



HEBREW INFUSION: LANGUAGE AND COMMUNITY AT AMERICAN JEWISH SUMMER CAMPS

(Begin audio)

Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons podcast and our acclaimed author series, brought to you by the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion, together with the Jewish Book Council. We'll meet authors recognized by the National Jewish Book Awards and discuss their celebrated books. My name is Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC Skirball Campus in Los Angeles, and your host.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons podcast, where we're gonna have the pleasure of discussing a new book which came out in the year 2020 and won the National Jewish Book Award in the category of education and Jewish identity. It's called Hebrew Infusion: Language and Community at American Jewish Summer Camps, and we're gonna speak to its authors. Sharon Avni is Professor of academic literacy and linguistics at BMCC at the City University of New York. She's also a research affiliate at the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education, Brandeis. Her current project, funded by a Mellon/ACLS fellowship, examines contemporary modern Hebrew culture in the United States. Sharon, thank you for joining us.

Sharon Avni: Thanks, it's a pleasure to be here.

JH: Sarah Bunin Benor is a Professor of Contemporary Jewish Studies at the Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion here in Los Angeles. Her previous book is called 'Becoming Frum: How Newcomers Learn the Language and Culture of Orthodox Judaism,' which came out in 2012. Benor is also the founding co-editor of the Journal of Jewish languages and creator of the Jewish Language Website and the Jewish English Lexicon. Sarah, thanks for joining us.

Sarah Bunin Benor: Happy to be here.

JH: And Jonathan Krasner, who holds the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel chair in Jewish education research at Brandeis University. He received his Doctorate in Jewish history from Brandeis in 2002, and 'Hebrew Infusion' is Jonathan's second National Jewish Book Award. The first being 'The Benderly Boys and American Jewish Education,' which came out in 2011. Jonathan, good to see you. And thank you for joining us.

Jonathan Krasner: Good to be here, Josh.

JH: The book we're going to discuss, 'Hebrew Infusion,' is about Jewish summer camp. Each summer, tens of thousands of American Jews attend residential camps where they may see Hebrew signs, sing and dance to Hebrew songs, and hear at camp specific hybrid language register called Camp Hebraized English as in, "Let's hear some ruach in this chadar ochel," meaning let's hear some spirit in this dining hall. Something is going on here, but it's not at all obvious what it is, and our guests dove deep into this story of Jewish camp and Hebrew language, and asked what it teaches us about the American Jewish experience.

JH: I'd like to begin with you, Jonathan, and ask you what fascinated you about Hebrew at Jewish camp that drew you into this topic?

JK: So first of all, as you pointed out, going to camp is a time-honored tradition in the Jewish community. Jewish kids in America have been going to summer camps, at least since the beginning of the 20th century, and really since the 1920s and '30s, there have been specifically Jewish culture or Jewish education camps that kids have been going to. And some of those camps were Zionist camps, and Hebrew was spoken either as a language of those camps or was infused into the English language of those camps really from the beginning.

JK: But one of the things that really, I think, made the language of those camps interesting to us, is the fact that camp is a 24/7 environment. The kids and counselors and staff are really together for this concentrated period of time, and they really create an all day and all-night culture there. So unlike, let's say, a classroom where the language is somewhat circumscribed by the context of, let's say, learning, I don't know, Bible or history or Hebrew, whatever the subject might be, in camp, you're doing everything from playing basketball to photography, possibly, to arts and crafts, to please pass the salt. Everything is going on in summer camps, and I think that that's... I think one of the main reasons why we were just so, so interested in this environment.

JH: It's not only not a classroom, it's vacation from a classroom, so presumably that changes everything, I would imagine.

JK: Exactly. It's informal educational environment. And that's another aspect of it that makes it really interesting, and it's also... It's separated from everybody and everything else. These camps are purposely usually outside of the city, kids are going up to the mountains or they're going to the sea shore, and therefore they don't have the same kind of interruptions or they don't have the same kind of contact with an outside culture, and so you have the development of a real culture that's intrinsic to the camp itself.

JH: Everything you've described, Jonathan, might lead our listeners... It certainly led me to think in terms of language acquisition, it may lead us to think of language immersion. Public schools these days, talk about this all the time, but in fact, your book names this phenomenon of camp Hebrew, not as immersion, but rather as infusion. So I wanna ask you, Sarah, if you individually or as a team coined the term language infusion or not, maybe it's a standard term of linguistics, I don't know, but either way, what does it mean?

SB: We did coin that term, the term ethno-linguistic infusion, and specifically in our book, 'Hebrew Infusion.' It's part of a broader field of language contact, which has a lot of terms for things like this, like code-switching and trans-linguaging and lone words and quasi-elect and meta-linguistic communities and post-vernacularity, and all of these terms that I'm not going to define for you, but our term, 'Hebrew Infusion' refers to people, in the case of summer camps, staff members incorporating Hebrew into the primarily English environment, through songs, through signs, through words used within English sentences.

SB: And the goal of infusion is not proficiency in the language, it is connection, connection to Hebrew, to Israel, to the Jewish summer camp, to Jewish people around the world. And so that is how it differs from an immersion environment, where one of the goals would be for the students, the campers to become competent in speaking the language.

JH: In addition to the complexities of how Hebrew makes itself felt both linguistically and communally in this unique camp environment. That connection has a political edge to it sometimes. And so I wanna ask you, Sharon, about the politics of the Hebrew language, and maybe you can give us a primer about what's at play that you saw in relation to people's really committed ideological stances in relation to Hebrew.

SA: Yeah. It's a really good question, and I think when I probably got into this area thinking about Hebrew in the United States, I don't think I fully appreciated how political it is, meaning, how deeply people feel about what they believe is the right or the authentic or the legitimate way of using Hebrew and for what purpose. And because in our book, we talk a lot about Hebrew being what we call flexible signifier, but in more lay terms, just that Hebrew can do a lot of different things. It's a modern language, and it's also a language of prayer, these are actually... In some ways, these are different varieties, they are different varieties of the language, but mostly we talk about Hebrew as if it's a singular kind of moralistic thing, but I think that that leads to issues of where the politics come in.

SA: So one of those is, what's the best or what's the right Hebrew for Americans you used to know? Should we be focusing on communicative Hebrew, of modern Hebrew, the Hebrew that's spoken in Israel or by Hebrew speakers in other parts of the world? Or should the focus be more on liturgical or other kinds of textual Hebrew, which gives access to the Jewish canon and ritual and stuff like that. And so you see that played out even outside of camps, at day schools, in congregational supplemental schools, which are trying to figure out, do we focus on modern Hebrew? Do we focus on liturgical Hebrew? Do we want our graduates, the people who go through our program to be able to chant Torah or do we want them to be able to ask for a falafel in Israel?

SA: And those are really different skills, probably equally as important, meaning 'cause they both are part of the broader Jewish repertoire of things we do, but they're really different, so it comes to be often a very political question. There's also lots of other angles to that, who's the best teacher? Meaning, is it the native Hebrew speaker? If the answer is modern Hebrew, is the

best teacher, the native speaker, or is it the American English speaking teacher who knows more about American Jewish culture and the particular kids in the class.

SA: So these are kind of these perennial questions that go back decades, nothing is new really [chuckle] today, but how this plays out in camps is even more interesting, because as Jonathan mentioned earlier, these are... Camps are sort of living cultures, and many camps, they're doing both things. They might be praying, and they might also be talking or doing things about Israel. And so, as our book tries to bring up, is the goal to have Hebrew speakers who can communicate fluently, or is the goal something else, which might be the role of Hebrew specifically at a camp. So, those are some of the politics that are involved.

JH: The question of politics and the fact, like you said, Sharon, that as you said, Hebrew can do a lot of things, it can mean a lot of things to different people, and language is all about what something means or doesn't mean, and what the signifier is and what the signified is, and this complicated relationship is dynamic and it goes in lots of directions, but one of the ways you can learn a lot about the way people speak and the way they think is to find out the way they make mistakes in a given language. So I wanna ask each of you to tell us your favorite solecisms of Camp Hebrew, meaning the inaccurate or outdated terms in the Hebrew language that are infused into these camp experiences that you researched so deeply, but specifically what those mistakes teach us about the camps who perpetuate them, and maybe even knowingly.

JK: So I think Sarah and Sharon will probably agree with me and elaborate on this. I don't necessarily consider it to be a mistake because these... The language at camp, it's a living language. It's like any other language, and if a group of people adopt a way of speaking, that would be like saying that standard English today is wrong because it's not... I don't know, like Middle English or something like that. So... I like the word marp, and I like the word marp for a couple of reasons. Marp, for those who don't know, is the word that some camps use for Infirmary and in fact it comes from the Hebrew word Mirpa'ah.

JK: And the reason why I like marp is twofold, one, because the word marpe'ah, which is an older version of that word, is a word that once upon a time was used on kibbutzim, and the fact that camps use the term... Some camps use the term marp today, hearkens back to that earlier kibbutznik kind of world that I think inspired many of the early camps like, Ramasad and Ramah, I think they got the word from the Kibbutz lingo, and even though it probably Israelis today wouldn't maybe know what a marp was, that's part of it. But also marp is clipped, meaning that the end of the word has been dropped and everybody just calls it a marp, even though once upon a time it was probably called a marpe'ah. And again, that just shows how a language develops over time, and the creative ways in which these different camps are using Hebrew and the way in which Hebrew flows in and out of their daily language.

JH: Sharon, despite the fact that that languages are always living, and there may be no such thing as a mistake, tell us something non-standard that you did.

SA: Sure, so you know usually we think of them as errors actually in linguistics, but to go to what Jonathan was saying, this notion of errors is somewhat political, to go back to what we were talking about earlier, but putting that aside, I think it relates to the other part of your question and maybe that's what's outdated, cause I'm not sure if things ever get out of date, meaning words evolve at camp like Jonathan was saying, the Mirpa'ah might become the marp.

SA: But the outdated-ness is sort of interesting because what makes camp camp is both this fantastic tension of its tradition and its innovations, and one of the things that builds tradition is language, so even if words in camp are maybe 50 or 60 years old or maybe not have been used in Israelis society today, they have this long-standing place in camp, and although camps do change the name of their groups and they change the name of their buildings sometimes, or they need a new name for a group or a new name for a building, often what we found, at least in our research, is that that can be a real area of debate, and they get a lot of pushback. Camps in a way are just constantly navigating the now, the past, the future, and I think Hebrew plays into that in some ways.

JH: Sarah. What's yours?

SB: Okay, I have several favorites. One is hak, so it comes from the word Hakshivu. Hakshivu, Hakshivu na, which they used to start announcements, and at one camp we learned that it became a verb, as in, "Can you hak that kid up to the Misrad?" To call... Make an announcement on the loud speaker, calling that kid to the Misrad. I also like meltz, which comes from meltzar, meaning waiter. And the word meltz means to wait tables, it's a verb that comes from a noun, because if you're a meltzar, what do you do? You meltz, so, that's on analogy with English words that have an 'er' at the end.

SB: But here's another interesting one bik, which comes from beit hakiseh, meaning the House of the chair, but it is a euphemism for a toilet that comes from rabbinic literature, I believe, and shows the Maskilic origins of Camp Hebraized English. And finally, I really like the word gabuap. Now, this is not a Hebrew word, but it is often assumed to be a Hebrew word or was at Camp Swig, where it was actually an acronym for the grassy area behind the ulam and pool, gabuap, and it came to be part of camp Hebraized English. So a lot of kids just assumed that it was a Hebrew word, that they didn't yet know what it meant.

SA: Can I add, two things which I find so interesting about what Sarah said is one, that expression Hakshivu na, just the 'na' at the end, it's just so fantastic because it's such a formal way to begin with, you know to use in Hebrew, 'Na' to do something, this formal way of saying, please, right? And that it was tack down at the end of an expression in a very syntactic way that itself marks time. You know it's not used today necessarily, you don't hear people using it that way, but it's just so great when you go to certain camps, not all camps, but in some camps, we heard that expression, and it's just such a great example of something that is a bit anachronistic and yet very, very contemporary.

SA: The second thing that Sarah brought up, which is so important in that we really try to probe or explore in the book is this idea of Camp Hebraized English which is really an amalgam or a mixture of all different types of varieties, not only of Hebrews, so Modern Hebrew and more liturgical or textural types of Hebrew, but also other languages. Perhaps English made up words that camps used, like a word like marp or meltz, and all of this becomes part of this variety that has a lot of meaning in this particular context. So I think we don't know what this variety will sound like even in 20 or 30 years, but it will also grow just like any language, which is sort of exciting.

JH: There's another dynamic which has come up in almost all of your comments about, the supposed non-errors but non-standard usages about the nostalgic embedded-ness of anachronisms by nature, the marp for example, if you're attuned to it, you have these very nostalgic images of draining the swamps and building the country, and it illustrates how important it is for people like you to excavate these moments of nostalgia, because the kids themselves won't experience them that way at all. I'd imagine.

JK: Yeah, no, I think you're absolutely right and certainly at this point I'm not even sure how many camp directors will necessarily have that nostalgia, but if you go back let's say to the '50s, the '60s, the '70s, where you did have camp directors Shlomo Shulsinger who was the camp director at Massad comes to mind. So he grew up in what was Palestine at that time, so for him these words had that significance even while maybe for a kid coming in the '60s who might not have appreciated that history, it meant something different for them that it's fascinating.

[chuckle]

JH: Before we return to the podcast, we want to let you know about digital learning on the College Commons platform. Beyond this podcast which is available for the public at large, check out the online courses at collegetcommons.huc.edu. For in-depth learning, digital syllabi, assignments, inspiration for teaching, and one of our most influential courses called Making Prayer Real. Subscribe with your synagogue for all this and more. Just click, sign up at collegetcommons.huc.edu. And one more thing, help us out and rate us on iTunes but whatever you do, do not give us five stars unless we deserve it. Now, back to our podcast.

JH: In your introduction you made a disclaimer, in which you recognize that your presence at camps as outside researchers inevitably affected the behaviors of the campers and administrators, but you assure us, your readers that, "We are confident that the practices described in this book are characteristic of Jewish summer camps, even when researchers are not present," and that begs the question, because I have to say that makes me suspicious, that your confidence comes from some serious personal experience. So, are you guys campers, camp kids, maybe camp parents, so that you know the ins and outs before you even went?

JK: I did go to camp. I went to Camp Ramah in Nyack which is a day camp and then I went to Camp Massad, which was a Hebrew-speaking camp in the Poconos. There's still a Camp Massad up in Canada, but the one in the Poconos doesn't exist anymore. And then I was at Camp Raleigh, which is a modern orthodox camp up in the Catskills in the New York area. My

eldest child went to Eden Village, which is an eco-farming camp, and my youngest son is going to Ramah this year. So yep, absolutely.

JH: Guilty as charged. Alright.

JK: Guilty as charged.

JH: Guilty as charged. How about you Sarah and Sharon?

SB: Well, I did not attend Jewish sleep away camp as a kid, I did go to Jewish day camp and got a lot of Camp Hebraized English there, but I am definitely a camp parent, in fact, my three children attend three different Jewish summer camps, some of which I found through this research. And they joke that I sent them to different camps to be their spies, but really I sent them to different camps because I learned from my research that these camps would be perfect for them. So they attend Ramah in Ojai, California, and Habonim Dror Camp Gilboa, and Ramah in the Rockies. And as I am scanning the photos that they send out during the summer and reading the blog post, I'm looking not only for the pictures of my smiling, hopefully, children but also for pictures of Camp Hebrew.

JH: Sharon, what about you?

SA: So yes, I'm a product of camping. My parents shipped me out when I think... I don't know, I think I was 12 or something like that. My mom was a Hadassah woman and heard about Sprout Lake, and the next thing I knew, I was at Sprout Lake and I loved it. Surprisingly, I loved it from the very first moment. And then continued at Young Judaea camps, went to their senior Camp Tel Yehudah, worked at one of their other camps, and even worked at these camps, as a high schooler and then in college for a few years.

SA: And to some degree, my life would be dramatically different today had I not gone to camp because it was ultimately through the camping experience that I went to visit Israel, I had never been to Israel prior to going after high school, and after that experience, I actually moved to Israel and lived there for about eight years which led to me marrying the person I'm married today and etcetera, etcetera. So, I do think a lot of things can be sort of connected to those experiences at camp, but I didn't know at the time when I was at camp that that was what was ahead of me, and my own children do also, they go to camp.

SA: And so when we think about Hebrew, that was really the Hebrew that I learned, although I did go to a religious school program where I learned the letters and stuff like that, I really got introduced to Hebrew through camp, and so some of this was very familiar to me, but yet this study... 'Cause so many years had gone by and so many other experiences that when we started this study, it was both very familiar and yet foreign, and that's a really interesting way to think about research.

JK: It's interesting. I'm doing a new project now on the history of the Jewish day school movement, and I was talking to one principal who has been the principal of a school for a long time, and is certainly a very strong advocate for Jewish day schools, but he confided to me that

the Jewish educational experience that had the most impact on him was Jewish summer camp, and that he, of course, sends his kids to Jewish summer camp because it taught him about joyful Judaism, I don't know if he used that exact word, but basically, it was an environment where he was able to enjoy Judaism. Judaism wasn't something that he was forced to learn and take tests about, etcetera.

JH: So I wanna ask each of you to share with us what surprised you most about your research for this book.

SB: What surprised me most was the ideological conflicts regarding Hebrew. In fact, when I started this project, I went to Camp Ramah in California, and I was planning to visit camps at different denominations to see how Jews were speaking English, with Hebrew and Yiddish influences, in different ways, in different contexts. And then I realized there that that's really not the interesting question. The interesting question is, ideologies about Hebrew because I was talking to a staff member and said, "Oh, I'm interested in how Camp Ramah uses Hebrew." And he said, "Oh, you mean we don't?"

SB: And I said, "What do you mean? The announcements were just in Hebrew and the chadar ochel after breakfast," and I pointed to a sign behind him that was in Hebrew, and he said, "Oh yeah, but it's nothing like what it used to be." And I realized, "Oh wow, this is actually a really interesting project about language ideologies, about how people think people speak, and how people think they should speak." And that's also when I realized that it was a bigger project than I could do myself, and so I invited Sharon and Jonathan to join me on the project.

SB: And throughout the project, I was often surprised at how much ideology there is about Hebrew at camp, whether it's people criticizing those things that you refer to as mistakes, or whether it's people at certain camps feeling that it's important to use certain varieties of Hebrew over others, or whether it's debates about how much to correct people, or how much it's okay to innovate as in the Habonim Dror movement's use of gender-neutral and gender-inclusive pronouns, like [Hebrew] or chanichol, meaning a gender-neutral camper.

JH: Jonathan, any surprises?

JK: Yes, as Sarah was speaking about the politics, reminded me of a story that we have in the book about how one camp strafed another camp from the sky because they were upset about the fact that the Israeli flag wasn't flying at the camp. So yes, there are a lot of politics at these camps. One of the most interesting things for me, in addition to that craziness, was just how language is diffused, how a word in one camp ends up in another camp, or how it evolves over time. And I found it fascinating to trace how you have...

JK: Now, in the age of COVID, we talk about super spreaders, but back in the time period when these camps were getting off the ground, there were super spreaders too, except they were spreading Hebrew rather than spreading virus. They were bringing the language from one camp to another camp because maybe they were hired from that other camp, or maybe they spent a

few years as a camper at one camp and then ended up as a staff person in another camp, so we were really able to create almost like a family tree of Hebrew at camp to figure out how it is that you get from A to B to C, and I just found that endlessly fascinating.

JH: It is, it is. Sharon, did anything take you by surprise?

SA: Yeah, I'd like to answer this by pointing to two things. So one, the joy of being able to work with Sarah and Jonathan was that I got to learn so much from them, and we all are trained slightly different... Jonathan is a historian, and I learned so much about the history of camping, which I didn't know, and particularly about Hebrew and the history of camping, and I was really surprised to the extent to which Hebrew factored so significantly in the early days of camping, and how so many of the early camp [Hebrew] or founders really put a lot into the proverbial linguistic basket of Hebrew.

SA: They really look to Hebrew to perform, to do some incredible social cultural work at their camps, and the extent is really... It's both inspiring, and today when we think about it, it's like, "Wow, could that ever happen again?" Meaning, that level of passion and meeting these characters, which Jonathan described so beautifully in the book and what they did, really that surprised me because I didn't know that, and I always loved reading the many, many drafts of Jonathan's work. [laughter]

SA: The second thing that surprised me more, maybe about the contemporary aspect of camping, is that I guess in... I guess I went in thinking more with an acoustic bias. And what I mean by that is I was thinking about what we would hear at camp 'cause I've been a camper and I knew that people would say these words and do all this stuff and the tears and all that. And what I wasn't expecting to see, and what really surprised me, was sort of the visual displays of Hebrew, how the language is made legible at camps to different audiences, and how camps sometimes on purpose, sometimes not, thought about how they actually render Hebrew letters.

SA: So are they in print, are they in script, are they with vowels, niqqud, are they in transliteration? And all of these decisions really speak to who is your camper and what do you hope that they're going to experience? I would go to camps and they would say, "We don't have any Hebrew here." And then you'd look around, and you would see these old plaques or newer signs actually, and I think that surprised me, the visual presence of different varieties of Hebrew and what they were doing too, what does it mean to sit at a place in camp and be surrounded by Hebrew letters? And that those letters, in a way, create camp because you know when you're in camp, it's not only a place that you go to, but it has a physical sense of place, and so I think Hebrew helps produce what camps look like, and so I thought that was really surprising.

JH: I wanna thank you, my colleagues, Sarah Benor, Sharon Avni, and Jonathan Krasner for the sheer pleasure of your company and the opportunity to learn from you on this fascinating, rich, rich topic. And to our listeners, you can find 'Hebrew Infusion' at Amazon, of course, or Rutgers University Press. And to bring home the point about the power of Jewish camp, we're gonna... Unprompted, mind you, my audience, my listeners, they're not prepared for this, our guests, we're gonna go out with a stereotypic Sheket Bevakasha.

JK: Hey.

SA: Hey. [laughter]

SB: Hey. Sorry I had to unmute. [laughter]

JH: That was a Zoom moment, my friends. 1950s Jewish camp meets the Zoom age. Thank you all. It was really a great pleasure.

SA: Thanks so much.

SB: Thank you.

JK: Thank you, Josh.

JH: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of The College Commons podcast available wherever you listen to your podcasts or at the College Commons website, collegecommons.huc.edu, where you can also stay tuned for future episodes.

(End of audio)