

## Women's Whispers: Mother tongue

By VIVA HAMMER  
30/04/2010

When my daughter was thrust into Hebrew immersion in first grade, I seized the chance to start speaking Hebrew at home. For an Australian living in America, this wasn't an obvious choice.

My Hebrew is as mysterious and unquenchable as the burning bush. With lubrication (e.g., an evening of *Srugim*), I speak like a native. Israeli security is always suspicious. "Your Israeli passport?" None. "Israeli parents?" No. Eyes narrow. "Why do you speak Hebrew like that, then?"

Perhaps credit goes to my Sydney day school, where the only tests I ever failed were Hebrew vocabulary. Or to the year in Israel with Argentineans who knew no English. But all this was a generation ago, and I haven't had contact with the language since. Moreover, I'm stubbornly illiterate: Agnon I can tackle; Israeli newspapers are unintelligible.

But my children didn't need newspaper language, they needed me to trill out those *reshes* and start communicating. My daughter jumped into the game immediately, that is, she paid as much attention to my instructions in Hebrew as in English (not much in either).

Her three-year-old brother, however, was defiantly oppositional. When I spoke in Hebrew, he drowned out my voice with singing, acted as if he didn't understand and generally wouldn't cooperate. I modified the approach, starting in English, translating into Hebrew and repeating in English again. It was unwieldy and exhausting, but I was sure he'd be fluent in a jiffy: Aren't kids said to be sponges for languages?

After the honeymoon glow ebbed, I realized that however authentic I may have sounded, my conversational scope was limited to Hebrew acquired in pedagogy lectures, kibbutz kitchens and archeological digging. But I persevered and discovered a wondrous thing. The language had become a golem inside of me with a life of its own. I invented nouns from verbs, developed my own conjugations and, if desperate, pulled out a Hungarian word from childhood. It sounded authentically foreign and my kids never knew the difference. I was dreaming and talking to myself in Hebrew; when the kids woke in the night, I soothed them in Hebrew without premeditation.

Still, there was no dialogue. My spouse cannot speak or understand a word and my kids answered only in English. Sometimes I felt I was communicating with a wall, and despaired of the project. Then I upbraided myself: If I had been able to transmit any other skill to my children

by osmosis, wouldn't I be negligent not to do so? Imagine intuiting calculus merely because your mother spoke it to you. What sustained me was a fantasy that I would one day bring the kids to Israel for real immersion, at a summer camp or even a bit of school. When I was six, I attended kindergarten in Jerusalem for a month while my father took sabbatical.

But this idea remained a fantasy: My career barely excused me on weekends; it certainly did not offer sabbaticals. And whenever we did visit the Holy Land, my friends were dying to exhibit their families' mangled English. Apparently, I was going to be my children's primary exposure to Hebrew.

It's been a decade since I began this experiment. At some point several years ago, I called an instruction to my son and he answered back in Hebrew. What's more, recently he asked us whether it was ethical to be eavesdropping on the arguments of some Israeli contractors discussing the loss they were making in fixing our house. Miraculous! I thought. Was it enough for me alone to speak to him for him to comprehend? Then I smiled. What is language except those sounds and signs which a parent offers a child so often that the child eventually yearns to reciprocate?

As the children get older, my Hebrew has become inadequate to their needs. To discuss bullying, college applications and tax policy, I'll have to enroll in ulpan. Until that happens, I revert to English. It's disappointing that neither they nor I are likely to be competent in adult Hebrew conversation in this incarnation. But I've transmitted to them all I know without putting them through the shame of failing vocabulary tests. And perhaps just as importantly, I've kept the language alive inside myself as well.

When Israeli passport control narrows her eyes, asking, "Why do you speak Hebrew like that, then?" I answer her thus: "Because it says *v'leshinantam l'venecha* 'you shall teach them to you your children.' Tell me, should I teach it to them in English?"

She shakes her head, meshuga Diaspora Jew, and waves me onward.