

Hebrew in a NFTY Safari

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HEBREW IN A NFTY SAFARI

This section, which examines the Hebrew language in the life of Safari A, is both an exploratory and a "summary" chapter. In a manner somewhat more speculative than earlier sections, it considers implications of the use and non-use of Hebrew in the course of the summer's program. It is obvious that there was not, and could not be, a goal to "teach Hebrew" in the 5 weeks the youths spent in Israel. On the one hand, because Hebrew is essential to a depth understanding of Judaism, and is the national language of contemporary Israel, it is a topic which has importance, even if only on the level of attitudes toward the language. Moreover, many of the youths came with some experience in reading Hebrew, most typically in preparation for bar- and bat- mitzvah. It is therefore worthwhile to give some thought to the way Hebrew was dealt with by the staff and the youngsters, if only to raise the issue for further systematic discussion. This discussion will finally touch upon some of the points raised in the previous sections.

The Reform Movement, as, indeed, any religious movement concerned with life in the Diaspora, must deal with the reality that much of the classic literature of Judaism is in Hebrew (and in Aramaic written with Hebrew letters), while the "mother tongue" of their adherents is English---or any other Diaspora language. On the other hand, there is a desire to have Jews gain direct access to religious and cultural sources in Hebrew, but given the fact that this is achieved only very partially, there also is the "wholesale" translation of Jewish texts into English. This is done, however, while trying to convey a message of the importance of Hebrew. The desire to "grab both ends of the rope," is evident in many practices. A situation that presented itself to the youngsters three times a day was the text of "birkat ha-mazon" which was printed in Hebrew, in transliteration so that youths who could only read the Latin alphabet could pronounce the Hebrew, and in English translation. There also were many NFTY songs, as indicated, which were basically Hebrew songs

but which incorporated lines and stanzas in English conveying the sense of the Hebrew text.

The NFTY EVENT provided another setting in which this dual approach was evident. Material given out there, such as the Ha-tiqvah anthem, was in Hebrew and in English. On the banner waving above the dais on Mt. Herzl, the title "NFTY Jerusalem March" appeared on top in Hebrew and below that in English. Also, on several occasions, when orators read from a source (e.g., from the book of Psalms), they recited the first sentence in Hebrew and then repeated it and continued through the whole passage in English. Moreover, during that event, one of the long speeches explicitly referred to the importance of the Hebrew language (14/7):

But there was another dreamer. Herzl wasn't the only dreamer we've had--there was another dreamer called Ben Yehudah. You may not know him, but I'm sure you know his street and you've been on the street that is named after Ben Yehudah. And you've walked that street (there is a bit of a reaction in the audience)...It's not enough to return to the land, you also have to return to the Hebrew culture and Jewish culture. So he took his children, his own children, and he said you've got to speak Hebrew. And his children--- or two of them are still alive incidentally--were the first Jewish children in over 2,000 years to speak the Jewish language. Today, Hebrew has become the language of the land---as the living language of a reborn Jewish people throughout the world. And we can say--to paraphrase one of our poets--that as much as the Jewish people has preserved the Hebrew language, the Hebrew language has preserved the Jewish people.

While this speech was quite unequivocal in its praise of Hebrew, other aspects of the NFTY event hinted that its organizers knew that "their customers" were only partial devotees of Hebrew culture. This was apparent in the realm of music---which I see, in some respects, as closely aligned to language. When first entering the HUC campus, NFTYites were presented with "Beetles" music and they departed several hours later to strands of "Simon and Garfunkel" (also suggesting that the organizers belong to the same musical "generation" as the researcher). In between, many Hebrew songs were sung, but the encompassing frame drew upon the broader popular musical culture.

This does not mean that Hebrew was not really a value in NFTY culture. The importance officially attributed to the language was not only mouthed by a central NFTY leader, but was placed right at the initial contact of the madrikhim with the youths. The following notes refer to the first announcements made over the microphone in the bus, as the youngsters had just gotten seated

and we were preparing to leave the airport (6/7):

Y starts by saying shalom and a few words in Hebrew. This is with the microphone---and is picked up by my tape recorder. She said--with banter--"you all were studying Hebrew on the way over so you can understand me!" When X spoke for the first time he said: "You can call me [English name], you can call me X, and some Israelis' nickname for [English name] or X is xxx. So if you want to call me xxx you can call me xxx. I am your mehanekeh and it comes from the word lehanekh which in Hebrew means to educate. Hinukh means education and mehanekeh is the noun: educator.

The message that Hebrew was important, in principle, was clear at the outset, but Safari A praxis did not sustain this. This was most evident with relation to the "custom" of a Hebrew "word for the day." During the first few days, but with diminishing consistency thereafter, one of the counselors--normally P who lived in Israel--taught the kids a "Hebrew word for the day." They were presented with the "word" over the microphone, and were asked to repeat it, as they began a bus trip. The momentum of this practice was not maintained. A word for the day was conveyed only on about one-fourth of the 35 days---certainly less than one-third. This did not mean, however, that awareness of the issue of Hebrew dissipated, for it continued to be a matter of concern for counselors and campers alike.

As stated, some of the campers came with some exposure to Hebrew. From the pre-trip interviews, the picture that I gained of their education was that Hebrew played a part in preparation for bar- and bat-mitzvah, but was accorded much less import thereafter---in "confirmation classes," for example. The youths had another connection to Hebrew: the songs they learned in NFTY frameworks. As discussed, the mehanekh sometimes sought to utilize knowledge of these songs in introducing substantive topics of the program (and this was done with limited success because many campers knew the words, but not their meaning). That these songs could be a source of "knowledge" to the youngsters as well is shown in the following incident. It was the turn of girl to lead the count-off when the campers mounted the bus at the end of our trip to Tsfat (18/7):

It is JS's turn to do the count-off and she immediately assumes the role of an entertainer with the "mike." She says something about keeping the bus clean for Tsiyyon the bus-driver, and the kids laugh about the way she pronounces Tsiyyon [is this connected to JG's

story about Zion square (see below)?]. She repeats it---trying to say it properly. Then I hear her singing to herself "eretz tsiyyon" from the song---as if to get the right pronunciation.

Whatever the background of the campers with Hebrew, it was quite limited with regard to a full summer of five weeks in Israel. It must be appreciated that the whole situation of people who know only one language traveling throughout a country where another language is spoken is full of potential tension and humor. Much of the tension was avoided by members of Safari A by being together with others of a similar background, and by having the insulation of counselors to deal with the Hebrew-speaking environment. Yet the youngsters remained aware of the limitations of their situation. When we arrived for a swim at the Nitzanim beach (along with other NFTY groups), the counselors were advised to tell the campers that there were jelly-fish in the water---that they might sting a little, but were not dangerous. The counselors were sitting in the shade--and I was with them--as the youngsters cautiously went off to the water. I told them to go to the life-guard and ask about the medusot---using the Hebrew term. They responded: "suppose he answers us in Hebrew?" The following incident shows that they were reminded of their lack of control of the environment in a myriad of ways, and consequently attended closely to non-language cues (13/7):

DS bought a can of apple juice. When he approached some friends, they asked what it was. He said---apple juice. They asked why the apple on the can was brown? I commented that it was cider---not juice.

As in other matters, the campers were buffered from their lack of knowledge of Hebrew. Money changing, for example, was arranged by the assistant counselors, a tactic which also avoided long visits to the bank. In the weekend with Israeli youths, local teenagers were selected who were comfortable in English. If anything (based on my reading the situation from a distance), a reverse situation was created; the locals were concerned about the degree to which they could function in a foreign language as opposed to the "tourists" being anxious about their ability to communicate in the language of the land. More common than direct expressions of tension over being found in two linguistic worlds, yet knowing only one language, was the humor derived from

the situation.

Each evening there was a quiet gathering of the group, called ma`amad by the madrikhim, in which information was relayed to the campers, and during which they often were given a chance to express their thoughts and sentiments. The term ma`amad was transformed into "my mom" by the campers, with the madrikhim acquiescing in this usage.¹ Another example is the giggle evoked by the mehanekh's pronunciation of the name of kibbutz Yahel--our base in the Negev--the last syllable of which sounds like "hell." Yet another is the predictable question directed to the madrikhim by one of the campers: "How do you say: 'I love you' in Hebrew?" When the reply is that there are four versions of that phrase, because both the speaker and the subject of the sentence may be either masculine or feminine, "fun" and "seriousness" are seen to intermingle in complex ways. Another complex example was related by one of the campers at an early ma`amad session, when the campers were still in the process of getting to know one another (10/7):

JG told about how she and her mother--on a visit to Israel the year before--were looking for Zion square. They had been told that the word for square is kikar. They then asked various people, and a cab driver after getting into a taxi, for kikar zayyin (Zion), not realizing that what they were saying conveyed in Hebrew: Penis Square. [In Hebrew-Zion is pronounced tsiyyon, not zayyin.]

This story was referred to on several occasions during the summer, and may have been in the background of the laughter when JS pronounced the name of the bus driver--Tsiyyon--over the microphone (above).

Cross-cultural/linguistic misunderstandings may be humorous, but they may also be used for didactic purposes. A number of times over the summer, I realized that my use of Hebrew words, and some Hebrew words that were standardly translated into English, were understood differently by the campers from the way intended. On several occasions I mentioned the Sea of

¹. See Section III, note 2 and Appendix II. The fact that ma`amad was not linguistically acceptable to the campers may stem from matters of phonology: it is not common to have two vowel syllables follow one after another in English. In addition, I don't think that any of the counselors, if asked, could have easily explained how this particular term, as it has been used in Jewish tradition, was linked to the type of evening sessions conducted in Safari A.

Galilee--an accepted translation of Yam Kinneret--and eventually learned that the very term was confusing to English speakers for whom the word "sea" meant an immense body of water, not something that could be considered a large lake. On another occasion, when I inquired of the youngsters about their weekend in Haifa with Israeli teenagers, I asked whether they enjoyed the "hike." I was translating from the Hebrew tiyyul which can be rendered "hike," but can also refer to the whole "tour" or "trip." The answers I received from campers referred only to the part of the visit which consisted of hiking proper ("in nature"). A linguistic matter of broader implications arose when, in the same situation, I asked them: "how was your Shabbat?", using shabbat as it is used by many Israelis (in certain contexts), as roughly parallel to "weekend." One camper replied: "I had no Shabbat," and then: "they had no Shabbat," because the family with which she stayed did not mark Shabbat in any special religious or ritual way. This clearly points to different perceptions of Shabbat---and not only on the level of translation. The linguistic "mix-up" could easily be used as an entrance point to considering the campers's backgrounds, expectations of Israel, and experiences in Israel.

In the realm of Hebrew, as in other realms, it would be helpful to know what knowledge the campers bring with them to the summer trip. As discussed with regard to other topics, the counselors and other staff sometimes misjudged the linguistic culture of the campers. When bringing out watermelon at the end of the meal served on his lawn, the American *oleh* stated: "here comes the avatia," expecting excitement from the announcement, but it was clear that the youngsters did not react to the term, but to their view of the dessert itself. On several occasions the term "kumsitz" was used when announcing campfires, while most of the youths did not seem familiar with the word (but this did not seem to stand in their way of grasping what was going on). The same considerations may be applied to music. It was my impression, on the initial trip up to Jerusalem, that the youths did not respond to the "Jerusalem of Gold" recording supplied by the *mehane*kh. Later, when discussing this with him and then with the other *madrikh*, they both thought the youngsters were familiar with the song: the first from the end of the film "Schindler's List," and the second from NFTY camp experiences. It is clear from later observations, however, that this

"basic" song was not part of the initial repertoire of many of the participants. The knowledge or ignorance of a specific song may seem like a peripheral detail, but the following notes, taken from the end of the four days of archeological work, accompanied by challenging and fun climbs through the Beit Guvrin caves, suggest otherwise. The archeological madrikha (A) had just finished taking us around the vast and almost cathedral-like "bell-cave" (13/7):

A suggested in the bell-cave that when they finish they take a group photo, and that they sing. They started to sing something--in English-- and she mentioned that she thought something in Hebrew would be appropriate. Some people suggested Hava Nashira [shir hallelujah; a particularly sonorous melody], but others said they did not know it. X came up and tried to organize things, suggesting the Kol Ha-Neshama hymn [associated with the Reform synagogue in Jerusalem]---but they also said that some people don't know it. Another suggestion thrown out was the Safari A cheer. Debate went on for 3-5 minutes. X sings Hava Nashira a bit and tries to teach it. His attempt doesn't last long, with only partial participation. Then kids began laughing at his conducting motions---and he says: "forget it." A throws out: "row row...your boat," and this catches on--in a round--for a while, but things break up after a couple of times. Picture taking does take place, but in smaller groups and quickly---not involving the whole Safari. A starts to leave during this scattered picture-taking.

The lack of a shared musical repertoire--in Hebrew--appropriate to the occasion deprived Safari A of a "summing-up" memory culminating several days of a successful "learning through participation and fun" program.

While the background in Hebrew of most of the youngsters was minimal, it was clear that some ideally thought it was important to learn the language. One camper carried a Berlitz Hebrew book---which I saw her consult in JFK and on the plane at the beginning of the trip, but never saw her refer to it thereafter. Another, in the course of a casual meal-time discussion among the youngsters about NFTY activities in which they would be engaged in the upcoming year, mentioned the possibility of studying Hebrew. My notes include records of about 10-12 youngsters who, on their own, evinced interest in Hebrew in either its spoken or written forms. One camper paid close attention to the madrikhim whenever they spoke Hebrew among themselves, and on several occasions subsequently inquired as to whether she had understood correctly. Others, when the opportunity arose to sit in one spot and ponder a Hebrew sign, attempted to recognize words

and letters. A variant of the latter was when several youths tried to decipher the Hebrew name of the Reform Movement in Israel on the T-shirt of the mehanekh. It is noteworthy that in designing their own Safari A T-shirt, they place "Hebrew" on the front without any translation. Eretz-Yisrael was written in Hebrew script, and the Jewish year given in standard Western numerals. The back of the shirt was only in English (all the names of the participants in Safari A were listed), but my sense is that the front, which had only un-translated Jewish content, indicates a respect for the language, in which Hebrew, and what it represents, are seen to be able to "stand on their own." A value was attached to "correctness" in Hebrew, even when based on minimum knowledge. Earlier, I mentioned how many youths knew (without really understanding why) that the term "birkat," in reference to the Grace-after-Meals, did not make sense by itself. On another occasion, the madrikh with the weakest Hebrew pointed out to some campers that it was correct to pronounce HavdaLA (stress on the last syllable), rather than HavDALah (stress on the penultimate syllable) when talking about the ceremony marking the end of Shabbat. His comment was accepted as enlightening, rather than taken as picayune or annoying.

The interest shown in Hebrew may also reflect general curiosity and the intrigue of meeting a foreign language. One of the campers, cited above as having been very excited about the trip to the Arab village, also pointed out to me that she had diagnosed how an Arabic "s" [sin] is written, by comparing the Arabic script with the English names of places on a road sign (she correctly commented that the Arabic letter is somewhat similar to the corresponding Hebrew). Another boy, with an artistic inclination, commented to me that it appears that Arabic has only a cursive, or "script" form, and not a "block letter" form. His attention had been attracted to Arabic writing without any knowledge of its content. A somewhat ironic incident occurred in the Beit Guvrin caves (13/7):

I was at the end of the line, and we were followed by two elderly tourists speaking to one another in French. One of them decided to go back to the entrance from where we came---crawling in the caves was too difficult for him. The other continued. He asked--in French--if we speak French, and JB said: "un petit peu." JB was able to exchange a few simple sentences with him in French---and was very pleased. He announced that this was the first

time he had ever spoken to some who was really French---outside the classroom. I wondered to myself whether he or others had any similar experiences in Hebrew.

Did the program of Safari A capitalize on this innate curiosity and positive orientation toward Hebrew? Attempts in this direction were generally not sustained. The "Hebrew word for the day," as mentioned above, was kept up only sporadically. Most of the phrases were forgotten soon after they were "learned." "Word for the day," if viewed as an attempt to "teach Hebrew," was based on the very mistaken notion that learning a language is essentially an accumulation of individual words and phrases (without attention to structure or grammar). Moreover, no systematic attempt was made to link the bits and pieces that the youngsters might have picked up. Early in the trip, they were presented by the archeological guide with a "word for the day": legalot shorasheinu--"to uncover our roots." On kibbutz, the ecological park in which the campers worked was called pinat shorashim (pronounced by the campers: `peanut shorashim')---"the roots (implying `origins') corner," but no mention was made of a connection between the two phrases. The only new bit of Hebrew competency that I can confidently claim was picked up by the campers over the course of the summer was the `good morning' sequence: boqer tov followed by the response boqer or. On the kibbutz (25/7):

This morning, when the kibbutznik who supervised their work first came to the kids, they all were tired. He said "good morning" and got no response. I said: "try boqer tov." He did and got a mild-to-reasonable boqer or in return.

Aside from not sustaining the "word of the day" program, it also frequently was presented in a relaxed and partially humorous vein. This, as has been emphasized, did not necessarily mean that, the topic itself was "not serious." As stated by one of the campers, what was special about the summer was "learning something new every day without even trying." The youngsters especially "got a kick out of" learning phrases which gave the aura of intimacy with Israeli culture. In the first few days, the mehanekh explained that when one is hot, you say: am li, and not ani am---because the latter has sexual connotations (assuring, thereby, that the phrase was repeated jokingly throughout the summer). No one expected the summer to include the drill of language learning.

Rather, the implicit hope was that bits of Hebrew would sink in when placed in the context of meaningful and/or enjoyable experiences that the campers underwent or were about to undergo, and which were likely to leave a lasting impression. Thus, as the long trip from the Dead Sea, via Arad, to the Upper Galilee began, the "word for the day" that was presented was nesi`a arukha---long journey. The same hope for opportunistic reinforcement is reflected in the speech cited above in which the weighty subject of the revival of the Hebrew language was juxtaposed to the "good times" associated with Ben Yehudah street. While some Hebrew may have been absorbed here and there through this approach, the question should be asked whether a general message is also being conveyed that Hebrew is a matter which is worthwhile only if it does not entail great effort.

Other problematic messages may have reached the youths, side by side with the officially proclaimed importance accorded to modern Hebrew. One ambivalent situation was created by the fact that the madrikhim spoke to one another in Hebrew when they didn't want the campers to understand. This may be NFTY-wide practice (not necessarily policy), for, at the NFTY event, the Israel director sometimes gave orders to the madrikhim over the microphone in Hebrew after addressing the campers in English. Had the madrikhim of Safari A spoken to one another in Hebrew all the time, it would have been one matter; but it was fairly evident that in these settings Hebrew was being "used" for strategic purposes, and not valued in and of itself. Thus, it ought to be considered what general attitudes toward Hebrew were being presented implicitly during the summer, without being part of any planned agenda.

This question can be linked to the general issues raised in the previous two sections: that of the "infantilization" of the participants (and their "regression") within a Safari framework, and the "knowledge vs. experience" debate. The first issue is usefully placed in the context of language study settings. Observers of ulpanim in Israel--in which immigrants are given intensive Hebrew courses to enable them to master the fundamentals of the language and to function in the society--have commented that in the framework of the ulpan all students, regardless of age, become "transformed into" children. The overall pedagogical stance treats them as lacking in knowledge and basic competence. They have to talk in simple sentences and sing songs appropriate to school

children. This may not only be found in Israeli ulpanim, but may characterize many settings in which newcomers, starting from basics, are faced with the challenge of gaining control of a language and first familiarity with a culture. Thus, on the one hand, a process of "infantilization" is typical of various intensive learning settings, and not only of NFTY Safaris. On the other hand, however, the nature of learning in such highly structured frameworks is very much shaped by the expected reality subsequent to life in that framework. Immigrants to a society may "regress" in a language school, "in the service of" gaining skills that will enable them to better function outside the school---a matter concerning which they have little choice. The question which may be posed to summer-in-Israel programs for Diaspora teenagers is whether the "regression" demanded by participation in the program ultimately contributes to greater competency in Hebrew or in Jewish culture more generally when linkage between the intense framework and post-program activities is far from clear.

The topic of language is also relevant to the discussion of "experience vs. knowledge." Our conclusion in that discussion was that an optimal blend of both those perspectives is desirable. Experiences should stimulate the search for knowledge and extant knowledge can provide the orientation for making experiences meaningful and for internalizing them so that their impact goes beyond the exposure to one-time emotional "highs." Language is a critical component of these processes. It transforms inchoate feelings and ideas into identifiable and usable symbolic² structures which can then enter into social discourse and become elements of self-identity. From this point of view, greater comfortableness and familiarity with Hebrew, or other sets of non-linguistic symbol systems, is a factor which potentially can enhance the post-Safari impact of a summer's experiences.

These questions about language are raised, not because the author of this report has any

². I use the term "symbolic" in a manner that is common within anthropology. Everyday words are "symbols"; they are vocal or written entities which stand for something else. Thus the word "pencil," either in its spoken form, or written on paper or on a blackboard, stands for a real pencil, the idea of pencil, etc.

clear ideas about how to conduct Hebrew instruction over the course of a 5-week trip, but because they are worth thinking about. If the settings of standard summer trips are not conducive to advances in the knowledge of Hebrew, they also should be monitored as to whether they may entail any negative outcomes. What impressions do young people come away with after having been in a Israel for 35 days and learned little new about its language? Does this further whet their appetites to study Hebrew, or does it breed an indifference: "it is quite possible to get on in Israel without Hebrew." Can summer trips provide some small sense of new competence in Hebrew, or might it also lead to a feeling of disappointment, that the task is so great that it is not really worth trying. Answers to these questions bear implications not only for Hebrew per se, but for evaluating the overall impact of the summer upon the youths.