contents of Torah in general fall roughly into two main categories: *halachah* and *aggadah*. Even the linguistic roots of these terms offer unique insights into their deeper significance for Jewish life. *Halachah* comes from the root הלך-לך-לך (*h-l-ch*), meaning “walk,” and refers to legal teachings, covering everything from the rules of kosher food to civil laws of damages (tortes to torts, as it were). It isn't exactly parallel to contemporary Western concepts of law, but it is about rules for behavior, or the “path we walk.”

If *halachah* is about “walking the walk,” then *aggadah* is “talking the talk”—literally. Originally an Aramaic form related to the Hebrew הגיד (*h-g-d*), “talk” or “tell,”<sup>20</sup> *aggadah* is the amorphous body of material that includes what is “told,” narrative passages such as legends and tales, theology, ethical maxims, observations on the world, and much more.

**Torah = Walk + Talk** The division between *halachah* and *aggadah* is not always clear-cut. Some verses span the divide and encapsulate both. For instance, look at the very first occurrence of the word *torah* in the Torah: “There shall be one *torah* for the citizen and for the alien who resides among you” (Exodus 12:49). This is both *halachah*, a legal teaching, and an overarching *aggadah*, a guiding principle, that emphasizes the fundamental equality between Jews and non-Jews in a Jewish society.

The Oral Torah, too, most notably the Talmud, includes and integrates both genres.<sup>21</sup> Its sixty-three tractates are a compendium of just about everything under the sun. Its integration of *halachah* and *aggadah* is not unlike the Written Torah, which contains a range of genres: legal, literary, historical, wisdom literature, poetry, etc.

The Talmud presents extensive discourses on the rules of jurisprudence, detailed case law, and rabbinic argumentation, as well as apparently real and clearly fanciful details of rabbis' lives, tales of relations with non-Jews, and more. With its some sixty-two hundred pages, it's no wonder that Jews who learn "Torah" in yeshivot and seminaries rarely spend time on Written Torah. What they study most of the time is Talmud, the heart of the Oral Torah.

The Oral Torah is indeed a further widening concentric circle, but it comprises even more than that. There's a Talmudic teaching that reflects a nesting doll that's even bigger than those of Written and Oral Torah: "Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: Scripture, Mishnah, Talmud, aggadah, and *even what a diligent student will teach in the future before his master* was already spoken to Moses at Sinai" (Jerusalem Talmud, *Pe'ah* 2:4, 17a, emphasis added).

This teaching is striking for several reasons. First, it readily conflates Written Torah (scripture) and Oral Torah—it's all Torah. Second, it extends those categories to include truly oral exposition, what any serious student teaches before his teacher, implying innovation and creativity. All of these, Rabbi Joshua ben Levi suggests, are an integral part of divine revelation, part of the ongoing project known as Torah, which seems to be—once again—just another way of defining Jewishness.

This huge idea can be summed up in the words of legal scholar Robert Cover: "The Hebrew *Torah* refers both to law in the sense of a body of regulation and, by extension, to the corpus of all related normative material and to the teaching and learning of those primary and secondary sources. In this fully extended sense, the term embraces life itself."<sup>22</sup> Or, as contemporary teacher and singer Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach put it more simply: "The Torah is a commentary on the world; and the world is a commentary on Torah."<sup>23</sup>

## What is Talmud?

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The Talmud, part of the Oral Torah, actually refers to two literary bodies—the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud. The Babylonian Talmud (the *Bavli*) is based on the teachings of the study houses in Babylonia (ancient Iraq), while the Jerusalem Talmud (the *Yerushalmi*) was compiled in the Land of Israel, primarily in the Galilee. The Babylonian Talmud is more widely studied, as it is more comprehensive and better redacted and holds much greater authority.

In other words, just about anything relevant to one's Jewish identity is a form of Torah. This is a super broad definition of "Torah" that includes ideas, experiences, etc., that are not only *not* based in text, but includes things we would not conventionally call religious or spiritual, from ecology to economy to politics to agronomy. Don't be put off by this phrasing; though some will see it as being over-the-top religious (that their lives could or should have anything to do with that thing called Torah), others will see it as quite sacrilegious, that that thing called Torah should be applied also to the less than sacred in our world.

Thus, we have arrived at the "equation" that brings together everything we've seen so far: Jewishness = text = Torah = poetry and midrash = life itself. Hebrew is our guide along that path from Jewishness to life and back again. And in many ways, it is also the path itself.

## H is for Hebrew . . . and Holiness

If examining the role of Hebrew can get a bit overwhelming when it comes to the ever-expanding nesting doll that is Torah, it will help to look at the contemporary use of individual Hebrew words. For instance, even in everyday advertisements for Jewishly related products or services, it's hard to avoid using Hebrew terms. One recent initiative promoting Jewish spiritual communities bills itself as

designed to support the development of spiritual communities that use the wisdom and practice of Judaism (*chochmah*), to help people live lives of sacred purpose (*kedushah*) and inspire people to contribute to a more just and peaceful world (*tzedek*). The context for this work are covenantal communities (*kehilot*) where a group of people intentionally enter into a mutual obligatory relationship.<sup>24</sup>

This initiative is geared toward American Jews; its founders explain it in English. But when engaged Jews get serious about their Jewish lives, they revert to basic Hebrew terms. This doesn't just tag or brand this initiative as "Jewish" in some superficial PR way. Words like "wisdom," "sacred," "justice," and "community" somehow don't capture all that is expressed in the Jewish value concepts of *chochmah*, *k'dushah*, *tzedek*, and *k'hilah*. These words pop out at the reader and are

as indispensable here as chocolate chips in a cookie—just a few nuggets, but they impart all the *ta'am*, a versatile Hebrew word that means both “flavor” and “justification.”

Germanic and Romance-language “equivalents” in English just can’t convey all the associations, historical and cultural, that those rich Hebrew expressions do in their three-letter roots and their dense literary and linguistic contexts. And as we’ve already seen in the discussions of tzedakah and Torah, sometimes the English equivalents are biased, skewed, misleading, or just plain wrong.

Merely unpacking these Hebrew concepts in all their richness, nuance, and interwoven associations can be a significant Jewish educational act in itself (see Wordshop 4).

Although we’re framing the ideal of *kodesh*, holiness and sanctification, as central to our Judaism, that doesn’t negate the very potent and positive forces of *chol*, “mundanity, daily reality.” The blessing said at the end of Shabbat each week known as *havdalah* (meaning “separation” or “distinction”) speaks about *hamavdil bein kodesh l’chol*, “separating and distinguishing the holy from the daily.” The holy day of Shabbat is distinct from, but crucially also balanced by, the other six days of activity.

This metaphor of a balancing act between sacred and mundane, holy and daily, is exactly what we are striving to express regarding Hebrew itself and, through Hebrew, regarding all of Jewish life. We’ve already seen a basic distinction between the traditional *l’shon hakodesh*, or what we will refer to as historical religious Hebrew (HRH), and the daily spoken version of the language, contemporary vernacular Israeli (CVI). We’ll come back to this distinction in chapter 3, a sort of methodological separation for the purpose of reunification, as part of understanding the function that Hebrew plays today.

But first, let’s take a step back from this very close look at terminology bound up in Hebrew and Jewish identity and get more of a sense of the historical context of the Hebrew language for the Jewish people.

## ש-ת-ק: Holy Destiny, Being, and Becoming

The root ש-ת-ק (*k-d-sh*) is usually defined as “holy” or “sacred.” But those terms don’t begin to tell the tale of the breadth and depth of *k’dushah*, “holiness,” in a Jewish context.

“Holiness” is an idea that exists in many cultures but is probably one of the most elusive concepts in religious thought. Protestant philosopher Rudolf Otto, in his book *The Idea of the Holy*, called it the *mysterium tremendum*, yet in Judaism it is part and parcel of the pots and pans of everyday living.

In Hebrew, the root ש-ת-ק connects to wine, women (and men), and prayer; and also to funerals, martyrdom, and the moon.

Traditionally in Judaism, the source of all that is holy is God. The Deity goes by many names, but one of the common ones in Hebrew is *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*—literally, “the Holy One, blessed be He,”<sup>25</sup> or in a less gendered translation, “the Holy Blessed One.”

In turn, many things associated with divinity, such as the Beit Hamikdash, “the Temple” (but literally, closer to “the Home of Sanctification”), use one form or another of this root. The Torah scrolls are housed in the *Aron Hakodesh*, “the Ark of Holiness.” And, not to be outdone, the inner sanctum of the Temple was the *Kodesh Hakodashim*, “the Holy of Holies.”

The Temples were built in Jerusalem, known as *Ir Hakodesh*, “the Holy City.”<sup>26</sup> Similarly, the official Arabic name of the city is al-Kuds (sometimes spelled al-Quds), which has the same meaning, coming from the parallel three-letter root in Arabic.

But this root pops up even more in verbs than in nouns, since the idea of a mitzvah, a commandment, is a religious act that sanctifies the doer or the very time in which it is done. For instance, the blessing said over the wine on Shabbat is called the *Kiddush*, “the Sanctification.” But it’s not the wine that is or becomes holy, it is the Sabbath itself.

And ourselves: being or becoming *kadosh*, “holy” (plural: *k’doshim*), is a call, a destiny, and a destination, as in God’s command to the Jewish people *K’doshim tihyu, ki kadosh ani Adonai Eloheichem*, “You shall be holy, for I, Adonai your God, am holy” (Leviticus 19:2). The core vision is to actively make holiness permeate all areas of life, for to be a Jew is to be a “kingdom of priests” and “a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6).<sup>27</sup> It’s less about things,



places, or people being holy, and much more about what we can do to become holy and sanctify our being in the world.

For instance, part of a wedding ceremony is known as *kiddushin*, when a couple embarks on a path to bring sanctity to their relationship. The groom declares that the bride<sup>28</sup> is *m'kudeshet*, “sanctified”—the very same word used in the ceremony at the beginning of a new month, where the waxing new moon is viewed and celebrated, and time itself and its cycles sanctified.

One of the best-known uses of this root, though, is in much less joyous circumstances.

It is one thing to express our faith and belief in times of celebration, such as when marrying. It is quite another at the other end of the spectrum, at a burial. Then, and every day for up to a year after the loss of a loved one, an observant Jew says the prayer known as Kaddish. Many people assume this Aramaic doxology is somehow a prayer for the dead, when in fact it doesn't even mention death or the deceased. The prayer, as the name attests, is a “sanctification,” this time of God and God's life-giving role in the world. Likewise, the voluntary association of Jews who attend the dead body before burial, called the *chevrah kaddisha*, are those who engage in a special sanctification of a body that once housed the soul and life itself.

Traditionally, believers can even sanctify God in the act of dying. In Hebrew, martyrdom, the act of self-sacrifice in the name of religious freedom, is known as *mavet al kiddush Hashem*, “dying for the sanctification of the (divine) Name.”

So while *kodesh* and *k'dushah* are both noun forms, the Jewish understanding of holiness is much more of a verb—something we are called to do, to become, in the way we live our lives.



## Hebrew, Hebrews, and Jews

The Spanish speak Spanish, the French speak French, Germans speak German, Russians speak Russian, and Israelis speak . . . Hebrew. Or should we say, Jews speak Hebrew? Except that they—we—don't. Jews used to speak "Jewish," for that is what "Yiddish" means (and Judezmo, another name for Ladino). Yiddish and Ladino are just two of dozens of Jewish languages, including Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Italian, and many more, that Jews have spoken around the world throughout history.

Israel and Israelis, Judaism and Jews, Hebrew and Hebrews—what connects them all?

Israel is a sovereign country, founded in 1948, whose citizens are known as Israelis. Most are Jews (about 75 percent), but there is a large minority Arab population (composed of Muslims, Christians, Bedouin, and Druze—about 20 percent) and other ethnolinguistic groups as well. Israel has two primary languages: Hebrew, spoken by both Jews and non-Jews, and Arabic, spoken by Arab citizens and by many Jews of *Mizrachi* origin, those from Arabic-speaking countries.<sup>29</sup>

Defining Judaism is a different story. Over the last fifteen hundred-plus years, Judaism has largely developed in relation to and under the influence of the dominant religious cultures of Christianity and Islam. While there are many commonalities and points of contact between the three "faiths," we often mistakenly think of Judaism in categories and terms of reference taken from those traditions. Even labeling Judaism as a "faith,"<sup>30</sup> or as a "religious culture," as opposed to, say, a "civilization" or "ethnic-national group," imposes an outside perspective, not one native to Jewish experience.

The very name "Juda-ism" (from the Latin *Judaismus*) seems to suggest some sort of ideology, like capitalism and communism, not a cultural or national identity. It is a Western Christian epithet, not unlike the more antiquated term "Mohammedanism," so different from the term Muslims themselves use: Islam. The equivalent Hebrew term, *Yahadut*, is simply the abstract noun form of *Y'hudi*, a Jew,<sup>31</sup> literally, a descendant of the tribe of *Y'hudah*, Judah.<sup>32</sup>

That tribal name was also the source of the original name of our tribal language. Although the vast majority of the Bible is written in Hebrew (a small part, in the late books of Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah, is in Aramaic, a related language), the word "Hebrew" is never mentioned

there as the name of the language. The few times that the language is referred to (2 Kings 18, Isaiah 36), it is called *Y'hudit*,<sup>33</sup> that is, “Judean.”

Note that contrary to other national language names like Spanish or German, “Hebrew” is not derived from a place name; there’s no “Hebrewland” or “Hebrewstan.” On the other hand, in biblical times, a *Y'hudi*, a Judean, lived in *Y'hudah*, Judea, and spoke *Y'hudit*, “Judaite.” So where did the name “Hebrew” come from?

## ע-ב-ר: Hebrew, a Tribal Tongue

The term “Hebrew,” when it’s used in the Bible, appears as a “gentilic,” a term used to name a people or an ethnic group. Abram is known as *Ha'ivri*, “the Hebrew” (Genesis 14:13); in the eyes of the Egyptians, the enslaved people are *Ivrim*, “Hebrews” (throughout Exodus 1–3); and the prophet Jonah, when quizzed about who he is and where he’s from, replies, *Ivri anochi*, “I am a Hebrew” (Jonah 1:9).<sup>34</sup>

It seems no accident that the vast majority of instances where we find the term “Hebrew,” it’s being used either by others (Egyptians, Philistines) or by Israelites in presenting themselves to others. Some even see this as a derogatory term from outside, an ethnic slur that others used, which the Israelites then appropriated for themselves. As Bible scholar Yitzhaq Feder notes about the term “Hebrew,” “the self-appropriation of the Other’s derogatory term serves as a subversive expression of self-empowerment, comparable to the use (albeit controversial) of [the ‘N’ word] in hip-hop music.”<sup>35</sup>

There are several theories as to the origin of the name. One is based on the genealogies of Genesis. Noah’s son was Shem, father of Semitic peoples and languages. In Genesis 10, he is described as “the father of all the children of Eber.” That name is spelled עֶבֶר, which has the same three consonants as the name עִבְרִי *Ivri*. While the similarity is suggestive, nothing specifically links the person Eber with Hebrew or Hebrews.

However, like all Hebrew words, עִבְרִית *Ivrit*, the word for the Hebrew language, has a root of its own. In fact, those three consonants, ע-ב-ר (*[ayin]-b-r*), are a productive root in the language that also sheds light on its history and meaning. Another tradition has it that Abraham is called “the Hebrew” (הָעִבְרִי *Ha'ivri*) because he came from “across”—the river

that is, meaning the Euphrates, to the land of Canaan. “Across” is מַעְבָּר *mei’ever*, using the same root. This may be more folk etymology than scientific description, for this idea is usually embellished metaphorically in that Abraham and his family “stood across” from (opposed to) the rest of the ancient world in terms of monotheism and ethics and crossed conventional boundaries. These senses connect to the general meaning of the root ע-ב-ר, which means “pass, cross, traverse, undergo.”<sup>36</sup>

Biblical and linguistic historian William Schniedewind points out that “Hebrew” as a name for the language is first used in the Mishnah,<sup>37</sup> which was edited around 230 CE, and thus

the metalinguistic term *Hebrew* emerged precisely when the speech community in Palestine was disappearing. . . . The Jews/Judeans who lived in Judah/Judea always spoke the Judean/Jewish language. It is only when the Jews were expelled from Judea that the Judean language ceased to be a living vernacular. In fact, it is only at this time that the Jewish language became “Hebrew.” When the terminology for the language of the Jews is separated from that of the territory, it marks a profound shift in the history of the language itself.<sup>38</sup>

It is fascinating that the name “Hebrew,” for the language and the culture, has become significant again as a result of the reconnection of the Jews with territory and sovereignty, marking another profound shift both for the language and the entire Jewish people.

## HEBREW(S): FROM TRIBAL TO GLOBAL AND BACK AGAIN

Since the days of Abraham and those early Hebrews, Jews have spread around the world, speaking Arabic, Spanish, French, German, Russian, and many other languages.

But more than anything else, Jews speak English. Fully half of the world’s Jews live in North America and the English-speaking world. English is also *the* global language, and Jews are a tribal people gone global. The language of academia, world politics, global tourism, mass media, high-tech, and the Internet is overwhelmingly English. For that reason, even most Israelis, if they have learned a second language for academic, business, or cultural purposes, speak English. When

two Jews meet anywhere in the world, the common tongue between them is almost always English. Jews are, as the saying goes, “just like everyone else, only more so.”

The modern spoken version of Hebrew has become the national language of the State of Israel, a secular language for everyday people. Thus, the Hebrew of today that is the vernacular of the State of Israel cannot be called simply “the language that Jews speak,” because non-Israeli Jews don’t speak it, and Israeli non-Jews do!<sup>39</sup>

Depending on our sociology and theology, and the connections between them, we might personally view that normalization as:

a joyous miracle, the jewel in the crown of the Zionist revolution in the Jewish world,

or

a distressing demotion of *l’shon hakodesh*, “the holy tongue,” from the celestial seraphim to the sewer,

or

a pedagogical impediment: “Hebrew changed from the language of culture and spirit of the broader Jewish world to a communicative instrument in the State of Israel,”<sup>40</sup> and therefore shrunk in status for world Jewry,

or

a simply meaningless mundane fact.

Yet regardless of how we personally view the re-entrance of Hebrew onto the global scene and the subsequent “localization” of Hebrew language and culture in the country called Israel, it has undoubtedly made Hebrew more alive, more vibrant, more creative, and more relevant.

Yet, relevant for whom? How is it relevant, and why? The development of Hebrew as a normal spoken language is precisely what’s made its functioning as a specifically “Jewish” language—and its connection to the larger Jewish world—that much more complex and conflicted.

All this makes the case for Hebrew—who should learn it, why they should, what it is in the first place, and what it can mean to Jews everywhere—at once more complicated, yet at the same time far more fascinating.

# How Hebrew Connects, and to What

Imagine Hebrew as a nexus of many types of Jewish connections.

We can visualize the language itself as a vertical connection with the Jewish past—roots and trunk—before it split off into its many branches. That happened pretty early on. As far back as the third century BCE, scholars in the Greek-speaking Jewish community of Alexandria in Egypt created the Septuagint,<sup>41</sup> the first translation of the Bible, because even then most Jews there didn't know enough Hebrew anymore to read the Bible in the original. Those Jews, just as we do today, sought to understand the Bible in the language they used every day: Greek. Clearly our generation is not the first to lack Hebrew literacy and feel the need for translation.<sup>42</sup>

The vertical connection, across time

But Hebrew texts persisted as the backbone of Jewish education and, with some admixtures of Aramaic from Talmudic and other literatures, grew into the whole range of Torah discussed earlier. This in turn blossomed into other forms of Jewish literature in Hebrew, such as medieval poetry—both religious and bawdy, songs to God and to women (and men<sup>43</sup>)—Greek- and Arabic-influenced philosophy, and other genres.

That vertical connection, directly tethering Jewish origins to the Jewish present, is what allows an unmediated connection to the basic value concepts of the sources and that inimitable Jewish activity of “doing midrash.”

The horizontal connection, across space

The other way in which Hebrew functions as a nexus is in its horizontal capacity as a connection between Jews. This may seem unlikely at present (since most international Jewish events are in English), but ironically this was the case *before* the contemporary revival of Hebrew as a spoken language. Throughout medieval and early modern times, worldly Jews, especially across the Ashkenazi-Sephardi divide, spoke or at least corresponded in the language they had in common, classical Hebrew.

Although English currently holds sway as *the* global language, and probably will for the foreseeable future,<sup>44</sup> we may well ask: can Hebrew be one of the ties that bind Jews to one another over the world? A global English-based identity is seductive and works for some aspects of life, but it's too easy to get lost, to lose oneself and connections to others.

All over the world, people are searching for meaning and identity, for smaller scale, for something that is unique and different and *ours*. If we can succeed in finding a new place for the tribal within the global, for a pocket of particularity in the cosmopolitan garment that clothes us all, for that historic genetic code that is the vessel for truths, values, and meanings that are uniquely ours, then Hebrew could potentially be a rallying point, a unifying force for a fractious and fragmented people, and a resource like no other for the continued flourishing of Jewishness and peoplehood. As opposed to Yiddish and other Jewish languages, “The deeper logic of peoplehood required the generative powers of Hebrew, for it alone could provide for the B’nei Israel of India and the Jews of Morocco as well as for the Hasidim of Belz.”<sup>45</sup>

Let’s explore this, using—what else?—Hebrew words.

## FEWER TIES THAT BIND

There are two words in Hebrew that are very similar and easy to confuse but mean very different things.

Many people know the word *echad*, “one”—if not from counting exercises in Hebrew school, then from the Sh’ma prayer (“Hear, O Israel . . .”), which ends with the words *Adonai Echad*, “Adonai is One.” The root of *echad* is א-ח-ד ([alef]-chet-dalet). This same root gives us two very similar-sounding words: *achidut*, which means “uniformity” or “sameness,” and *achdut*, which means “unity” or “togetherness.” While these are very similar words, when it comes to Judaism, no two concepts could be further apart.

Though the Jewish people have experienced moments of relative unity, we have never, as a people, been uniform or monolithic. Schisms, sects, parties, schools, denominations—they were all just as common in antiquity as they are today. Roman-ticized views of premodern times often present the historic religious Jewish community as more unified in its religious belief and its traditional observance. But whether we’re referring to the first-century conflict between Pharisees and Sadducees, or to the eighteenth-century Hasidim and their virulent opponents, the Mitnagdim (literally, “opponents”), it is doubtful that it looked that way from the inside.

If we can find a new place for the tribal within the global, for that historic genetic code that is the vessel for truths, values, and meanings that are uniquely ours, then Hebrew can be a unifying force and a resource like no other for continued Jewish survival.

While never uniform, though, Jews have been more unified than we are today, and not even that long ago. The twentieth century may have begun with Jews more religiously and politically fragmented than ever before, but by mid-century, only two to three generations ago, we had experienced the nadir of the Holocaust and the zenith of the founding of the State of Israel, two events that galvanized the Jewish people.

The Holocaust and the broad experience of virulent anti-Semitism, precisely because of the suffering and persecution, helped unify the Jewish people, both through the common experience of oppression and through the need to respond in protest and mutual aid. Then, with the founding of the State of Israel, came the determined but joyous enlistment in the struggle to create a Jewish homeland, which became in many ways the major (though by no means only) response to the fact of collective oppression. Though the first half of the century was filled with fractious debate over the value and wisdom of the Zionist enterprise, in the second half, and certainly right after the Six-Day War in 1967, opponents within the Jewish world were reduced to a fringe minority.

Today, the Jewish people are becoming increasingly fragmented once again, with fewer unifying factors or points of commonality. Israel, once a unifying element, has become a contentious topic, with various political values, visions, and agendas vying for Jewish hearts and minds: Peace? Security? Territories? Democracy? Settlements? Equality? Jewish sovereignty? It's difficult for different supporters of Israel to even march in the same parade anymore.<sup>46</sup>

Even in Israel itself, disunity reigns along the East-West divide, between Ashkenazi Jews, of European origin, and *Mizrachi* Jews, whose origins are from Arabic-speaking countries. Though Yiddish-based European culture is the background of most North American Jews, it represents a minority in Israel, where most of the Jews came from Morocco, Iraq, Yemen, Ethiopia, and dozens of other non-European locales.

Globally, common threats from outside the Jewish world don't have the same unifying, rally-the-wagons effect they used to. While there is a worrying rise in anti-Semitic incidences in several European countries, fewer Jews today live in structurally oppressive societies, and widespread Jewish suffering is rapidly fading into historical memory. Shared victimhood may still be a component of Jewish identity, but for many reasons, it's a problematic one at best.

Many feel that common ground is even harder to find religiously. While there is some blurring of denominational distinctions—left-wing Orthodoxy and neo-traditional Reform are both tending to the center—Jews are still deeply split along gaping religious fault lines, with many hot-button issues.

Neither is Jewish culture what it once was as a unifying factor. While mid-twentieth-century comedian Lenny Bruce loved to riff on the razor-sharp distinctions between what was quintessentially Jewish and what was irredeemably “goyish,” fewer Jews today would get the joke, for two reasons: society at large has become a little more Jewish—McDonald’s serves bagels, for the love of Moses—and mainstream Jewish society is a lot more, well, if not goyish, then certainly less old-country, Yiddish-inflected, culturally Jewish.

## ENTER HEBREW: YOUR BACK DOOR TO THINGS JEWISH

Persecution, religion, and culture, then, are not solid ground for finding commonalities between and among Jews. But there is one thing that could unite us: Hebrew.

It is perhaps none other than the Hebrew language that has the unique potential to transcend the deep chasms between Jews and provide a culturally rich, spiritually significant, intellectually engaging rallying point. As a unifying force, it can serve as a gateway to all those things—culture and values, religion and observance, memory and identity, Diaspora and Israel.

Hebrew is in many ways a universally Jewish back door that can access many of the important but contested aspects of Jewishness. Think of Hebrew as a delivery system that enables and encapsulates various perspectives on personal identity and collective peoplehood, such as the following:

- **Culture:** There’s no culture without language, and there’s no Jewish culture without Hebrew. Yes, there are other Jewish languages, but an accepted definition of a Jewish language is one that integrates Hebrew into a host tongue. Hebrew is still the base and the core.
- **Religion and values:** Jewish values are naturally encoded in Hebrew terminology. For instance, the fact that *tzedakah* is related to *tzedek*, meaning “justice,” speaks worlds about the Jewish approach to wealth and inequality. Or take the



verb *l'hitpalel*, which names the basic religious act, “to pray” (*t'filah* means “prayer”). Its root is related to *p'lilim*, meaning “judgment,”<sup>47</sup> and so actually means something more like “to be judged” or even “to judge oneself.” This is worlds away from wishing and waiting for a bicycle or piously pining for peace.

- **Israel:** Peace and security, territories and democracy are indeed weighty issues, and as a longtime resident of Israel, I cannot and do not belittle them. But they are far from being the be-all and end-all of what Israel is. So much of Israeli life does not pass through the sieve of international news outlets: culture (high and low), technology, arts, and just the reality of daily life. The way to connect to those multiple Israeli realities—including to its politics in a way that goes deeper than the latest headlines—is through language.

But more important, perhaps, than any of these separate perspectives is the importance of keeping the conversation going among Jews of all kinds. Familiarity with relevant Hebrew terms and their cultural context is the stuff of which Jewish literacy is made. And we need widespread Jewish literacy to create an even playing field for those all-important religious and other disputations to occur in the first place.

In all these cases, even a basic familiarity with certain roots can go a long way toward gaining a foothold, creating cultural coordinates for further navigation. And from those beginnings, the only way to go is *el al*, “to the above.” In other words, onward and upward (yes, like the airline).

Wordshop 6 offers an unconventional perspective on Israeli culture and society, looking at Hebrew words through the lens of food. We're all familiar with falafel and hummus as basic Israeli cuisine. But the idea of approaching Israel specifically through its coffee might seem odd. Don't most societies drink coffee? Yes, but not every society reveals its innermost character through the words it uses for that beverage. And as we'll see, we're dealing with miracles, and transformations, so maybe there are deeper Jewish connections here as well.

## נ-פ-ה: Grounds for a Miracle

When one of my sons was about four years old, his favorite joke was (translated from the original Hebrew): “A man was walking along, fell into a hole, and couldn’t get out. ‘God,’ he prayed, ‘make a miracle for me!’ God answered, ‘How much sugar?’”

To get the joke, you have to understand that the word for “miracle” in Hebrew is *nes*, which also means “instant coffee.” So, if you ask someone to make you (a) *nes*, you’re more likely to get a cup of coffee than a miracle. Even from God.

*Nes*, the coffee, is actually short for *nescafe*, which, though it refers to a specific brand, has become the generic term for “instant coffee.” The actual term for that light brown powder dissolved in hot water (which is hardly divine, by any standard) is *kafeh names*, literally “dissolving coffee.” Pronounced “nah-mess,” compared to other types of coffee, it indeed involves less mess, making it somewhat miraculous.

Today Israel boasts world-class cafés in most cities and a burgeoning coffee culture, with a plethora of brews for every palate. But years ago, *nes* was one of a mere two types of Israeli coffee.

The original Israeli coffee was a sort of Turkish coffee that, instead of being cooked on the stove, is simply mixed in water like *nes*. But since it is essentially unbrewed coffee grounds, the miraculous dissolution does not occur. This leaves a thick, black sludge at the bottom of the glass, which looks a lot like mud, or in Hebrew, *botz*, which became the name for this potent beverage, usually served in small glasses.

It’s not hard to imagine the Israeli pioneers, after a hearty mug of muddy *botz* in the morning, heading out to drain the *bitzot* (“swamps,” a word that comes from the same root), whose black peat looked and probably smelled about the same.

### MIRACLE OR MUD?

These two types of coffee came to define the two poles of Israeli reality: miracle or mud. Roses or thorns, paragon or pariah—a country of extremes. And it’s no accident that these are opposites.

A third type of coffee came on the scene a little later that turned things upside down: *kafeh hafuch*, or simply *hafuch*, meaning “opposite” or

“reversed.” Or “upside down,” or “inside out,” or “backwards”—for the Hebrew word *hafuch* can mean all those things.

In the case of coffee, though, it really only means something between a cappuccino and a latte (or café au lait): a shot of espresso, with a lot of milk, and possibly some whipped or steamed milk, depending on your taste. It’s not clear whether it’s called *hafuch*, “backwards” or “reversed,” because the hot milk is poured in before the coffee or simply because as opposed to *nes*, which is a lot of water and a little milk, this is the opposite.

## FROM CUPS TO COUPS

The root of the word *hafuch* is ח-פ-ה (*h-p-k*), which may not evoke the same symbolism as do miracles and mud, but is also central to Israeli culture and history. The very oscillation between the roses and the thorns is an indication that reality here is very *hafachpach*, a beautiful word that means “changeable,” “volatile,” or “erratic.” It is in a form that repeats the second syllable (*f* and *p* being alternates of the same medial letter) to make it a descriptor, and almost onomatopoeic at that—one can almost hear the flip-flops.

Probably the most well-known use of this root came when Israeli newscaster Haim Yavin was narrating the results of the election polls in the game-changing vote of 1977. In this election, the long-ruling Labor party was ousted, and the Likud, under the leadership of Menachem Begin, came to power for the first time in Israel’s history. When Yavin received the breaking news that the polls showed a significant lead for Likud, he summed it up in a word: “*Mahapach!*”<sup>48</sup>—a reversal, an upset, a sea change.

Yavin meant that this was not nearly a *mahapeichah*, a full-out “revolution.” And since it was achieved by fully democratic means, neither was it a *hafichah*, a coup d’état. But all these words derived from the root ח-פ-ה signify different political developments that turn things, well, inside out, upside down, or backwards—at least relative to previous regimes or norms.

Likud’s liberal economic policy, especially in an era that also featured Thatcher and Reagan, ultimately opened up the Israeli economy, globalizing the country in what might be called *mahapeichat hakafeh*, “a coffee revolution,” branching out beyond *nes* and *botz*, miracle and mud, to all the various beans and brews, sizes and strengths that are available today on almost any street corner.

Even though the Starbucks chain famously failed in Israel, it seems that the global coffee culture is here to stay. But regarding Israel's perennially difficult political situation, if someone were to suggest that that, too, is permanent, that there's no way out, we'd probably say: *Lehefech!* "Au contraire!" Hope springs eternal, and we have to believe that there's still room for some surprising *tahapuchot*—turnarounds, changes of direction—though at times it may seem like this requires nothing short of a *nes*.

## ONLY CONNECT . . .

Miracles—and muddy realities. And Hebrew roots can be the strands that connect all these aspects of being Jewish in the twenty-first century. This certainly isn't about *achidut*, "uniformity." And perhaps even *achdut*, "unity," doesn't quite sum up what we're aiming for anymore.

Jewish communities often try to come up with a unifying vision, in the form of a motto, to focus and motivate community members. When I was growing up in Ohio, the slogan of the Jewish Federation was simple enough: "*Am Echad*—We Are One." Playing on that elemental Hebrew root and Jewish value of *echad*, the emphasis was on unity. Later on, "continuity" became the Jewish buzzword du jour. In today's world, awash in digital technologies and new media, Jewish communities should be speaking the language of *connectivity*. In fact, it could be that the only way to strive for unity and ensure any sort of continuity is by promoting *connectivity* as a vision that integrates Jewish past, present, and future realities.

As novelist E. M. Forster wrote, "Only connect! . . . Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect. . . ."49

In Jewish education and communities, we can strive for

- Connections to *our values and collective past*: deep, meaningful grounding in spiritual sources
- Connections to *each other*: robust, pluralistic Jewish peoplehood
- Connections to *ourselves*: strong vibrant Jewish identities
- Connections to *Israel and its people*: a societal expression of Jewishness

## ח-ב-ר: Life and Death Connections

The Hebrew word for “connect” is **לְהִתְחַבֵּר** *l'hitchaber*. It's derived from a fruitful root in Hebrew, **ח-ב-ר**. (*ch-b-r*), which basically means “join.”<sup>50</sup> This truly is a Jewish nugget of knowledge, for through various forms of this root we can explore different aspects of what it means to be connected in deep ways.

The most basic and most familiar word from the root **ח-ב-ר** is **חֵבֵר** *chaver*.<sup>51</sup> If you join a club or a kibbutz, you become a *chaver* (masc.) or *chaverah* (fem.)—“member.” More generally, any two people who “connect” can be *chaverim*, “friends.”<sup>52</sup> This word became familiar to many Americans from President Bill Clinton's moving farewell to assassinated Israeli prime minister Yitzchak Rabin, when he finished his eulogy with two simple words: “*Shalom, chaver*”—“Farewell, friend.”

A group of friends who hang out together are colloquially known as a *chevreh*, which is not French goat cheese, but Yiddishized Hebrew.<sup>53</sup> This is similar to the more standard Hebrew *chavurah*, also a group of friends or associates, better known to the Jewish American public as the movement for non-synagogue-based prayer groups.

When a group of people joins together, especially in a formal way, it creates a *chevrah*, “company” or “society.” The adjective is *chevrati*, which appears in terms such as *tzedek chevrat*, “social justice,” the focus of the big Israel public protests in the mid-2010s. It also gets to modify trendy words, like *reshet*, “network,” and the foreign loan-word *medyah*, “media”—as in “social network” and “social media.”

For sacral tasks related to the deceased, the organization known as “the holy society,” the *chevrah kaddisha*,<sup>54</sup> does the carrying and burying.

Two Jews may or may not be friends, but if they learn Torah together, they become a *chavruta*, scholarly study buddies, from an Aramaic Talmudic word meaning “fellowship.”

*Chavruta* sums up this entire section, because in essence it refers to something much deeper than a learning dyad. Deep companionship or fellowship is a crucial part of the connection we are looking for as Jews.

In a famous Talmudic story,<sup>55</sup> an early rabbi named Honi has a sort of Rip Van Winkle experience and sleeps for seventy years. Upon his return, his teachings and legacy are known and revered, but no one recognizes him personally, and he dies a lonely death. A later sage, Rava, closes the story by saying that “this is what people mean when they say, ‘*O chevruta, o mituta*’—‘Either fellowship [companionship] or death.’” Or, as Israeli rabbi and high-tech economist Julian Sinclair reads the phrase, “Either connection or death.”

This is a fittingly urgent message for today’s Jewish community leaders, encapsulated in one simple Hebrew root.<sup>56</sup>

The Hebrew language can be a powerful resource to strengthen our Jewishness in all of these four dimensions: shared values, global peoplehood, personal identity, and pluralistic connection to Israel. As Wendy Zierler writes, “Language is the poetic, emotive, connective tissue of history. . . . Hebrew is not merely a spoken language like any other . . . it is a portal and connector to an entire library of Jewish civilization and culture.”<sup>57</sup> And the very idea of connectivity has a great Hebrew root we can use to promote it, as we see in Wordshop 7.

During the American Revolution, rebels rallied behind Patrick Henry’s cry for independence, “Give me liberty, or give me death!” But above all else, the Jewish search for connectedness calls for the exact opposite—*interdependence* as the critical condition to survive and flourish.

But in order to be able to make meaningful connections at all, we need to understand the context, and so we now turn to the larger historical context of the role of Hebrew as compared to other languages Jews have used throughout our history.



## KEY INSIGHTS FROM THIS CHAPTER

- To be at home, language is essential. Translation makes it difficult to get beyond superficiality, partialness, and living life at a distance.
- Even acquaintance with some Hebrew roots can open up access to culture, to spirituality, and to the mother lode of all Jewish culture and morality: text. English terms can't convey all the associations, historical and cultural, that rich Hebrew expressions do in their three-letter roots and their dense literary and linguistic contexts.
- Just about anything relevant to one's Jewish identity is a form of Torah. Our relationship to this is midrash: the ongoing creative and pluralistic interpretation and application of traditional texts in light of changing insight and needs. Non-observant or free-thinking or humanistic or rebellious Jewishness is some of the most authentic and powerful midrash there is.
- Without Hebrew, it's much harder to "do midrash." Hebrew is not about authenticity, but rather can help us *do* Jewish better.
- Rather than unity or continuity, Jewish communities should be speaking the language of *connectivity*.
- Hebrew is a bridge-builder that connects our Jewish lives and worlds; it transcends all historical periods, all religious, political, and ethnic schisms. And it can be a powerful resource to strengthen shared values, global peoplehood, personal identity, and pluralistic connection to Israel.