

# DAY SCHOOL LIBRARIES

“Read for Pleasure and Learn Hebrew, Too!”\*

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## The Program

When I attended an Association of Jewish Libraries/New York Metropolitan Area Day School Workshop at the Yeshiva of Flatbush in 1987, Mrs. Aviva Lapide, the librarian of the Yeshiva's Elementary School, showed a page listing one child's recreational Hebrew reading achievement from fourth through eighth grade. The grand total was 32,600 pages. Incredible, you say. I thought so, too. But it was true. The documentation—the titles of books the child had read and the number of pages of each volume—lay in front of us in black and white.

How did it happen that a regular American boy, who liked to play baseball and watch television, read so many Hebrew books? It was not an accident. I believe that the success was due to the school's library program, which fosters the reading of Hebrew books.

If, at first, the student read because he was required to do so, then later, when he was “hooked,” he read for pleasure. He was, no doubt, among the exceptions and not the norm, but his example reflects the extent to which the program could succeed. It would never have happened without the library program, which provided the initial incentive.

If reading, in general, needs to be promoted, then encouraging American children to read in Hebrew needs a special effort. Yeshiva of Flatbush makes that effort. It employs a professional full-time Hebrew librarian who is familiar with the full range of Hebrew

fiction and who has a good rapport with children. Furthermore, the Yeshiva makes the systematic library program an integral part of the curriculum (Birnbaum, 1968, pp. 134–143—see Sources, item A1).

Students from the fourth through the eighth grades are required by the school to read 750 Hebrew pages per year. Each child chooses a book, generally with the help of the librarian. After the child has read the book, he/she is questioned by the librarian, in Hebrew, to verify that the book was indeed read. The name of the book and the number of pages are then recorded onto a page devoted to the particular student. All the books that a child reads throughout elementary school are recorded on that page.

Each child receives a grade on his/her report card based on the number of pages read. Currently, a child receives an *alef* (A) if 750 pages are read, and gets a progressively lower grade according to a pre-determined scale. (In earlier years, 1,000 pages were required.) In the 1950s, when children received number grades, up to five points were added to their average according to the number of Hebrew pages read. Some students received averages of over 100, even 105. A select few, among the most diligent readers of each grade, received a free subscription to *World Over*, a Jewish children's magazine.

The groundwork is laid for the program as soon as children begin to read Hebrew in the first grade. The librarian brings the teacher books to read to, or with, the class. Simple books, such as *Shabbat Shalom*, published by the Board of Jewish Education, are recommended.

In the second and third grades, the librarian distributes to the entire class copies of a single title on Thursday or Friday, so that the children can read the book

on Shabbat. On Monday or Tuesday, the teacher discusses the book in class. In the third grade, even though reading Hebrew books is still a class project, children can come to the library and take out books on their own. Only in the fourth grade is the child required to read the minimum 750 pages.

## Keys to Success

The partnership between librarian and teacher is critical. Only with such cooperation can the program succeed. The teachers work closely with the librarian in the earlier grades, and later they encourage the children to go to the library themselves.

The relationship of the children with the librarian is warm, pleasant, and non-threatening. During the oral reports, the librarian does not only ask about dry facts, but also interjects opinion questions: “What did you think of the character?” “What did you like, or (for that matter) not like, about the book?” The librarian then uses the feedback from the child to direct him/her to the next selection.

In most elementary schools with a set curriculum, there are few, if any, choices allowed the children. But in the library, they can select a book of their own choosing. Of course, the librarian may be needed to guide the child, but ultimately the choice is left up to the child.

While the program needs the cooperation of the teacher in order to succeed, it could not have been implemented at all without the partnership of principal and librarian. Yeshiva of Flatbush was blessed with two dedicated people—Dr. Joel Braverman, z”l, founding principal, and Dr. David Birnbaum, z”l, creator of the library program. Both shared the ideal of inculcating in the children a love of *‘Am Yisra’el*, *Eretz Yisra’el*, and *Torat Yisra’el*, and viewed the

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\*Dedicated to David Birnbaum, z”l, librarian of the Library of Yeshiva of Flatbush, who introduced so many of us to the delightful world of Hebrew fiction. A different version of this article has been submitted to Ten Da’at.

reading of books in Hebrew as a means to this end. The principal saw to it that the Hebrew library program became an integral part of the curriculum, with the librarian successfully implementing a systematic program.

### Rationale for the Method

Some librarians object to any method that forces children to read. Although I agree that it would be wonderful to provide positive encouragement for reading Hebrew, I don't think there are incentives strong enough to overcome the magnetism of such competing activities as watching TV or reading English-language books. Sometimes, in order to reach a specific educational goal, it is necessary to institute requirements. (For example, many people consider the core college curriculum essential, because students do not always choose the courses that are best for them.) Besides, an important principle in Jewish tradition is applicable in this case:

מתוך שלא לשמה, בא לשמה. (פסחים, ג.)

*Mi-tokh she-lo li-shemah, ba li-shemah.*

"Out of [doing good] for other reasons there comes [doing good] for its own sake" (Talmud Tractate *Pesahim* 50b).

Initially, the children read Hebrew books because they were required to, but later they discovered that it was a pleasurable experience. Had they not been obliged to do so, they would have lost the opportunity to enjoy and profit from Hebrew reading.

### Benefits of the Program

What does this program accomplish?

The extracurricular reading improves the children's knowledge of Hebrew. Further, students who read regularly show marked improvement in their Hebrew studies.

While the school requires 3,750 pages of Hebrew reading per student, from the fourth through the eighth grades, there are always a few pupils in each grade who read much more. Mrs. Aviva Lapide, the librarian, can cite instances of students reading 8,000, 12,000, or 32,000 pages, and in the days before television was stiff competition—over 50,000! Such children

could later read a Hebrew text, article, or newspaper without frustration.

The content of these books expands the children's knowledge of Jews, Judaism, and Jewish history. Besides enhancing their understanding of subjects about which they have learned in class, the books expose them to those they have not. The children experience the fear of the Marranos, the pain of the cantonists, and the bravery of the partisans. The students' identification with the heroes of our people deepens their love of our heritage.

Furthermore, when a child who is literate in Hebrew continues on to high school, he or she arrives with tools that enable greater understanding of classic Jewish texts. *Tanakh*, Mishnah, and Rashi—as well as other commentaries—are far more easily understood when the child knows the language.

Graduates of Yeshiva of Flatbush Elementary School fondly remember their Hebrew reading experiences. They recall stories about Chaim Pumpernickel, Ashmedai, Hannah Senesh, and Rabbi Akiva, to name just a few. No one has scientifically measured the impact that this program has had on the educational and spiritual development of the child, but the graduates with whom I spoke considered it a positive experience.

Other Jewish day school librarians may copy or adapt the Yeshiva of Flatbush Hebrew reading program. There could be no greater pleasure for the supporters of this program than knowing that children in other schools are learning Hebrew and strengthening their Jewishness through reading Hebrew books.

### Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Mrs. Aviva Lapide, Librarian, Yeshiva of Flatbush Elementary School, for providing the data used in this article.

### Hebrew Reading: Sources

*Hebrew bibliographic data for items in section A follows the list of series.*

#### A. Bibliographies and Review Journals

1. Birnbaum, David. *Madrakh bibliyografi la-moreh vela-talmid*. New York: Jewish Education Committee of New York, [1968].  
Part of the book is devoted to a graded listing of Hebrew fiction. Some titles may be outdated, but many can still be used.

2. *Leket divre bikoret u-sekirot 'al sefarim hadashim*, 1968—. Jerusalem: Center for Public Libraries, 1968—. Monthly.

A review journal that includes a section on children's books. Each book review is about half a page long.

3. *Sifre keriah li-yeladim: katalog menumak u-maftehot*, no. 6. Jerusalem: Ministry of Education and Culture, 1992.

An annotated alphabetical listing, with indexes by subject and age group. Earlier editions are also of value. The usefulness of the grade-level index depends on the American child's facility in the Hebrew language.

4. Regev, Menahem. *Madrakh katsar le-sifrut yeladim*. Jerusalem: Kaneh, 1984.

An alphabetical, graded listing.

5. *Katalog nos'im le-sifrut yeladim*. Jerusalem: David Yellin Teachers College, 1981.

A bibliography of children's fiction arranged by subject.

#### B. Series

Listed below are some series of Hebrew books that have been very popular with American children. In addition, various Judaica publishers, such as Behrman House, offer a few Hebrew titles. Boards of Jewish Education, such as those in Baltimore, Boston, and Rhode Island, also publish a number of titles.

1. *Gesher Series*

World Zionist Organization, Department of Education and Culture, 110 E. 59th St., New York, NY 10022.

2. *Lador*

Board of Jewish Education, 426 W. 58th St., New York, NY 10019.

3. *Tel Sela*

Jewish Educational Council of Greater Montreal, 5151 Cote St. Catherine Rd., Montreal, Quebec H3W 1M6, Canada.

4. *Sifriyat 'Oneg*

United Synagogue Book Service, 155 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10010.

(Continued on next page)

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**Hebrew Bibliographic Data**

1. בירנבוים, דוד. מדריך ביבליוגרפי למורה ולתלמיד. ניו-יורק: ועד החינוך היהודי בניו-יורק, [1968].

2. לקט דברי בקרת וסקירות על ספרים חדשים, 1968 - ירושלים: מרכז ההדרכה לספריות צבוריות. ירחון.

3. ספרי קריאה לילדים: קטלוג מנומק ומפתחות, מספר 6. ירושלים: משרד החינוך והתרבות, המזכירות הפדגוגית, המדור לספרות ילדים, 1992.

4. רגב, מנחם. מדריך קצר לספרות ילדים. ירושלים: כנה, 1984.

5. קטלוג נושאים לספרות ילדים. ירושלים: המכללה לחנוך על שם דוד ילין, 1981.

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