

Odyssey to Israel

Part 4, By Bernard Shuman

The author's Hebrew language class includes, from left, a Russian, three persons from Argentina, from Turkey, Morocco, Marion Shuman from the U.S., Turkey, and three more from Russia.



Hebrew Is a Different Tongue

This is the fourth installment in the "Odyssey to Israel" story of Bernard Shuman, his wife and three teen-age children, formerly of Sioux City, Ia., who left their native land last May to return to the land of their Jewish forebears.

Armed with a determination to learn the Hebrew language, although I basically didn't know an "aleph" from a "gimmel" and a "shin," I enrolled in an ulpan shortly after our arrival in Jerusalem. An ulpan is a speed course conceived by Israel to teach the Hebrew language quickly to new immigrants.

Fortunately for me, my wife Marion enrolled in the same class. Without her life-saving ability, based on Hebrew lessons as a young girl, I would have drowned in a sea of Hebrew words, conjugations of verbs, present, past and future tenses, masculine and feminine endings, and assorted characteristics identifiable only with the Hebrew language.

Marion and I are the only Americans in our class. Although our instructor has a knowledge of the English language, she insists understandably that Hebrew be the language used in the classroom.

This is a fair and considerate gesture to the other newly-arrived immigrants in the ulpan, including a husband, wife and mother-in-law from Buenos Aires, Argentina; a father, mother and teen-age son from Georgia, Russia; elderly women from Moscow and Tangiers, Morocco; men from Paris and Romania, and a father and daughter from Turkey.

Thus the composition of the class is cosmopolitan, and Hebrew is the only language that can break down the communications barrier that exists among all the students.

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FREQUENTLY, however, the native tongues of the immigrants interrupt the learning process, especially when there is an acute failure to comprehend the meaning of the Hebrew word that the teacher is explaining.

The students hastily retreat to their comfortable English, French, Spanish, Russian or Yiddish, whatever the case may be, in a semi-

comical struggle to discover what the strange-sounding Hebrew word means.

The woman from Moscow will speak in Yiddish to Marion, asking what the teacher said. The Romanian, who knows some English, will reaffirm the meaning by questioning us in English. The woman from Argentina will speak Spanish to her husband, who has a previous limited knowledge of Hebrew. The woman from Morocco and the Parisian will doublecheck their interpretation in French.

The teen-ager from Georgia, Russia, who possesses an amazing capacity to devour all Hebrew words, will convey the meaning in the language of his homeland to his parents. At first, the route traveled sounds like the nonsensical babblings of a roomful of infants. Eventually, however, the sounds converge, and the students beam proudly at their understanding of the new Hebrew word. At this congratulatory point, the class advances to the next Hebraic obstacle.

On those re-occurring occasions when I individually fail to decode the Hebrew word, and Marion is unable to whisper the English counterpart to me, I can't hide my ignorance by nodding my head and smiling. The teacher sees through my mask of deception. She breaks her ban on the use of English in the class and asks me to tell her in English the meaning of the Hebrew word. What do I do now?

Many years have passed since I studied journalism at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, and it isn't easy to return to the world of memorization, classroom concentration, homework assignments and examinations. Do I take my grade home to my children when I take a test?

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PREPARING for our first test put me in a state of panic. I

studied and worried because I seemed unable to retain the meanings of the words we had studied. The present, past and future tenses had me tense, and I was giving masculine endings to feminine words. I confess to a sleepless night.

Since then I have learned not to react in such a childish fashion. There have been other tests, and although I have studied, the preparation has not been to a point of exhaustion. Furthermore, our tests are not graded; thus, Ellis, Debby and Judy don't know whether or not I passed or failed.

Our ulpan began with Dina, the teacher, explaining Hebrew words to us via pictures drawn on the blackboard in the classroom. She used stick figures of a boy and girl standing, walking, sitting, living in houses, riding on buses, going to school and visiting friends. The boy is David. The girl is Rachel.

Everything in our stark white classroom becomes the foundation for adding a newcomer to our Hebrew vocabulary, opening and closing the windows and door, writing at the desk, sitting in the chair, walking to the blackboard, turning the light on and off, the pens and pencils that we write with in our notebooks, as well as the clothing that we are wearing. Nothing is sacred.

Anything that happens unexpectedly becomes an opportunity for learning another Hebrew word. There is a dynamite blast in the distance. The class takes a trip. There is a knock at the door. The students are bothered by flies and hot weather. One of the students is late; another student is absent.

As we progress into the complicated world of Hebrew, I sometimes feel as though I have returned to my kindergarten and elementary school days. This occurs, for example, when I must recite in simple Hebrew what I ate for breakfast that

morning or when I must disclose, also in simple Hebrew, how I spent my Sabbath, the single day of rest from our classroom activities.

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I HAVE discovered that learning Hebrew is not easy. I frequently feel so stupid and discouraged that I'm ready to be labeled "an ulpan dropout." I can't compare myself to the Romanian who entered the class several weeks after it was in session and quickly acquired an enviable working knowledge of the language.

I am reminded by Marion and Dina that he comes from a continent where a large percentage of the people are multi-lingual. People in Europe are familiar, even fluent, in several languages, one reason being that they can't travel a great distance without crossing the border into a neighboring country where another language is spoken. My origin is the United States where English is the one and only language used for thousands of miles.

Conceivably, one could survive in Israel with English and a hit-and-run knowledge of Hebrew. English is No. 2 in Israel.

Marion, who must be commended for her courage in using the Hebrew that she is learning, is immediately recognized as an English-speaking American. She'll speak in Hebrew; the Israeli will answer in English. One explanation is that the Israeli wants to help us by making the conversation easier; another explanation is that the Israeli wants to display his knowledge of English, which is taught in school beginning with the fifth grade.

A knowledge of Hebrew will elimi-

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Student volunteer Haim Malka helps Shuman, above, read a Hebrew language newspaper. Right, wife Marion and ulpan teacher Dina at the blackboard.



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nate many minor complications continuously experienced by the Shumans, such as receiving all our messages at the absorption center office in Hebrew or filling out employment application and school enrollment forms in Hebrew.

There is also nothing worse than standing like an ignoramus amidst a group of people who are enjoying themselves while speaking Hebrew.

I must concede that some Hebrew words have penetrated this head of mine, and I have even risked using one or two of them outside the classroom. But it assuredly must sound ridiculous to the Israeli on the receiving end when I put a "please" at the end of my request for "ehsehr mich-taveem" (ten letters).

Our ulpan class for beginners will last slightly more than five months, at which time the students are enabled to leave the confines of the classroom and enter Israeli society,

speaking, reading and writing Hebrew.

The ulpan approach to teaching Hebrew to new immigrants in Israel is a controversial issue. Opponents argue that more emphasis should be placed on spoken Hebrew, acquiring a man-on-the-street vocabulary that will help the newcomer live, work and play from day to day.

Too much effort is devoted to conjugations, tenses and correct word endings, according to the opponents. When I realize that I don't ever intend to write the great Israeli novel in Hebrew, I'm inclined to agree with this viewpoint.

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THEN one truth emerges through the running debate, placing me on the other side of the fence—if one is going to learn a language, whether it be Hebrew, Spanish, French, Russian or English, it is best to learn the language correctly from the beginning. There will be no other

opportunity than the ulpan to acquire a proper foundation for an accurate knowledge of the language.

Each ulpan session lasts four hours, from 8 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., six mornings a week, Sunday through Friday. The half-hour from 10 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. is a much-deserved coffee break, a respite from sitting on the same hard, uncomfortable chair for a two-hour stretch.

Sometimes as I shift about, crossing and stretching my legs, twisting about in the seat, I wonder which part of my anatomy is doing the best job at learning the language.

Attending ulpan on Sunday, or going to work for that matter, or shopping in stores that are open, is perhaps one of the most perplexing adjustments an American encounters in this country.

Don't misunderstand. There is a tremendous satisfaction in having the Sabbath (Saturday) as the day of rest, recreation and religion. This is a fundamental reason for Jews living in Israel, one of the basic motivations why the Shuman family made aliyah.

We can now observe the Sabbath as we wish. There are no longer the contradictions that we faced in Sioux City, Ia., when we wanted to observe the day and were confronted with the normal functions of the everyday American world.

Regardless, I must reiterate the question that countless other Americans have asked—Whatever happened to Sunday? Sunday is Monday in this land where the six-day work week prevails.

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ON PAPER, the theory of living in an absorption center and devoting one's time and energy for five months to the study of Hebrew in an ulpan works out superbly. Placed into actual practice, it falls apart like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle dropped on the ground.

A man who has been accustomed to providing stability and security for his family can't divorce himself entirely from thinking about these issues. Gnawing constantly in the recesses of his mind are the questions of employment, housing, education and living together as a family.

Too often these problems emerge into the open, choking you from a variety of sources, when you well-meaning friends, other residents of the absorption center and the center's staff begin asking the usual questions.

"Have you found a place to live?" "Have you found a job?" "Where are your three children going to school?"

These questions cannot be answered when one is enrolled in ulpan. And the individual begins to wonder whether or not the answers can wait until ulpan graduation day.

Unfortunately, at our absorption center, located in Jerusalem's Katamon Tet neighborhood, there is a strong undercurrent of discouragement about aliyah to Israel. Here where aliyah physically begins, where there should be anticipation and optimism, the outlook for tomorrow already has a pessimistic flavor.

Some of the families openly discuss the possibility of returning to the United States. Of course, return-

ing to America is the alternative, the ace-in-the-hole that the American immigrant to Israel has in contrast with his Russian counterpart, who can't go home again.

Employment and housing are the two influencing elements in the overall discouragement package. The cost of an apartment in Jerusalem is outrageously high, completely out of reach of a middle-class income family such as ours. Job hunting is not a simple chore, and I have been forewarned that when one is offered employment, the salary is unbelievably low in comparison with what is being paid in the U.S.

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THE cultural shock is another factor. Cultural differences between the Israeli and the American are immediately recognizable. Jewish heritages link the two together, but the formative years when each one matured in completely contrasting atmospheres keep them apart. There is no similarity between the Israeli way of doing things and the American method.

At this strategic point, I must search out persuasive points why we made aliyah, simple truths that will hurriedly demolish all these factors that lead away from aliyah. I must not dwell too long on the negative side of the ledger less I join the ranks of the disenchanting at this early stage.

Here in Israel we identify ourselves as Jews by simply living here. There is no urgent rush to attend synagogue services for the emotional satisfaction of identification purposes. Our presence in the country suffices. Everything that we do has a Jewish quality.

Perhaps the oddest twist of all is the fact that here in Israel we are members of the majority, a membership never known before. In the United States, regardless of all arguments to the contrary, we as Jews were different from our Anglo-Saxon neighbors. Isn't it ironic that the Israelis consider us as Anglo-Saxons because of our American backgrounds?

In Sioux City we regularly attended Friday night services at Shaare Zion Synagogue, a conservative Jewish house of worship. Attendance there was as necessary to our lives as waking up in the morning and eating three meals a day. Whether or not we attend synagogue services here in Israel no longer matters. We know who we are.

Observance of the Sabbath in Israel is perhaps the truest moment of all. Here the traditional Sabbath meal begins in virtually every home at sundown Friday, with the mother reciting the blessing over the candles and the father reciting the kiddush. The memorable Sabbath prayer scene from the beloved "Fiddler on the Roof" was not a figment of the playwright's imagination.

This is Israel, the Jewish homeland where the Jewish past is irrevocably entwined with the Jewish present and the Jewish future. Absorption for the immigrant is not easy; however, nobody said that it would be. An oleh (immigrant) must constantly remind himself of the reasons for his aliyah.