

## The Hills (of Vermont) Are Alive With the Sound of Hebrew

By Margaret Carroll-Bergman  
*Special to the Advocate*

Vardit Ringvald, director of the School of Hebrew at Middlebury College in Vermont, believes that anyone can learn Hebrew, even in the foothills of the Green Mountains.

Ringvald has started a master's degree program with a focus on immersion that will give teachers more expertise in teaching Hebrew. The immersion portion of the program takes place during the summer semester at Middlebury College, where students sign a pledge to speak only Hebrew during their stay on campus.

"Absolutely, there is no doubt in my mind you can learn Hebrew. You need to have a teacher who can teach you," said Ringvald, who was born in Israel. "I am happy that this is my native language and so happy my parents decided we only speak Hebrew at home. I get excited when I teach it. It's a smart language."

Ringvald was appointed the first director of the Middlebury School of Hebrew in 2008, the first year the 214-year-old college known for its language department introduced Hebrew into the curriculum. In 2013, Ringvald helped found the Middlebury-Hebrew at the Center Institute for the Advancement of Hebrew Language.

On a scale of one to four in difficulty for native English speakers to learn a language, Hebrew registers at level three in difficulty.

"Hebrew is a difficult language for Americans or those whose first language is English," said Ringvald. "We teach it in a context. The goal is to teach the language, alphabet and vowels, all at the same time; speaking, writing, reading all together. We package everything together around communicating."

As an undergraduate, Ringvald studied art. It wasn't until she moved to Uruguay with her husband and learned Spanish in 3.5 months, that

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## Vermont school speaks Ivrit



Prof. Vardit Ringvald, director of the School of Hebrew at Middlebury College.

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she became interested in the process of how people learn a foreign language and used those principles to teach Hebrew. "I started to study and to learn it (Hebrew) better... to learn the pedagogy," said Ringvald, who had taught Hebrew language, culture and Hebrew teaching pedagogy at Brandeis from 1985 until 2013. "People came to Brandeis after several years of studying Hebrew and [still] did not know Hebrew... I did not grow up here. I did not know the

Jewish day school system and I wanted to understand their background."

Yet, the mysteries of teaching Hebrew also extends to students from Israel, who have a different set of concerns. In Middlebury's Hebrew program, Ringvald said students from Israel come to the college directly from the airport eager to study the language. "Most Israelis might not pay attention to the rules of grammar," said Ringvald. While there are plenty of opportunities to study Hebrew in Israel, Ringvald

said that many Israelis want to learn Hebrew the right way without English words being blended into a Hebrew word.

"When you teach a language you have to make choices on what to teach. What choices you make has to do with the goals of your students and be true to authentic language," said Ringvald.

"Hebrew is an amazing language, because it is a transparent language," said Ringvald. "If you understand the root system, you can understand the connection between the words. Every new word falls within the linguistic system of the language. The fact that it is evolving all the time, it doesn't stop to amaze me. It continues to develop... the interaction with other languages, Arabic, English and Spanish... for me there are so many layers that interact with each other, it's fascinating."

As Latin is the basis for English, Biblical Hebrew is the basis for modern Hebrew. "There is the root system of Old Testament," said Ringvald. "If you know modern Hebrew, you could understand classical Hebrew. It's a Semitic language. Modern Hebrew is based on the classical Hebrew."

*For more information on Middlebury College's Hebrew programs go to <http://www.middlebury.edu/academics/hebrew>.*

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