

Gender diversity in Hebrew classes

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Introduction

How can we as Hebrew teachers support gender non-conforming students in our classes?

Hebrew presents significant challenges to transgender students, especially those who are non-binary or questioning their gender identity. Hebrew is a highly gendered and binary language; there's almost no way to communicate without specifying gender, nor is there a conventional way to express non-binary gender. A learner who cannot find a way to express their gender in Hebrew may experience frustration and dysphoria; trying to communicate in ways that contradict their gender identity may harm their motivation to learn as well as their psychological well-being.

Many Hebrew teachers are unsure how to deal with these difficulties. Luckily, there is plenty that can be done to ensure that Hebrew classes will be inclusive spaces which enable self-expression for all genders. As well as supporting and enabling the participation of gender non-conforming learners, dealing with issues of gender in Hebrew lessons provides all learners with opportunities for relevant cultural and linguistic learning.

Terminology

Let's begin by clarifying relevant terms. Keep in mind that like other elements of language, these do not have one fixed meaning and may be understood differently depending on the context.

Gender: Our internal conception of ourselves as a woman, a man, or a different gender. Gender norms vary between cultures and over time.

Non-binary gender: Identities and experiences of gender beyond the dichotomy of woman/man or girl/boy. This is an umbrella term which includes gender fluid; a-gender; third gender; bigender; genderqueer and more. Most non-binary people see themselves as transgender.

Transgender: Someone whose gender identity is different to the gender they were assigned at birth. As part of gender transition, they may change various aspects of how their gender is socially expressed, such as clothing, names, pronouns. Transgender people may also choose to undergo gender-affirming physical changes including hormonal treatments and surgeries.

Cisgender: Someone whose gender identity aligns with the gender they were assigned as birth, i.e. someone who is not transgender.

Gender non-conforming: An umbrella term for people who don't conform to the norms of gender that are societally expected of them. Gender non-conforming people may be transgender, cisgender, or questioning their gender identity. May be used interchangeably with "gender variant".

Gendered grammar: Many languages, including Hebrew, have different conjugations based on gender. English is a slightly gendered language, with grammatical gender existing only in third person pronouns. Finnish and Farsi are examples of languages with no grammatical gender. Hebrew and other Semitic languages (such as Arabic) have grammatical gender in pronouns, nouns, adjectives, verbs and prepositions. The Hebrew term for gendered grammar in reference to people is לשון פנייה.

What kind of grammar?

In recent years there is a sea-change in the attitude to Hebrew and gender, in Israel and in the diaspora. Gender-equal and inclusive forms of expression have spread into the mainstream, as fewer people accept the claim that masculine forms of grammar (לשון זכר) represent all genders¹. Today we can see and hear many forms of gender-equal and gender-inclusive Hebrew in the public sphere: from educators addressing a mixed gender group using both masculine and feminine forms ("חברות וחברים") to politicians' speeches ("אזרחים ואזרחיות"). An increasing number of institutions, companies and service providers publish letters, advertisements and notices in Hebrew using a dot, a slash or a double suffix to indicate the inclusion of all genders:

"תלמידים", "מטופלים/ות", "נוסעות.ים", "דרוש/ה"

What does this mean for us as Hebrew instructors? The answer depends on our approach to grammar.

The traditional approach, which still dominates many language education settings, is "prescriptive grammar". According to prescriptive grammar, there is one correct way in which language should be used, based on authoritative sources such as textbooks, dictionaries, and the Academy for the Hebrew Language². However, the generally accepted approach in the field of linguistics today is "descriptive grammar", which describes the ways in which languages are used in practice, in different registers and dialects. According to descriptive grammar, languages are constantly changing; variations are not a corruption of a language but rather it's natural development. This

1 The project דברו אלינו has published a [literature review](#) on the topic.

2 The Academy of the Hebrew Language combines both approaches: On the one hand, this is by nature a prescriptive and conservative institution, which has a legal status in Israel to decide the rules of the language. On the other hand, the Academy often changes these rules to reflect previously 'unauthorised' changes in public use. Currently, the Academy rules that לשון זכר is impersonal (סתמי) and refers to all genders. However, the Academy has established an internal committee to consider gender issues in Hebrew, in response to changes in public attitudes and use.

approach can enable us to let go of the concern that we would be teaching our students “mistakes” if we teach non-standard uses of gendered grammar in Hebrew.

It’s also worth remembering, and mentioning to our students, that we are not alone in this challenge – many other languages are highly gendered, such as German, Arabic, Spanish, and they are developing similar strategies for gender-equal and inclusive language.

Current options for gender diversity in Hebrew

We are in a process of experimentation and change with regards to gender in Hebrew. There has not yet emerged one agreed replacement for the old standard of using masculine grammatical forms in impersonal and plural address, and there are several different options for non-binary self-expression in Hebrew. If we as teachers are familiar with these options, we can present them to our students and give them the ability to choose what is most suitable for them.

Suggestions for speaking

Mixing grammatical gender (לשון מעורבת): Speaking sometimes in masculine and sometimes in feminine forms. This is the most common and visible strategy used by the non-binary community in Israel. Usually there’s no need to alternate or keep an exact ratio of masculine to feminine forms; לשון מעורבת is primarily a way to sever the implied link between לשון פנייה (gendered grammar) and gender identity. In other words, when someone non-binary is using feminine grammatical forms it doesn’t necessarily mean that they are a woman or feel more feminine in that moment, and vice versa. That being said, for people who are gender fluid, changing לשון פנייה can actually be a way of expressing their gender in a given moment.

Choosing one grammatical gender (לשון פנייה אחת): Many non-binary speakers of Hebrew choose to use just one grammatical gender, (אֶתָּה) or לשון זכר (אֶתָּה). This choice is made with the understanding that Hebrew’s gendered grammar cannot currently express non-binary gender, so the choice of לשון פנייה reflects the limits of the language more than the speaker’s own identity.

Plural (לשון רבים/ רבות): Influenced by the visibility of singular “they” in English, some non-binary Hebrew speakers, especially from the younger generation, use plural grammatical forms to express themselves.

The Non-Binary Hebrew Project (עברית א-בינארית): This project proposes a new grammatical gender as a third and fully neutral (or “gender expansive”) option.

For example: **”הָא תלמידָה ואֶתָּה מוֹרֵת”**

Currently, Non-binary Hebrew is used mainly in North American Jewish contexts, which poses a challenge for classroom use: this is the most faithful way to express non-binary gender in Hebrew today, but at the moment, it is not widely known or used within the non-binary community in Israel nor in Israeli society in general. The relative

significance of these considerations will vary depending on the context; we can help by giving students the guidance in order for them to make an informed choice.

Suggestions for writing

All of the above suggestions can be expressed in writing. Additionally:

Writing with a dot: A full stop can be used to express both masculine and feminine forms within one word, and thus to express non-binary gender.

For example: “אני מתכתבת עם החברה הטובה שלי”

Multi-gender Hebrew: A system of 11 new letters which visually combine masculine and feminine forms in order to refer to all genders.

For example: “כל האנשים שווים”, “יש לי תלמידה א-בינארית”

Suggestions for best practice in the classroom

We have the ability and the responsibility to provide a supportive classroom environment which encourages curiosity, builds a positive relationship between learners and Hebrew, and strengthens the learning community.

An inclusive approach

The approach that we bring as teachers is the most important factor in determining the character of the classroom and the many choices that take place within it.

- Instead of making assumptions about gender, sexuality, or other characteristics, we can give our learners space to explore and express themselves.
- The descriptive approach to grammar influences many areas of language teaching. In general, giving priority to expressing meaning, rather than accuracy/correctness, contributes to building confidence, self-expression and a positive relationship to the language.
- We can think critically about the learning materials and examples that we give in class. Who is represented and who isn't but should be? How can we avoid stereotypes?

Making space for discussion

Gender in Hebrew is a complex, interesting, important, and confusing topic! Giving space to discussions makes the difference between empowering or disempowering students on this issue – even if it means speaking in English sometimes.

- Classroom discussions: We can present these issues right from the start of the learning process, and explain that Hebrew speakers in Israel and all over the world deal with grammatical gender in different ways. In many cases questions will already arise from the learners themselves, and this is an opportunity for cultural and meta-linguistic learning about Israeli society and about processes of linguistic change. We can even devote a learning unit or a classroom project to the topic of Hebrew and gender.

- Discussions amongst colleagues and with school management: These issues are relevant for the whole team, and you can learn together, consult each other about specific incidences, and organise relevant training sessions. Your team may wish to formulate a guidance document which expresses the school's linguistic policies.
- What type of discussions: This is a sensitive and complex topic. We should give space for different views and questions. That being said, we also have a responsibility to challenge pejorative and hurtful statements and explain why we are doing so.

Demonstrating gender-inclusive Hebrew

- Introducing options: Introducing our students to the options presented above, including mixed grammar and the Non-Binary Hebrew Project, enables them to choose. We can demonstrate, explain, and give space for them to try it out. We can also teach learners how to ask each other what gendered grammar they use in Hebrew (like asking pronouns): “מה לשון הפנייה?”
- Addressing the class: We can model inclusive and equal use of Hebrew when we address the class by using both masculine and feminine forms (“מה אנחנו חושבות וחושבים על זה?”) or by alternating- sometimes referring to students as תלמידות and sometimes as תלמידים.
- Written instructions and materials: There are many ways to write Hebrew in an inclusive manner, including plural imperative forms (“השלימו את המילים החסרות”); infinitives (“שיעורי בית: בבקשה לכתוב חיבור על טיול משפחתי”); first person plural (“בשיעור האחרון נציג את הפרויקט שעבדנו עליו”); using dots (“תלמידות.ים”), forward slashes (“תלמידות/ים”) or double plural endings (“תלמידיםות”). At advanced levels of Hebrew we can present, write with, and even teach the multi-gender Hebrew letters (“תלמידות”).

Supporting gender variant students

Simple actions can make a big difference in the lives of learners who are transgender or exploring their gender identity/ expression.

- Before lessons begin, teachers may notify students that gender in Hebrew is more present and binary than in English and that there are options for non-binary expression, and invite them to be in touch. This enables gender variant students with to think about different options in advance and participate fully in the lessons from the beginning, rather than being distracted by worrying.
- Unconventional gender expression in Hebrew can be challenging at beginner levels, especially as we are used to teaching the זכר/נקבה dichotomy. Nevertheless, it is possible to teach Non-Binary Hebrew alongside זכר/נקבה or to enable students to speak and write in לשון מעורבת from the beginning. We should at least explain some of the options that exist. For some students, using לשון

or Non-Binary Hebrew from the beginning is crucial to enable their participation, and worth the extra effort. For others, it may be preferable to compromise at the beginning, until they have a firmer grasp on the language. Learners could be given the option of choosing a different *לשון פנייה* each lesson,³ or to choose one option (אָתָּ / אָתָּה)⁴ which could be revisited later. Each situation is different; we should give our students the tools to make an informed choice. If gender-inclusive options are presented as part of the living language and used consistently, they need not be confusing.

- Please be sensitive to the complex experience of transgender students: they may be in the closet and not have told their parents, or perhaps their parents don't support them. They are also more likely to be bullied by other students. If you're not sure, speak to them or get advice from relevant colleagues.

Examples

Finally, here are some examples, for inspiration and consideration:



Multi-Gender Hebrew letters on a sign at the entrance to Branko Weiss High School in Kibbutz Sasa (2021)

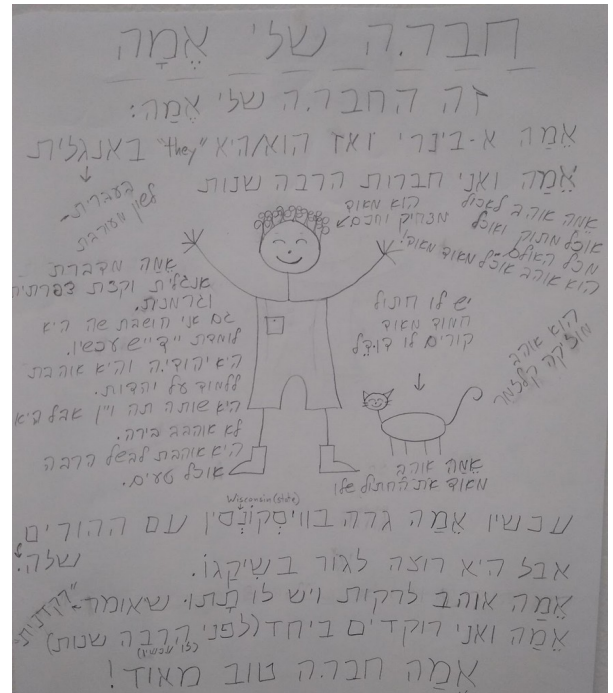
Non-Binary Hebrew in *Siddur Masorti*, a Sephardi egalitarian prayerbook (2019)

<p> מוֹדָה ^(f) מוֹדָה ^(f) מוֹדֵת ^(nb) </p> <p> אָנִי לְפָנֶיךָ, מֶלֶךְ חַי וְקַיִם, שֶׁהַחַיּוּת בֵּי נִשְׁמָתֵי בְּחִמְלָה, רַבָּה אֲמוּנָתְךָ. </p> <p> בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ עַל נְטִילַת יָדַיִם. </p>	<p>I Thank You</p> <p>living and sustaining Sovereign, who has returned my soul to me graciously, great is Your faith in me.</p>  <p>Blessed are You, יְיָ, our Elohim, Sovereign of the Universe, who has hallowed us with THEIR commandments and commanded us about the washing of hands.</p>	<p> Modēh (m) Modāh (f) Modēt (nb) </p> <p> <i>ani lafanēkha, melekh hai vakayyam, sheheẓarta bi nishmaṭi bahemlah, rabbah emunaṭekha.</i> </p> <p> <i>Barukh Attah Adonai, Eloḥenu melekh ha'olam, asher kiddashanu bəmitsvotav vatsivyanu 'al netilat yadayim.</i> </p>
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³ This is not suitable for everybody – for some students it could be affirming, for others, distressing.

⁴ With the shared understanding that the gendered grammar they use in Hebrew lessons does not necessarily reflect their gender identity.

A student's homework, writing about a non-binary friend (reproduced with permission, 2021)



Further reading

[Hebrew at the edge of chaos](#) – a deeper exploration of these topics, by the author of this guide. (הכתבה המקורית בעברית פה)

[A quick guide to gender inclusive Hebrew](#) – this could be shared with students, parents and colleagues

[A guide for writing gender-equal and inclusive Hebrew](#) – understanding the different options for content writing in Hebrew

[Multi-Gender Hebrew](#) – explanation and option to practice writing with the multi-gender Hebrew letters, including downloading them onto your computer

[The Non-Binary Hebrew Project](#) – a third/gender neutral grammatical system for Hebrew

[Kris Kniselu](#) – resources for gender-just language teaching

[Supporting transgender school students](#) – a detailed guide for K-12. Also, here is a shorter [list of recommendations](#), and here [a guide in Hebrew](#).

[Conference on non-binary and inclusive Hebrew](#) – full recording available

[LGBT+ terminology in Hebrew](#) – a detailed list

Materials for in-class use

[Hebrew For All](#) – a queer feminist Hebrew textbook for beginners

[Kul Kolton](#) – explaining in Hebrew about their experience as a non-binary person

[What is Genderqueer?](#) – a detailed explanation in Hebrew

[Multi-Gender Hebrew](#) – an interview with Michal Shomer, the creator of these letters, explaining how and why the project began