



On Inadequacy and Enoughness

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Drawing on collective Jewish wisdom and the personal experiences of Hartman's network of North American and Israeli research fellows, faculty, rabbis, and Jewish communal professionals, our new blog [Notes for the Field](#) offers guidance, inspiration, and support for navigating the challenges facing the Jewish people today.



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Before Hamas's abhorrent attack shook our worlds and reoriented our lives, I spent my days speaking with Israeli parents about how they could maintain Hebrew, Israeliness, and Jewishness in America with and without the help of educational institutions. This project—the bulk of my dissertation research—is a labor of immense personal meaning. When I was growing up in Queens, NY in the 1990s, many of my classmates were new-to-newish arrivals from Israel. Their parents greeted me in Hebrew and composed Hebrew ditties with my name. Our playdates and sleepovers were set to the soundtrack of Sarit Hadad's newest albums. B'nai mitzvah season often featured a recording of Happy Birthday, which sounded more like *heppy berrzday* in the Israeli accent of the singer who worked for the DJ everyone used.

Despite this level of immersion, my friends' use of Hebrew, especially in public, progressively waned over time. This trend is not unique to the children of Israeli expats, but it has for too long been overlooked within the broader story [regarding how we in the North American Jewish community talk about and plan Hebrew and Jewish education for our kids](#). With my research, I set out to better understand what the Hebrew language means to Israeli families living in America today, and how they relate to the web of institutions that teach the language. The question that kept emerging from my interviews with parents pertained to which Hebrew language resources would enable the transmission of Israeli identity abroad. Who could they depend on to give their children instruction that would yield the skills and cultural knowledge they would like their children to have? And for the largely secular Israeli expatriates, how might Jewish educational institutions serve those purposes (or not)? Is engaging in religious communities critical to maintaining a distinctive Israeli identity and raising Hebrew-speaking children in the United States?

But in the dark days after October 7, all my thought-work about heritage language learning and religious identity went onto the back burner. I frantically reached out to my loved ones, my friends and colleagues, and my interviewees. Like so many others, I endlessly scrolled through the news and social media, trying to grasp the devastating information coming in. The war seemed to be creeping closer to us abroad. The name of the Israeli American Council's Facebook group, *Tzav 8*, alludes

to a military call-up, but it is usually a metaphor. Now, the group's page had information on chartered flights for all those who had been called up to serve as reserve soldiers in the IDF. WhatsApp groups and Facebook pages for Israeli expats became flurries of messages about supporting families stuck either "here" or "there"; urgent childcare requests for those whose spouses had been called up; and pushes to strategize around corporate responses to the terror attack.

Two months later, the war remains acutely disruptive and painful for members of the Israeli American community. It is also leading many to ask anew whether and how they should continue to settle and grow roots in the United States. Many are wondering what might prompt them to relocate family members who are still in Israel to the US, and how they might do so if it should be necessary. How will they weather this storm when they are so far from home? How can they insulate their children from the anti-Zionist and often antisemitic vitriol becoming rampant on American high school and college campuses? Most critically, many are left wondering whom they might lean on within the American Jewish community for material, ideological, and educational support. These questions are growing in size and relevance even as educational institutions, social service organizations, and philanthropists are learning to pivot in various respects to respond to their needs.

A few weeks after the war began, I dropped into the "Israel Afterschool" program at the JCC in New Haven, where I live. This new group offers Israeli families a low-commitment opportunity to expose their preschool and elementary school-aged children to Hebrew through storytelling and crafts. During this particular session (it had not been advertised so as not to crowd out emergency requests on local WhatsApp groups), a local mother read the group a Hebrew children's book about a king who gives silly, nonsensical orders to his charges. The group ranged in age, attention span, and Hebrew literacy, but the children giggled at the pictures and whispered to their parents and siblings in Hebrew.

On the one hand, the value of maintaining Hebrew was self-evident in that room. When you feel a profound sense of dislocation and disorientation in your adopted home, the importance of being comfortable speaking your native language in public with your own children should not be taken for granted. For Israeli expat families,

insisting that children speak Hebrew gives them access to gatherings like these. Programs like these afterschool sessions aim to give children some of the linguistic resources they need to forge meaningful relationships with family members in Israel, as well as the cultural (sometimes religious) knowledge to seek out local Jewish community wherever they go in their lives. For families that are now unexpectedly making repatriation plans, having greater facility with Hebrew and Israeliness is not only a plus, but will be a key tool they need to raise successful, safe, and savvy children in Israel.

The value of that story hour for the families who attended went far beyond delivery of language content learning. Scholars have spilled gallons of ink defining various desired “outcomes” in language learning and how to achieve them. But these and other narratives that focus on language as something that risks being lost over time may miss the most human aspect of language use: being understood and held. Nothing in the world is all right in this moment, but for the Israeli expat parents in that room, the questions I’d been asking about raising their kids with “enough”—enough Hebrew, enough Jewish identity, even enough material objects—did not seem at all urgent. The togetherness and safety of that group, the knowing nods, their children’s laughter, their joy in hearing and speaking Hebrew—that was more than enough.

After sitting through story time, and helping corral the children towards the craft table, I felt a strong impulse to step out of the room. Not only was I lacking the emotional wherewithal to engage these families with levity in my second language, I also recognized the necessity for that affinity space to be by and for the target community. The space was not meant for me, no matter how much time I’ve spent in Israeli communities in Israel and abroad.

Notions and feelings of peoplehood lead us to foreground our entangled fates and shared experiences. We embody these ideas as we experience the horrifying spike in antisemitic activity in the U.S. and elsewhere in the diaspora. And yet, the intangible felt sense of Israeliness, borne out of lived experience, and expressed through language, is increasingly salient these days.

As Israelis abroad lean on diaspora Jewish communities more significantly in this extended cataclysmic moment, I ask how we might make space for them to cope and heal within the framework of their own experiences. Their ritual markings of these moments and their means of advocacy may look different from our own. How might we harness our impulse to be helpful and caring, without implicit expectations that their reactions to grief and the news cycle mirror ours?

Enabling the diverse range of voices in this broader community to be heard and supported—not just during emergency circumstances, but for the long haul—will require accommodation, creativity, and collaboration. The notion that Israelis in the diaspora are transient and sitting on their suitcases has for decades obscured the ways in which they have settled, with deep roots, in many communities around North America. The urgency of the moment calls on us to make adaptive changes to our communal landscape. May we have the fortitude and humility to strengthen our community accordingly.