

The 'Modern Miracle' Bringing the Bible Alive to New Readers

It's the beginning of revelation, the debut appearance of one God. It's got stories of heroes to emulate and villains to despise. It's the parent text that begot the creeds of the peoples of faith in the Western world. It's the foundation of our morality and our value system. It's the Old Testament, the series of books that started it all.

And yet it's unreadable for people who don't know Hebrew.

Yes, there's the King James Bible as well as more contemporary English renditions, but while translation does allow readers to get the gist of what's going on in the biblical text, it causes them to miss out on the finer points, the nuances that are so loaded with meaning. Estera Wieja of the Fellowship of Israel Related Ministries (FIRM) sums it up: "I believe that all the details (in the Bible) are significant. Things that are otherwise lost in translation are very clear in Hebrew."

You can certainly get by, receiving the messages of the Hebrew Bible through the channels of translation. But to really experience the text, allowing the Hebrew Bible to speak directly to your heart without intermediaries, a basic understanding of its language is imperative.

The Second Coming of Hebrew

Hebrew is a modern miracle. This language, spoken by the biblical Israelites, lay dormant for thousands of years in diaspora until Zionists of the 19th and 20th centuries revived it. Today, it's the mother tongue of millions in the state of Israel. For them, understanding the book of Genesis is a bit easier than a native English speaker trying to understand

Shakespeare: although the language is a little archaic, it's accessible, readable.

But how does someone without a Hebrew background get started even decoding this very foreign language, much less understanding it? Learning to read any new language presents a challenge that to many people seems insurmountable; how does one get started without even knowing the alphabet? I believe the key to reading Hebrew is to speak it first.

My Hebrew Journey

I was lucky enough to grow up in a Hebrew-speaking home. I was born in Los Angeles, a haven of Israeli expats. One of them is my father, who not only made sure that my siblings and I would enjoy the benefits of a traditional Jewish education, but that we would also know his native tongue, Modern Hebrew: he raised us speaking it.

Fast forward to when I was in my 20s, teaching Hebrew to American high schoolers. I had spoken Hebrew since I could utter words, but my students were struggling. To figure out how to help them, I started dabbling in learning foreign languages on my own. I picked up Pimsleur CDs (this was before mp3s), which, I found, got me speaking French, Spanish and Arabic very quickly thanks to its easy-to-use, scientifically-informed method. And after spending some time learning the alphabet, an Arabic text became more than lines with strange squiggles, but something meaningful. And thanks to my knowledge of its sister language, Hebrew, I started making connections that contributed to deeper comprehension.

I later moved to Israel and set up Ulpan La-Inyan, a unique Hebrew-language school for foreigners that ranks learning to speak as its first priority. Our course geared towards English speakers looking to acquaint themselves with the biblical text, Hebrew 101, brings the ancient language to life, first via their ears and mouths, then through their eyes.

Hebrew 101 is based on the principles discovered and developed by Dr. Pimsleur, who pioneered the idea of teaching people to first speak a foreign language and then read it. Since his death in 1976, Pimsleur's program has commercialized by Simon & Schuster as well as used by the CIA to train their foreign spies. Hebrew 101 with Ulpan La-Inyan goes beyond Pimsleur's speaking-only course, providing the essentials of both spoken and written Hebrew. Graduates interested in reading the Hebrew Bible are not only able to decode what they're reading, but they also begin to understand it, informed by the modern living language in which they've immersed themselves.

The Ancient and the Modern

But for someone interested in reading the Bible, why learn Modern Hebrew? How close are today's Hebrew and that language spoken—and written—by the ancient Israelites? More practically, does learning to speak, read and write Modern Hebrew help someone who hopes to read the Hebrew Bible?

Michael Mistretta, also of FIRM, says, "studying Modern Hebrew has been irreplaceable for understanding Biblical Hebrew. Everyone says it's so different, but I don't really find it to be that different. I try to read the *Tanakh* (Hebrew Bible) every day as a way of practicing my Modern Hebrew. It's also interesting to me to see how Modern Hebrew evolved from ideas in Hebrew Scriptures."

If Moses were to roam the streets of Tel Aviv or Jerusalem today, it might take him some time to get used to the accent and to some grammatical changes (after he got over his culture shock). But soon enough, he would find himself conversing with today's Israelis. If they were to get stuck, he or the Israeli could just pull out the book of Exodus, and together, they would reminisce about the times of old and take in the lessons that prevail to this day.

Hebrew 101 is an introductory course to spoken and written

Hebrew, developed by Ulpan La-Inyan. Students of Hebrew 101 learn the fundamentals of this biblical-modern language, so that when they approach the Hebrew Bible they can understand it from a living-language perspective. Over the past three years, Ulpan La-Inyan has doubled in size, reaching an annual student enrollment of over 1,000. With modest beginnings, Ulpan La-Inyan started off in the founder's apartment in Jerusalem and today offers courses in over 10 English-speaking communities throughout Israel as well as online to students around the world. For more information or to start your trial lesson, please [click here](#).

Ami Steinberger founded Ulpan La-Inyan in 2008, in Jerusalem, Israel. He holds a Bachelor's degree in English literature and a Master's in clinical psychology. Beyond teaching Hebrew, Ami likes to swim as well as learn foreign languages, which helps him connect with people around the world.