

HEBREW AT THE CENTER BACKGROUNDER

Hebrew at the Center (HATC) is revolutionizing how Hebrew is acquired—deepening connections to Jewish identity, text, Israel and peoplehood.

VISION

A world where Hebrew literacy is vibrant, celebrated, and pivotal to a thriving Jewish identity and global Jewish community.

MISSION

Hebrew at the Center aims to revolutionize the effectiveness of teaching and learning Hebrew in all educational settings, worldwide.

BEGINNINGS OF A REVOLUTION

While the average Jewish day school dedicates four academic hours per week towards Modern Hebrew language instruction, student outcomes are often disappointing, with graduates of thirteen years of this type of education unable to function in the language. Factors contributing to these poor results range from the significant lack of effectively trained teachers to the degree to which Hebrew is valued within the school and broader community.

To change this reality, an initiative to establish a center to advance Hebrew teaching and learning was envisioned and given its first real boost in 2002, when The Covenant Foundation provided JCDS, Boston's Jewish Community Day School with a grant to systematically pilot Dr. Vardit Ringvald's assessment-based approach to Hebrew teaching and learning in elementary and middle school settings. Early successes led other schools and individuals seeking to advance Hebrew language education to consult with JCDS leadership, demonstrating the need for field leadership and guidance.

In 2007, a small group of visionary Hebrew language educators and enthusiasts who wanted to disrupt the status quo in the field of Hebrew language education founded *Hebrew at the Center*. Inspired by the common understanding and foundational principle that teachers are at the heart of an excellent education, HATC adopted an approach to teaching Hebrew that focuses on developing students' authentic ability to function in the language in real life. The outcome of this work will be to professionalize a critical segment in the field of Jewish education and to bring increased effectiveness, joy, and excitement to Hebrew teaching and learning.

DISRUPTING THE STATUS QUO

HATC brings tailored second language teaching tools and techniques to programs across North America—educating leadership, training educators, building expertise, and establishing academic partnerships and alliances that are yielding impressive results in Hebrew proficiency. This work has now been done in 65 schools in North America, as well as through work with schools in other Diaspora communities, with the focus on working to create embedded expertise within each school that allows it

to develop Proficiency Approach appropriate curricular materials, effectively assess student outcomes and use these data to inform educational decision making, and to professionalize and elevate the teachers and leaders within the school.

In September 2010, *Hebrew at the Center* built on its work with individual schools developing a regional approach and began working with six (of the seven potential) Atlanta Jewish day schools with the following goals:

1. The development of local talent and capacity to embed Hebrew teaching and learning expertise within each institution and across the community, including the establishment of a community of practice of well-trained teaching and administrative level Hebrew language professionals.
2. The achievement of an economy of scale and financial efficiency.
3. The engagement of other Jewish educational settings throughout Atlanta, such as synagogue schools, Jewish camps and adult learning initiatives, utilizing the growing expertise in the community.
4. The positioning of Atlanta at the leading edge in the creation of an innovative and sustainable regional model for the perpetuation of excellence in Hebrew teaching and learning on a national and international level.

We developed a 4-year plan that began with an introductory year of developing relationships between HATC and the schools and among the schools and a focus on introducing a culture, the expertise and tools for assessment. The second year included introductory workshops for all participant school Hebrew language educators focused on the HATC tools for Hebrew teaching and learning, with subsequent years focused on deepening the professional development and assessment of the students. This approach was then modified and brought to a series of day schools in the Los Angeles community.

LEADING IN HEBREW

To further test HATC's assumptions, tools, and theory of change, and to generate a deep data set that could inform the field, HATC launched the *Leading in Hebrew* initiative in 2018. Jewish day schools with the strong commitment to Hebrew education were invited to apply to be selected to become "demonstration schools"—models of excellence in Hebrew teaching and learning for other day schools and communities to emulate. Philanthropic funds were raised to support the initiative, and beginning in 2019 the *Milton Gottesman Jewish Day School of the Nation's Capital* was selected as the first demonstration school. *Chicago Jewish Community Day School* was then selected in 2020 as the second project site. In both schools, the school leadership works with HATC professionals to formulate a vision for the role of Hebrew in the school's Hebrew program and to engage in an in-depth audit of its current state of Hebrew teaching and learning in order to identify gaps and challenges to be addressed.

The overarching objective is that these model schools demonstrate successful educational outcomes, which then catalyze similar outcomes in surrounding schools. Data dissemination and guidance on curricular approaches will subsequently expand knowledge about Hebrew education to other communities in North America. The ultimate goal of the *Leading in Hebrew* initiative is to raise the quality of Hebrew language teaching and learning such that Hebrew becomes an integral and elevated part of

Jewish life in a community. Imagine the shift in the attitudes of parents, students, and the communities in which they live when day schools begin to graduate students with a passion for the language of the Jewish people, taught by Hebrew language teachers who model the best in both language education and education writ large. Consider graduates with a passion for the language of the Jewish people and an intimate understanding of Israeli culture, ready to contribute personally to strengthening bridges between America and Israel. As important, these schools will provide inspiration and a new, higher standard, demonstrating what is in fact achievable, establishing expectations in North America that will have transformative implications for Hebrew education everywhere and a reframing of this community's relationship with world Jewry and the Jewish state.

In addition to continuing to work with individual schools across North America, over the past year HATC collaborated with Hebrew College to provide online courses for Hebrew educators from all backgrounds and provided a series of complementary workshops for schools as they navigated the challenges of Covid.

BEYOND DAY SCHOOLS: INFORMAL SETTINGS, ADVOCACY AND AFFINITY

While HATC began and continues to do significant work in the Jewish day school field, the organization's expertise was brought in to assist in establishing the pedagogy for Hebrew charter schools, to develop the pedagogic training for the *Kayitz Kef* Hebrew immersion camp program, and to set up the graduate program in Hebrew language instruction at Middlebury College.

The majority of young people do not encounter Jewish education or Hebrew via the day school system and the audience for serious Hebrew language learning remains small despite the organization's successes. HATC works to advance the Hebrew advocacy agenda to elevate this fundamental topic on the communal agenda through active participation in conferences, the sponsoring of webinars that galvanize Hebrew activists and researchers, and partnerships with other national organizations to support their Hebrew agenda.

HATC has recently developed a new pedagogy of Hebrew engagement designed to strengthen affinity with Hebrew and to provide a lower threshold for participation in the Hebrew community for those looking to prioritize Hebrew as a connector for all Jews, regardless of whether they are not yet speakers or who are already committed to acquiring the language. Significant projects include the recent launching of *Amitei Ivrit* – Hebrew Fellows, a project done in partnership with the Jewish Agency for Israel and piloted in nineteen camps, and work with RootOne, the initiative designed to reintroduce teen summer travel to Israel to a new generation, with HATC playing a key role in providing Hebrew content and training for pre-trip, land-based, and post-trip experiences.

SECURING THE FUTURE OF HEBREW

Hebrew is the great connector to Jewish life, learning, prayer, and global peoplehood. And yet, we face serious challenges in ensuring the vibrant survival of modern Hebrew in the Diaspora. Communities must recognize the essential role that Hebrew plays in our lives and elevate Hebrew education as a priority. At the same time, leaders and professionals need a framework for achieving excellence in the delivery of Hebrew language skills. Many institutions, and the broader communities in which they

operate, struggle with the best approach to teaching Hebrew and cultivating a culture where Hebrew is a priority. HATC is prepared to address this communal need. The cultivation of leaders on multiple levels—faculty, school administration, and community—is critical to the long-term and sustainable advancement in the field of Hebrew language acquisition. HATC develops both educational leaders within the school Hebrew program and the broader school leadership who together become champions and in-house experts as they continue the work well beyond HATC’s involvement. We also extend our work to develop schools as leaders, resources, and centers of Hebrew excellence in the broader community. HATC’s foundational principle is built upon developing professionals as leaders and changemakers.

By both bringing our own language proficiency framework to an institution and collaborating with organizations that are already focused on teacher development, HATC builds a network of support that creates a community of Hebrew language professionals and leaders ready to advance the field of Hebrew teaching. The acquisition of the modern Hebrew language must be nurtured and cultivated to ensure its survival and role in our lives as Jews.