The Hebrew-Jewish Disconnection

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THE HEBREW-JEWISH DISCONNECTION

Submitted by

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Abstract

A common language creates a cultural community regardless of geographical boundaries. In the Jewish community this language is Hebrew. The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship that American Jews have with the Hebrew language in terms of comprehension, the value they place on Hebrew, and how they position themselves on the Jewish spectrum (religiously and culturally). The research carried out was both qualitative and quantitative, including both a survey and interviews. While the subjective assessments by questionnaire takers indicated that many did not find a deep connection between Hebrew and their religious identity, a closer look provided evidence that this feeling was proportionate to their lack of proficiency. In depth analysis led the researcher to the conclusion that conscious efforts need to be made to assure that cultural languages, like Hebrew and all other languages, are protected and not lost by those immersed in the dominant culture.
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Glossary

Cantor – An ordained prayer leader in the synagogue who chants the prayers.

Conservative Judaism – Judaism as practiced especially among some United States Jews with adherence to the Torah and Talmud but with allowance for some departures from strict observation, in keeping with differing times and circumstances

Diaspora -- Scattering. The time from 70 CE after the destruction of the Temple when the Jews were scattered over the world and there was no Israel (until 1948)

Reform Judaism – Judaism marked by a liberal approach in nonobservance of much legal tradition regarded as irrelevant to the present day, and in shortening and simplification of traditional ritual. Emphasis is on “tikkun olam,” repairing the world through community service and charitable acts

Haredim/Haredi – any of several sects of Orthodox Judaism that reject modern secular culture, some of which do not recognize the spiritual authority of the modern state of Israel

Hasidic/Hasidism -- Jewish sect of Judaism that is devoted to the strict observance of the ritual law

Orthodox Judaism – Judaism that adheres to the Torah and Talmud as interpreted in an authoritative rabbinic law code and applies their principles and regulations to modern living

Rabbi – An ordained teacher of the Jewish law. He/She is important in the community and has authority over the people in the community

Synagogue – Building for Jewish public prayer, study and assembly

Talmud – Written commentary on the oral law (Mishna). There are two versions of the Talmud: the Babylonian Talmud (which dates from the 5th century C.E., but includes earlier material) and the earlier Palestinian or Jerusalem Talmud

Temple -- Sometimes used to refer to a synagogue (see synagogue) esp. in North America. It also is used to refer to the Temple in Jerusalem, destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE of which only the Western Wall (in Israel) remains.

Torah – Meaning “Law” in Hebrew. It contains the Five Books of Moses (Pentateuch)

Zionism – Political movement securing the Jewish return to the land if Israel
Chapter 1: Introduction

Language is ubiquitous; you cannot avoid it and you use it in order to align yourself with a certain group of people, as well as to distinguish yourself from others (Benor, 2009). Throughout history, Jews have spoken a variety of languages when given access to the dominant community; as Spolsky notes “unless there is active isolation, contact in the neighborhood as well as at school will usually produce a socially desirable knowledge of the dominant language,” which is what made it desirable for Jews to acquire the mainstream language of the time period in order to participate and interact outside of the Jewish community (when allowed) (2014). Historically, Jews have adopted the languages of their locations but they often created Jewish varieties of these languages as well (Benor, 2009). The language that connects all Jews, no matter what location or Jewish denomination, is the language of the Jewish religion, Hebrew. The Hebrew language is a heritage language and heritage languages are intricately connected to identity. However, most American Jews cannot speak Hebrew and are illiterate in Hebrew as well.

Jews have spoken many languages throughout history. The Hebrew linguist, Haim Rabin, makes a distinction between Jewish languages and languages spoken by Jews (Rabin, 1981; Spolsky, 2014). According to Rabin, a Jewish language is a variety that exists in a diglossic relationship with Hebrew (or rather, Hebrew Aramaic)- which helps to explain why these Jewish languages are most often written in Hebrew script- and also, many expressions and words from the Bible, Talmud, and other religious Jewish texts (Spolsky, 2014). Scholars have produced different lists of “Jewish languages” but the Encyclopedia Judaica lists the following languages as “Jewish languages”: Berber, Judeo-Catalan, Judeo-Corfiote, Judeo-French, Judeo-Greek, Judeo-Italian, Judeo-Persian, Judeo-Portuguese, Judeo-Romance, Judeo-Tajik, Judeo-Tat,
Judeo-Tatar, Ladino (Judeo-Spanish), and Yiddish (Judeo-German). Interestingly enough, the Jewish writer, Nathan Birnbaum, objects to using the prefix “Judeo-” and prefers the following names: Yevanic, Italkian, Tsarfatic, Arvic, Ma’aravic, Parsic, Bukharic, Tatic, and Gruzinic (Birnbaum 1972; Spolsky, 2014). Weinreich adds to this list, including Targumic (Judeo-Aramaic) and the Jewish language website includes Jewish Dutch, Jewish English, Jewish Malayalam, Jewish Latin American Spanish, Jewish Polish, Jewish Russian, Judeo-Georgian, Judeo-Slavic/Caanaic, Karaim, and Yiddish sign language; according to Spolsky (2014) and (Hary, 2011), this lengthy list illustrates the addition of religion as a criteria for a Jewish language, categorizing them as “regiolects.” Jewish languages have been documented in many parts of the Jewish Diaspora but the two languages, Yiddish and Judeo-Spanish, are exceptions in Jewish history as both languages continued to be spoken outside of their land of origin (Benor, 2009). While the borders of what it means to be a “Jewish language” seem to be widening and becoming broader, the original “Jewish language,” Hebrew, is now questioned as to whether it and any of its varieties are truly a Jewish language today (Spolsky, 2014). The Israeli linguist, Ornan, says that Hebrew is not a Jewish language but the language of the country, Israel, for both Jews and non-Jews, but in the case of the Diaspora, it’s identified as the language of the religion (Spolsky, 2014).

A common language creates a cultural community regardless of geographical boundaries. In fact, “modern national identity often rests upon a frequently romanticized sense of belonging to a linguistic group and to a territory group and to a territory (Rabkin, 2010). While Modern Hebrew accomplishes this in a sense of territorial connectedness in Israel, it does not create a sense of belonging within the Jewish American community, as it is not a spoken language of that community. According to Benor (2009), “language (along with other sociocultural practices)
enables people to perform and perceive broad social dimensions like ethnicity, social class, age, and gender, as well as membership in more localized social networks and communities of practice.” Ethnic and religious groups also use language as a way to construct and express distinctiveness from other groups (Benor & Spolsky, 2006). Hebrew is commonly viewed as the language of the Jewish people; however, most Jews are unable to speak the language and are illiterate in Hebrew, as well. The aim of this research has been to determine whether American Jews are truly unlearned in the Hebrew language both orally and written and, if so, whether they are disconnected from fully experiencing their Jewish religion and cultural identity. Through a survey, the literacy abilities of an American Jewish community in Westchester, New York, were assessed. Open-ended questions served to give insight into how American Jews perceive the Hebrew language and its importance (both spoken and written), and how those perceptions compare to speakers’ their overall performance. Interviews also contributed to the understanding of how authoritative figures in the Jewish community position Hebrew in their lives as well as how they view Hebrew’s place in the American Jewish community as a whole.

Understanding the relationship between Jews and Hebrew is vital as it directly impacts the current and future state of the Jewish religion and culture on a personal and communal level in America. As previously mentioned, this research served to identify the relationship that Jews have with the Hebrew language in terms of comprehension, the value they place on Hebrew, and how they position themselves on the Jewish spectrum (religiously and culturally). This information, illustrating the role of Hebrew in the lives of Jews who do not reside in Israel, is imperative to fully understanding how the language is or is not being used and how this impacts an American Jew’s religious and cultural identity. The findings of this research are not only significant to Jewish individuals and the Jewish community, but also extend to the domain of
education. Students enter the classroom with a variety of heritage languages, and this study serves as an example of how a language, which is a marker of identity, can be both honored but lost and not preserved.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Hebrew Origins

According to Spolsky (2014), the Hebrew language was never truly “dead.” It has always played a central role in the many languages of the Jewish people (with rare exceptions, of course). It had not been a spoken vernacular for nearly 1,900 years but still lived continuously as a sacred and literary language for most of this period. This is why it was easily available for the renewed vernacular of Hebrew, modern Hebrew, which came about with the return to Zion (the creation of the modern State of Israel). The Hebrew language has a very complex history, and linguists have attempted to reconstruct the existence and form of the language from extant texts as it developed over many hundreds of years (Spolsky, 2014). The term “Hebrew” was used not used to refer to a language directly (though mentioned on the rare occasion). The language was not called Hebrew (ivrit) until the Hellenistic and Roman period. The language thus referenced was the language of Canaan “Yehudit” which means “Jewish” or “the language of Judah” (one of the twelve tribes of Jews). Therefore, assumptions about the original development of Hebrew have to be made, due to minimal evidence. Archaeological findings have provided evidence of documents in Hebrew that have been preserved; however, there are many limitations to the information known about the origins of their language. For instance, evidence is sparse at times for the time period that Hebrew was first taking shape. It must also be noted that many of the stories in Hebrew found by archaeologists may have been written years after the events took place, and represent ideological interpretations of the past, with contemporary significance. Much of what is written was often claimed to have been eyewitness accounts as well, which have been shown to be questionable and often untrustworthy by researchers. Lastly, written sources are limited in reliability because there is no way to know that the language is reflective of the
language that was spoken at the time. Also there is “no hard evidence of authorship and dating” (Spolsky, 2014). When discussing the history of the Hebrew language it is important to keep these limitations in mind.

The Hebrew language itself came about in “a matrix of closely related tongues in Syria-Palestine,” and is “a halfway (point) between the Phoenician language and Old Aramaic language, with the earliest inscriptions being in the 10th century BCE and was most likely used in some early Bible texts” (Gzella, 2011; Spolsky 2014). Comparative linguists have place Hebrew in the Afro-Asiatic macro-family, which has nearly 100 member languages, which is broken into major subgroups: Semitic, Berber, Egyptian, Chadic, Cushitic groups (Greenberg 1950; Spolsky, 2014). Common linguistic features of this family are the inclusion of a two-gender system, emphatic (glottalized or implosive) consonants, a tendency to organize sentences verb-subject-object, words inflected by vowel changes as well as prefixes and suffixes, and a causative affix. Hebrew is a part of the Semitic group, which is the eldest subgroup. There is no agreement on the precise origin of Hebrew and the other languages of the family and, therefore, theories of Hebrew’s history are based on the archeological findings of written texts found in various locations which, as previously mentioned, is evidence that needs to be interpreted with care.

While Hebrew is often associated with religion, most texts that are found are related to administration and economic purposes (Spolsky, 2014) but also include legal texts as well as religious and literary texts. Not only do these present the languages that existed at a point in time but they also illustrate the culture.

The development of Hebrew as a sacred language started in the first millennium and became influential in literature. Findings have suggested that the emergence of Hebrew occurred in the context of a multilingual Semitic Canaan with established scribal literacy and a developed
literary tradition (Spolsky, 2014). Hebrew did not remain unadulterated or as the only language spoken among Jews. Jews adapted to the communities within which they lived but maintained Jewish identifiers, which would be a common occurrence throughout the history of the Jewish people in the centuries to come. For instance, in Elephantine (close to Aswan in Egypt), the Jewish community that resided there for 100 years observed many aspects of Jewish law and maintained Jewish names, but adopted common Aramaic patterns with some Egyptian influence in their legal documents (Spolsky, 2014). There were also intermarriages between Jews and non-Jews (Spolsky, 2014). Hebrew had many functions in the lives of the Jewish people. Hebrew was used for higher learning and sacred purposes and as a continued internally spoken vernacular, although like all languages, it went through changes over time. Maintenance of Hebrew as a language of ritual and literature continued and it was probably a spoken vernacular (until the destruction of the Temple and perhaps even later) in a multilingual pattern (Spolsky, 2014). Even when Hebrew was no longer the dominant tongue in a Jew’s life, it was, for some, still the language of everyday life. For others, Aramaic was the most used language. Interestingly enough, this went the other way as well. For instance, some Aramaic speakers kept the Hebrew language as a language of prayer and also to speak to the elderly and to villagers (Spolsky, 2014).

There are two sets of thought regarding how the Hebrew language existed in society: multilingual Hebraists and monolingualists. The multilingual Hebraists believe that the Hebrew language continued to be spoken until the destruction of the Second Temple or later, although in a bilingual diglossic pattern with Aramaic and, later, added onto by the inclusion of Greek. Monolingualists, on the other hand, believe that Hebrew became a restricted and artificial language that was used solely for religious literary purposes, much like what Latin became in the
medieval Church. As previously stated, Aramaic had become the dominant language of the time, but scribal conservatism supports the position held that Hebrew was written long after being replaced by Aramaic as a vernacular (Spolsky, 2014). In terms of being spoken, some believe that the language shift from Hebrew to Aramaic occurred with all speakers except for those who were educated, as well as for priests and leaders who spoke Hebrew as religious jargon. This shows that, while it was not the common language nor spoken by the majority, it was still a vernacular of sorts.

Hebrew was also influenced by the conquests of Alexander the Great who introduced the Greek language to the Hebrew-Aramaic mixture that had currently existed. In second century Palestine, the Roman destruction of Jewish political independence resulted in the loss of Hebrew vitality but it continued to be the preferred language for religious and literary composition (Spolsky, 2014); it was “entrenched as the language of Jewish religion and literacy, its transmission supported by a religious education system” (Benor & Spolsky, 2006). Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew were used in different spheres of life amongst different cultural groups, and while the Hebrew language was being replaced (initially by Aramaic and then Greek), this switch was only as a vernacular and did not replace Hebrew as a religious language (Spolsky, 2014). Hebrew was maintained as can be seen in Roman Palestine where Greek was the main language but composition of new works in Hebrew continued (Spolsky, 2014). Also Hebrew was the primary language for writing and communicating religiously relevant information (Smelik, 2010; Spolsky, 2014). Greek played a significant role in the Jewish sociolinguistic ecology and “in the Diaspora communities, a variety of either Aramaic or of Greek came to be the common language, but Hebrew was maintained as a sacred language and probably a vernacular” (Spolsky, 2014). This multilingual way of life is shown through an example that
Spolsky (2014) mentions, that rabbis did, in fact, recognize the Greek language and the use of Aramaic for private prayer, but Hebrew remained primary, religiously speaking.

Researchers agree that 300 CE is the assumed sociolinguistic end of the Hebrew vernacular; however, Spolsky (2014) claims that this boundary may not be a neat one but rather “a bleeding of periods, a gradual loss of central focus and the growth of separate Jewish communities in Palestine and beyond.” While Hebrew was a discontinued vernacular in Jewish communities, it remained the sacred and literary language of the Jewish people and still remains an essential part of the Jewish religion today, regardless of the literacy of the Jews who practice it. The Jewish vernacular most well known in the American Jewish community is Yiddish.

**Yiddish:**

Spolsky (2014) claims that, “Yiddish is without question the premiere Jewish language.” While German scholars of the Enlightenment as well as Zionist Hebrew scholars criticize it, the current students of Jewish language varieties view it as the fundamental example of an “autonomous Jewish language.” Spolsky (2014) explains that Yiddish began as a fusion language but in time became standardized, gained vitality, functioned as a vernacular, achieved distinguished literary use, and at present time, is surviving both secularly and religiously with supporters of its continuation. Most Yiddish speakers are elderly and Hasidic, and other secular supporters form a “metalinguistic community” which, according to (Avineri, 2010; Spolsky, 2014), is typical of indigenous languages that are disappearing and are without vitality.

Yiddish is the language associated with the Ashkenazi Jewish community. It is a 1,000-year-old language that was centered in Eastern Europe and is sometimes referred to as Judeo-German (Benor & Spolsky, 2006). The exact location of origin is not entirely agreed upon.
While it is often assumed to be in Rhineland, the historian and scholar, Max Weinrich, says that it was in the communities of Loter on the banks of Rhine and Moselle, while other scholars claim that Yiddish was born in places like Bavaria, East Central Germany, or France and Italy (Spolsky, 2014). The assumptions of where Yiddish originated from are based on theory, but Rhineland is the one with the most support. Spolsky (2014) suggests that Yiddish emergence was not localized but occurred over a long period in central Europe and took recognizable shape in Eastern Europe where it reached its cultural and literary apex.

Yiddish is derived from the same source as modern German, which is a Middle High German dialect; it is more consistent with Middle High German than modern German (Spolsky, 2014). However, both Yiddish and modern German developed separately from their conception. Like other Jewish languages, Yiddish evolved through the wanderings of the Ashkenazi Jews who spoke Hebrew, Aramaic, and old French (Wolferus, 2001). A majority of the linguistic borrowings in Yiddish come from German; however, it is written using the Hebrew alphabet. Hebrew and Aramaic are responsible for most of the Jewish terms that are included in the Yiddish lexicon (Spolsky, 2014). Yiddish, like all other Diaspora Jewish languages, is a product of Jewish-gentile interaction, has always been multilingual, with its speakers having the ability to understand, speak, sometimes read and even write one or more of their neighbors’ languages (Shandler, 2008). Yiddish functioned as a device for presenting the otherness of Jewish culture, language, traditions and society through the resistance of assimilation. In Germany, Yiddish was considered a “disruptive, disordering, or anarchic element in German culture” (Grossman, 2000; Shandler, 2008).

There are four historical periods of Yiddish: Early Yiddish, which occurred around 1100 until 1250; Old Yiddish which occurred from 1250 until about 1500; Middle Yiddish which
occurred from 1500 to 1700; and New Yiddish, which began around 1750 and is still being spoken today (citation 81; Spolsky, 2014). Early Yiddish is the fusion of *loshn joydeshm* (Hebrew Aramaic), Loez (Judeo-Romance) and German, which then spread. Old Yiddish included the spread of Ashkenazi Jews to middle Danube, adding Bohemia, Moravia, Poland, Lithuania and Palestine to the areas where Jews lived. They moved eastward as a result of both the Black Death and expulsion from large cities in both Germany and Austria. They immigrated to Slavic states as where they were accepted as immigrants and there Slavic entered the linguistic fusion of Yiddish. Middle Yiddish occurred when southern and western Lithuania were added to Poland, and The Thirty Years War, Cossack massacres, and the Swedish War “encouraged Jewish migration back to the Alsace, Holland, and Northern Germany and north to eastern Kurland (part of Latvia (Spolsky, 2014). Also, as a result of expulsion or taxation, Jews left the larger cities, relocating to smaller towns and, under the protection of local lords, dialects developed in Eastern Yiddish that separated from Western Yiddish. New Yiddish is a growing vernacular in Ashkenazi Jews in Palestine. According to Spolsky (2014) this is when Hasidism emerged, Europe became urbanized, and the religious observance of many Jews was abandoned. Interestingly enough, he also mentions that Yiddish was enriched when it took on secular functions, becoming a language of social movements and educational instruction in secular schools, and literature began to be published in Yiddish. Western Yiddish was originally the written form of the language but over time the written form switched to Eastern Yiddish, around the 19th century, and became standardized and a language of social culture (Spolsky, 2014).

Since World War II, Yiddish has been considered an endangered language and according to the list given by Spolsky (2014), Yiddish is a 4 on the EGIDS scale in all areas. Overall, there are approximately 1,505,000 speakers of Yiddish; there are 215,000 speakers in Israel, as of
1986; 634,000 speakers in Ukraine, as of 1991; 1,100 speakers in Romania, as of 2002; 4,000 speakers in Sweden, as of 2000; 50,000 speakers in Latvia, as of 1979; 148,000 in the United States, as of 2009; and 30,000 in the UK, as of 2002. Currently, Yiddish has a different symbolic meaning than it once had. Since the conception of the State of Israel in 1948, Yiddish has been juxtaposed against the official national language, Hebrew, becoming an “emblematic way of life rejected and superseded by Zionism” (Fishman & Fishman, 1974; Shandler, 2008). Yiddish is denied value as written vernacular in Israel’s official policy, despite the fact that Ashkenazi Jews have spoken Yiddish in the region for centuries (Shandler, 2008). However, recently Yiddish has received more recognition as an important resource for Jewish heritage (Shandler, 2008). While Shandler (2008) mentions that “it is too early to mourn over the Yiddish language… (i)t is necessary to cultivate it…. Its riches must not be lost.” Hebraists denounce Yiddish as a language, portraying it as lacking linguistic, cultural, or social identity (which is a similar discourse to the German assault on Yiddish) and as a language that will always be marked by the sigma of exile.

**Judeo-Spanish:**

Judeo-Spanish is one of the many Jewish languages. However, before discussing the language itself it is imperative to understand who speaks it. The Jews who speak Judeo-Spanish are Sephardic Jews (Sephardim) whose ancestors resided in the Iberian Peninsula, in what is now Portugal and Spain (Roffé, 2016). Researchers agree that “Sephardic” was a term that initially referenced Jews who lived in Spain and were later expelled from Spain in 1492 (Roffé, 2016). The Jewish faith was the reason for their expulsion, and this expulsion in 1492 was the first event of the Sephardic Diaspora. Jews were, however, given the choice to stay if they converted to
Christianity; while some Jews did indeed convert, some stayed and went into hiding (Attig, 2012). Those who reluctantly left took with them the language and culture of Sefarad. A large portion of these exiled Jews resettled in the Ottoman Empire. However, according to the Judeo-Spanish scholar, Haim Vidal Sephiha, Judeo-Spanish did not exist as a distinguishable variety (from Old Spanish) before exile; it was only around 1620 that it became a marked Jewish language (Spolsky, 2014). Not only did these Sephardim survive but their Spanish heritage, both cultural and linguistic, remained alive for centuries as well (Attig, 2012). The continuation of the Sephardic cultural identity has broadened what it means to be Sephardim, and Roffé (2016) explains that the term “Sephardic” is now an accepted reference to Jewish exiles and their descendants who settled in countries along the Mediterranean Sea, North Africa, the Balkans, Italy, Syria and Palestine, as well as the Jews who inhabited these areas before the expelled Jews relocated there. Aside from the Jews who stayed in Spain and those who fled to the aforementioned locations, some Jews fled to Brazil, Holland and to Jewish communities in the New World (i.e., New Amsterdam [New York], Mexico and Curacao in the Caribbean) (Roffé, 2016).

Both scholars and native speakers do not agree upon the name of the language spoken by Sephardic Jews as it has nearly 20 names (Zucker, 2001). Some of these names are Ladino, Judezmo, Spanyolit etc., but it is most often referred to as Judeo-Spanish in academia (Zucker, 2001). According to the online dictionary Real Academia Española, it is known as Ladino (Attig, 2012) and this seems to be the name that has prevailed in the United States as well as Israel, where its acceptance is growing (Roumani, 2014). Many Jewish scholars and speakers of the language prefer it to be called Judeo-Spanish or Judeoespanol (Attig, 2010). On the other hand, Roumani (2014) notes that many view Judeo-Spanish as a pseudo-scientific term and that
'Ladino' refers to the written language used for translation, while others opt to call the language ‘Judezmo’ as it translates to “the Jewish language.” In North Africa, Turkey, and the Balkans they refer to it as Judeo-Spanish, while in Morocco, they speak a variety known as “Haketia” (Spolsky, 2014). In the eastern Mediterranean, they refer to their variety as Judezmo, and lastly, the re-Hispanicized formal writing system/language of Sephardic Jews was termed “Ladino.” These are the most common terms used but there are also varieties such as “Tetuani” (being the dialect of Oran), and in formal modern Hebrew it is called “Spanyioloit.” (Spolsky, 2014) For the purposes of uniformity, the vernacular of the Sephardic Jews will be discussed using the term “Judeo-Spanish,” unless quoted otherwise.

Roumani (2014) describes the origins of Judeo-Spanish as a living tree, with its “roots” having taken hold two thousand years ago in the Eastern Mediterranean (Israel, Greece, and Italy), and its “trunk” going through the Iberian Peninsula where Jews were under the dominion of the Roman, Visigothic, Muslim, and then Christian rule until the expulsion of Jews in 1492. As one would assume, the “roots” and “trunk” of the language are static while the “branches” are dynamic, having grown over the last five hundred or so years. The ”branches” spread “over north-western Europe, bending back to Italy, the Balkans and Greece, west to the New World, and bending south and east to Maghreb and back again to Istanbul and Turkey, and now Israel.” Wherever these Jews settled, they learned the dominant language of the land and also developed a Jewish version of their own. This resulted in languages like Judeo-Greek, Judeo-Roman, Judeo-Latin, etc. Each of these languages was based on the local language; however, they incorporated other Jewish languages like Hebrew and Aramaic (Roumani, 2014).

While Judeo-Spanish developed out of 15th century Castilian, Roumani (2014) indicates that Castilian was one of several languages that grew simultaneously within the Iberian
Peninsula. Also, it was under Muslim rule in 711 CE that many Sephardic Jews became quadrilingual, using Arabic for contacts with rulers, for literature, science and philosophy, a Romance dialect for social contact, and Hebrew for prayer as well as poetry. The home language was a mixture of the three and varied by region, and would eventually develop into Judeo-Spanish (Roumani, 2014). But according to Spolsky (2014), Judeo-Spanish was not a vernacular of the Sephardic Jews until after their expulsion and departure from the peninsula.

Linguistically, Judeo-Spanish does not reflect the same sound shifts as modern Spanish and uses sibilants that no longer exist in Spanish. Additionally, certain sound shifts are assumed to originate from either Hebrew or Arabic (Zucker, 2001). Judeo-Spanish did not adopt many of the phonetic changes that influenced Castilian in the 16th and 17th centuries, and therefore it sounds outdated in comparison to modern Castilian (Attig, 2014). The Hebrew-Aramaic attribute that is common to all Jewish languages can be seen as reflective of the Jewish daily life. According to Zucker (2001), Spanish society turned to Latin as a model when they desired a more precise language; however, Jews saw Latin as the language of the Church, which had been a source of oppression to them. Instead of using words and structures from Latin to apply to the vernacular, as non-Jews did in Spain, the Jews turned to Hebrew (Zucker, 2001). Judeo-Spanish took further shape in the Ottoman Empire. Initially, the Sephardic Jews founded communities and attended synagogues based on the languages that they spoke, i.e., Castilian, Aragonese, Catalan, Galician, Portuguese or other Iberian languages (Gerber, 2003; Attig, 2012). But the varying linguistic backgrounds of these Jews meshed over time, creating a common language that was understood by all of the Sephardic community with the exception of regional dialects (Attig, 2012).
While Sephardic Jews spoke Judeo-Spanish, “Hebrew is, and always had been, the liturgical and religious language of all the Sephardim” (Attig, 2012). Despite the importance of Hebrew in their lives as Jews, not all of the Sephardic population could read and understand Hebrew and thus rabbis were needed to explain the ethics and proper conduct through musar, which is a didactic literature (Attig, 2012). Musar was written in Hebrew even though there was a low rate of Hebrew language literacy among the Sephardic communities. As mentioned by Roumani (2014) and further supported by Attig (2012), “Ladino” was a term that was designated for calque translations and was eventually given the verb form “enladianar”, meaning to render a Hebrew or Aramaic text into a Romance vernacular. The translations followed Hebrew syntax while replacing Hebrew words with Iberian ones, and while they were translations, they did include large chunks of the Hebrew original that both rabbis and translators presumed the reading public could comprehend (Lehmann, 2007; Attig, 2001). While there are disagreements, according to Attig (2001), the general consensus of Jewish Studies scholars is that Ladino became the religious language of the Sephardic community, but only where there were translations and musar literature to serve as mediums for those who could not access the original Hebrew (or Aramaic). Ladino did not completely replace the Hebrew as the religious or liturgical language.

In the 18th century, Judeo-Spanish literary production thrived with the publication of religious texts, and in the 19th and early 20th centuries, there was an emergence of plays, novels, and newspapers that were printed in a variant of the Hebrew alphabet (Attig, 2012). Sarah Aroeste (2015), a Sephardic singer and songwriter, notes that Judeo-Spanish “poems, proverbs, songs, jokes, books, and plays depict the life of a major Jewish culture over the last five centuries” and that it has the power to connect thousands of Jews with a shared Hispanic past.
World War II caused a decrease in these Judeo-Spanish literary works but this was nothing compared to the eradication of almost the entire Sephardic community during this attempted annihilation. Judeo-Spanish survived as a vernacular as a result of immigration to Turkey and Israel. According to Attig (2001), Judeo-Spanish survived as a post-vernacular in the United States and Morocco primarily as a language of nostalgia in songs and idiomatic expressions. However, she states that the communities of native speakers of Judeo-Spanish today in both Turkey and Israel are sizable. Stein (2006) indicates that a vast majority of the world’s speakers of Judeo-Spanish lived at the beginning of the 20th century and the majority of approximately 250,000 Jews who inhabited successor states of the Ottoman Empire, i.e., Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Serbia, and Greece, identified Judeo-Spanish as their native language.

Jews in Western Europe quickly lost their Sephardic distinction as they assimilated into the cultures within which they lived (Zucker, 2001). Sephardic Jews from Turkey and the Balkans began to immigrate to the United States in the late 19th century. According to Zucker (2001), an estimated 70,000 Sephardic Jews immigrated to the United States in the early 20th century. In America, many of the Sephardic Jews had issues with the language, Jewish American culture, and non-Jewish American culture (Zucker, 2001). Most of the American Jews were Ashkenazim who, unfortunately, were not particularly accepting of the Sephardic Jews.

The Judeo-Spanish language is struggling to survive as can be seen on the list Spolsky (2014, p. 269-272) includes all of the Jewish languages (separated by dialects), their rating on the EGIDS scale, the country within which it is spoken, the number of speakers, and the year the number was determined. The only speakers of Judeo-Spanish who were unable to be assessed were Moroccan Jews; however, they were labeled as being a 7 on the EGIDS scale, which, according to SIL International (2013), means that it is in “intergenerational transmission (and) is
in the process of being broken, but the child-bearing generation can still use the language so it is possible that revitalization efforts could restore transmission of the language in the home.” In fact, Judeo-Spanish is considered a 7 in all locations aside from Israel in 1985, where it had 100,000 speakers and was identified as a 4, which meant that language “has been developed to the point that it is used and sustained by institutions beyond the home and community.” It was re-assessed in 2013 when the status went to a 7 and the number of speakers dropped to 72,000. The speakers in all other countries are as follows: 10,000 speakers in Turkey; 3,500 speakers in the United States; 2,500 speakers in France; 1,000 speakers in Greece, Brazil, and the UK (each). The number of Judeo-Spanish speakers is miniscule compared to the heritage language of the Ashkenazi Jews.

**Hebrew in Israel:**

Modern Hebrew is one of the official languages in Israel, and its existence is the result of the efforts of Eliezer ben Yehuda (1858-1922) who is considered the “instigator” of the Hebrew revival (Rabkin, 2010). According to Spolsky (2014) the revival of the Hebrew language was not a matter of reviving a dead language and reconstructing it from ancient manuscripts but was rather an “expansion of the domains in which the language was currently being used and an increase in the number of uses and users.” There were two processes that occurred in the creation of modern Hebrew: revernacularization (adopting a formal written and sacred language for normal daily use) (Fishman, 1996; Spolsky, 2014) and revitalization (adding vitality, meaning, speaking the language to babies in order to guarantee natural intergenerational transmission) (Stewart 1968; Spolsky, 2014). The revival began in the mid-19th century, and interestingly, was invoked by European nationalism rather than Jewish tradition (Avineri, 1998;
Rabkin, 2010). The initial creation of modern Hebrew was part of the Zionist movement to invent a universal language for the Jewish people but it became a universal language for the people of the State of Israel. Ben-Yehuda immigrated to Jerusalem in 1881 and his home was the first to use modern Hebrew as a vernacular, his son being raised with the language as his mother tongue Rabkin (2010).

In Israel there are many different communities and, within those communities are many different smaller communities that can be separated sociolinguistically by native-born and immigrants. These groupings are as follows: Ashkenazi (those whose ancestors came via Europe), Sephardim (descended from the Jews expelled from Spain in 1492 and who moved to the Ottoman Empire or North Africa), Mizrahim (North African and Middle Eastern Jews whose ancestors lived in Arabic-speaking countries until they escaped or were expelled), and Beta-Israel (Ethiopian Jews). When coming to Israel, all of these communities brought with them a culture, which included a language.

While there are many communities and many heritage languages in Israel, Hebrew is at the forefront of them all. It must be noted that the Hebrew spoken in Israel is not the biblical Hebrew that is found in the Torah but is modern Hebrew, which continues to be the dominant language in Israel, and is what is “normal” and unmarked. Social surveys that the Israeli government distributes illustrate what the frequency of the language in the society is. The most recent showed that a majority of Jews (75%) are fluent in Hebrew, regardless of religious identification; Hebrew proficiency/knowledge is closely related to employment/income and academic success. However, these surveys are somewhat limited as they are only distributed to, and taken by, individuals who are 20 years old or older.
Native-born Jews and their children are most likely to have Hebrew as their mother tongue. Most Haredim know and speak Hebrew; however, some sects of Hasidic Jews prefer Yiddish as a way of identifying themselves apart from the Hebrew-speaking Zionists (Spolsky, 2014). Also, many older immigrants still use their heritage language (i.e., Polish, Yiddish, varieties of Judeo-Arabic) but most are bilingual in Hebrew, and their heritage language incorporates many Hebraisms (Hebrew words). This is not happening solely amongst Jews who live in Israel but amongst non-Jews, as well. It is actually common to be bilingual in Israel and Israelis are aware of the role that Hebrew plays in society. In fact, those who do not speak Hebrew, like many in the Arabic communities, are now increasing their Hebrew abilities due to education and employment opportunities, much as with English in America. Hebrew is the most common language spoken in Israel, both socially and within the home. As it is the dominant public language, immigrants and groups like Israeli Palestinians feel the outside pressure to learn Hebrew in order to participate fully. In fact, “Israeli Palestinians are rapidly becoming bilingual, first borrowing Hebrew words and then code switching developing bilingual proficiency” (Amara 2010; Spolsky 2014). Hebrew is needed not only for social interpersonal relationships but to also experience the culture. For instance, high circulation newspapers are in Hebrew; Israeli television is in Hebrew; and Hebrew continues to flourish in literature (Spolsky, 2014). Also, Hebrew is needed to participate in the military. Recruits are assumed to speak Hebrew, and Hebrew is the regular language of the army, air force, navy, and border police. While recruits are not tested for their Hebrew proficiency, Hebrew knowledge is actually a prerequisite for promotion or professional training. Israel is depicted as a bilingual culture, and the “people are not just bilingual but live in a speech community where there are defined rules for choosing a
language (Hary, 2009; Spolsky, 2014). Israeli citizens use language in accordance with their needs.

Hebrew did not become the dominant language in Israel overnight. There has been much effort to ensure that it thrives in Israel. For instance, all Israeli schools, at all levels of Jewish education (apart from Haredi schools who prefer Yiddish and programs for foreign students) teach in Hebrew only. Israel has established a policy of using Hebrew from pre-school level to university so this stance is not of the school's’ choice but has been decided by the government. Also, all levels of government business are conducted in Hebrew, and the police and law courts operate in Hebrew.

As history has shown, Hebrew has maintained a role in the Jewish religion and it is firmly established in the Israeli Jewish religious life as both a sacred language of worship and study, and a language of the public for religious purposes (i.e., sermons, lessons, and announcements (Spolsky, 2014). Communities like the Haredi community worship in Hebrew, though pronunciation differs in some cases. Most ultra-orthodox schools for girls teach them Yiddish, but teach it in Hebrew, reinforcing the importance of the language.

The secular and religious status of Hebrew is what reinforces its dominant position and its maintenance in Israel. Overall, Hebrew is not in danger in Israel, as it has successfully reversed its decline that occurred in the past and restored the language, which is used as a daily vernacular. However, English is needed by Israeli speakers to maintain ties with other countries. Also, Jews outside of Israel are often non-Hebrew speakers, which means that Hebrew cannot be used to connect to or maintain a connection with the non-Hebrew speaking Jewish Diaspora (Spolsky, 2014).
American Jews:

The Jewish Diaspora has resulted in the development of diverse linguistic and cultural practices; however, these rich additions to Judaism have ceased to be signifiers of being Jewish in America. Language practices and language beliefs are entrenched in the Jewish religion, which can be seen through the “distinctiveness in the ways in which languages and texts are recruited, employed, and regimented in religious and cultural practices” (Boyarin, 1993; Heilman, 1987; Avni, 2012), and yet, the Hebrew language appears to be absent in the lives of the majority of American Jews. Comparative diasporalogists question not how Jews have mattered to America but how Jews have mattered to Judaism, but come up empty handed (Wieseltier, 2011). Wieseltier (2011) notes that history has saved American Jews from the persecution that their ancestors faced and goes so far as to say that American Jews are “the luckiest Jews who have ever lived,” suggesting that this is the reason why they “are the spoiled brats of Jewish history” and “to a degree unprecedented in the history of our people, our own experience is discontinuous with the experiences of our ancestors: not only our ancient ancestors but also our recent ones.” American Jews do not possess the “natural knowledge of their (ancestors’) pains and pressures” and even when efforts are made to access said knowledge, they do so through “commemorations” which, in Wieseltier’s opinion, puts American Jewish culture in danger of transforming itself into an “essentially commemorative culture.” He views history as having saved American Jews but also as having distracted them. According to Hazony (2012), if the time hasn’t already come, it will in the near future, where an American Jew will be unable to “fully participate in Jewish cultural life without knowing Hebrew.” A large part of this is the inability for American Jews to participate in the “quickly growing wealth, population and global influence” of Israel. He also states that “American Jews have a great deal to contribute to
the Hebrew discourse and therefore to our collective Jewish future” but are locked out of the
Hebrew based culture. While it cannot be proven, Hazony believes that by learning Hebrew,
“American Jews just might find a great deal of what they’ve been looking for to help cure their
own inner culture malaise.”

“Jewish tradition has a lot to say about Hebrew;” it is a language that, “theologically and
culturally occupies a place of privilege and power in defining authentic Jewish practice and
traditions (Avni, 2008; Avni, 2012). However, the American Jews, in Wieseltier’s opinion, are
the “first great community in the history of our people that believes that it can receive, develop,
and perpetuate the Jewish tradition not in a Jewish language.” This was true in the 1900s, when
American Jews believed that being Jewish was innate and that schools did not need to instill an
education that imbued a Jewish identity (theology, culture, history, knowledge of the Hebrew
language, etc.) and probably could not; however, as Jews became integrated and assimilated in
American secular culture in the 20th century, this mentality shifted to the understanding that
formal and explicit Jewish education was needed (Ravni, 2012). Being Jewish was no longer a
“given” but a “decision” and resulted in the creation of formal Jewish education programs (Avni,
2012). The results of a study done in a non-Orthodox Jewish day school showed that “Hebrew
performed identity by serving as a medium in which Jewishness was made visible and socially
meaningful” (Avni, 2012). During a discussion with Avni, students in the study could express
their sense that they could not perceive how one could have a Jewish educational experience
without Hebrew. For these students, Hebrew was an authenticator, and overall, the study showed
that the role Hebrew played was significant, as it defined certain acts as Jewish (Avni, 2012).
Also, Avni notes that Hebrew enabled the students to make sense of their Jewishness, identities,
and practices. Avni’s results aligned with the thinking of Butler (1997) who proposed that social
identities are brought into being and sustained through repeated actions that individuals perform (Avni, 2012). The most recent census of Jewish Day schools (2013-2014) revealed that there were 802 schools and about 40 percent of the schools have less than 100 students. In total in 2013, there were 255,000 students in Jewish day schools at the elementary and secondary levels.

It is assumed that as many as 80% of American Jews would view Jewish day schools as “foreign territory” as “more American Jews, including many from traditional homes, move further away from any sense of a religious commitment” (Schick, 2014). This has resulted in disfavoring of a Jewish day school education by a large portion of the American Jewish population. However, Schick (2014) observes that it can be “demonstrate(d) statistically through the abundance of demographic studies that have been conducted over the past quarter century that day school education is far and away the greatest guarantor of Jewish continuity.” Also by “an overwhelming number of American Jews, including those who continue to identify as Jewish by religion, Jewish commitment is articulated in more secular terms” (Schik, 2014); this is demonstrated in the survey, *Chosen for What? Jewish Values in 2012* (Jones & Cox, 2012). The survey included a question regarding what qualities respondents found to be most important to Jewish identity. The results showed that 46 percent said a commitment to social equality was most important; 20 percent said support for Israel; 6 percent said cultural heritage/tradition; 17 percent said religious observance; 3 percent said general values; and 8 percent said other. It appears that social action is significantly more important to American Jews than the Jewish religion itself or cultural heritage/tradition. In fact, approximately 76 percent of American Jews agreed that synagogues should be engaged in public policy advocacy to address social problems (Jones, 2012). The participants appeared to have stronger opinions regarding political and social action than they did questions ranking the importance of Jewish holidays; 43 percent named
Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), 25 percent named Passover (exodus from Egypt), 10 percent named Hanukkah (Festival of Lights commemorating the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem after a successful revolt against the Seleucid Greeks), and 10 percent named Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) (Jones & Cox, 2012). These holidays are the best-known holidays to both Jews and non-Jews alike; however, there are many more Jewish holidays and there are surprising numbers of American Jews who do not know a good portion of them (Rich, 2011).

While American Jews’ reluctance to learn Hebrew and acquire a Jewish education seems to not be an intentional unwillingness but rather a change in values, Hazony (2012) questions if American Jews are truly are hesitant to learn Hebrew in order to preserve the “American-ness,” feeling that speaking English is the “American thing to do” and that, by promoting another language, one would be un-American. By promoting Hebrew, does the American Jewish community “run the risk of undermining all it has done to achieve its place in general society?” On the contrary, Hazony seems to believe that the “American Jewish community (is) finally secure enough to freely embrace its own heritage.” Despite his reasoning for why a Jewish American would avoid learning Hebrew, Hazony (2012) explicitly states that, “American Jews have to learn Hebrew” and acknowledges that many will be annoyed with this statement but wonders, “(I)s the suggestion that the study of Hebrew become a central priority to the American Jewish educational agenda really so outlandish?” He also states that in today’s world, there is “no good reason (that) all self-respecting American Jews shouldn’t gain a working knowledge of Hebrew.”

Benor (2009), on the other hand, believes that American Jews do speak a Jewish language, which she terms Jewish English. According to Benor (2009), “Jews of diverse
backgrounds speak and write English with distinctive features, specially (using) words from Hebrew and Yiddish.” However, the examples she presents are of individuals who are the most religiously active members of the Jewish community (i.e., Orthodox Jews, a Rabbi, and a religious school teacher). Moreover, she mentions that throughout history, Jews have written their language in Hebrew letters, but this does not occur in American Hebrew. In support of the inclusion of the Hebrew writing system, she shares that Hebrew is sometimes inserted in writing. The examples she provides are in the educational setting, in the orthodox community, and in stickers/posters that show political support (i.e., writing “Obama” or “Romney” in Hebrew letters). This also occurs on shirts with the names of sports teams, identifying the fan as a “learned” Jew, despite the fact that this does not mean that the owner of such souvenirs is literate in Hebrew. Also, the linguistic differences between American Jews and non-Jews are “minor;” secularization has resulted in the lessened the central role of Hebrew and Aramaic in American Jewish life (Benor, 2009). According to Benor, Jewish English is comparable to Judeo-Persian, Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Greek, and other Diaspora languages aside from the fact that it is not written in Hebrew but in the Roman alphabet. However, the inclusion of Hebrew and Yiddish words in the English of American Jews varies from person to person; nevertheless, no matter the size or degree, Jewish communities in America are continuing to practice linguistic distinctiveness.

Benor notes the existence of a Jewish language in the lives of some American Jews but she also expresses the knowledge that Hebrew no longer has a central role in American Jewish life, while it still performs a central role in the Jewish religion. Rudolph (2014) acknowledges this as well, stating that, Hebrew is “lost on the American community as a whole” and according to Wieseltier (2011), “an overwhelming majority, American Jews cannot read or speak or write
Hebrew, or Yiddish. This is genuinely shocking. American Jewry is quite literally unlettered.”

In summation, Wieseltier (2011) observes that, “the assumption of American Jewry that it can do without a Jewish language is an arrogance without precedent in Jewish history… and this illiteracy, I suggest, will leave American Judaism and American Jewishness forever crippled and scandalously thin… Without Hebrew, the Jewish tradition will not disappear entirely in America but most of it will certainly disappear.”
Chapter 3: *Methodology*

**Subjects:**

Research methods included a survey questionnaire (providing both qualitative and quantitative information) and interviews. A proctor, who is another congregant, distributed the surveys. The proctor told the survey respondents (participants) that the purpose of the survey was to determine if there was a relationship between the degree of Hebrew literacy and one’s ability to connect to Judaism as a religion and culture. Participants understood that there would be no compensation. They were told that responses were anonymous, there were no foreseeable risks, and that they could refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the survey at any time. The proctor encouraged them to be honest and stated that they could not use any devices; to do otherwise would invalidate the study and unfairly influence the conclusion. All of the 44 participants were members of Temple Beth Abraham in Westchester, New York; it is both a Conservative and Reform Synagogue. Participants were selected based on availability at the time that the proctor was given access to the synagogue to conduct the study. Any person who was younger than 18 years old was excluded from the study. The researcher was given permission to distribute the questionnaire and information was gathered during Women’s Circle, Adult Hebrew learners’ class, Movie Mavens and during religious school. The subject pool is reflective of the population of American Jews that are currently among the most involved in the Jewish community at Temple Beth Abraham.

The researcher individually met with and interviewed two religious figures of Temple Beth Abraham, Rabbi Holtz and Cantor Goldberg. The Rabbi and Cantor were chosen for the interviews, as they are the religious leaders to guide the members of Temple Beth Abraham. They guide the congregation in Jewish liturgy and in Jewish practices, both culturally and
religiously, and aim to help members discover (and understand) their Jewishness, as well as their own unique Jewish identities. Each of the clergy’s perspectives about the place Hebrew has in a Jew’s ability to connect to the religious is imperative to this study. Within both Jewish society and the greater non-Jewish society in which we live, rabbis and cantors are looked upon as experts; therefore, it is important to gain insight into the significance that Hebrew has/holds in each of the clergy’s own ability to connect with his or her Jewish identity.

**Instrumentation:**

The instruments used were a hard-copy survey questionnaire and a prepared list of interview questions for clergy interviews (see Appendix A). Both the survey and interview questions were submitted to and approved by Bridgewater State University’s Institutional Review Board. All of the surveys were submitted anonymously. The answers to the survey provided contained quantitative statistical/numerical data and specific Hebrew-language related questions with demonstrable knowledge responses. It collected, as well, qualitative data, looking into the thoughts and feelings of the respondents, dealing with personal relationships, both within a cultural and a religious community, and required the respondent to reflect on and judge his or her relationship to Judaism, to Hebrew, and to assess any connection between the two. The researcher aimed to understand the personal relationships that the interviewees have with their Jewish religion, community, and the role that Hebrew has had and currently has in their lives, and in the context of their broader Jewish identities. The researcher created the survey which included questions to obtain background information as well as information about each participant’s relationship to Judaism (both culturally and religiously), the Hebrew language (both verbal and written), and the role that Hebrew plays in his or her Jewish identity. Demographic
information was gathered; respondents were asked about gender and age; identification in terms of religious affiliation; whether born Jewish; whether mother and/or father was Jewish; how respondent was raised in terms of religion; and what religion respondent considers him- or herself. In terms of background information, these questions help the researcher to understand the past and current role that Judaism plays in the participants’ lives on a rudimentary level. The survey continues with questions to determine the level of their Jewish education, if any (i.e., Hebrew school and bar/bat mitzvah) as well as how strongly they feel connected to their Jewish religion and, separately, to Jewish culture. Participants were also asked if they speak Hebrew, can read Hebrew, and can read Hebrew and understand what they're reading in order to compare the ability to read Hebrew to the ability to comprehend. They were then asked if they thought that Jews should be able to speak Hebrew and/or that Jews should be literate in Hebrew. These questions allowed members of the Jewish community to demonstrate the nature of their Hebrew abilities as well as to share those individual feelings about the place that Hebrew should have in the Jewish community. The latter questions on the survey were created to illustrate the actual Hebrew ability of the participants. For instance, they were asked to identify certain Hebrew letters by name or, if they could not name a letter, to identify the sound that the letter (consonant) makes, if possible. Participants were also asked to identify the sounds created by each letter-vowel combination, demonstrating knowledge of Hebrew reading construct. Participants were also asked to translate three sentences: one a common prayer; the second, a less commonly heard prayer; and the third a simple conversational, not Biblical, sentence. These last questions were used to identify the comprehension ability of participants. They also served to allow for a comparison between how the participants self-identified their Hebrew reading and comprehension skills and their actual demonstrated ability.
The final questions were qualitative in nature, as they asked for the participants’ feelings and opinions. For instance, they were asked how they felt their ability to speak or not speak Hebrew has influence their Jewish identity; in what ways they saw the Hebrew language as a connector to other Jews around the world; and finally, to respond to the statement: “The Hebrew illiteracy of Jews disconnects them from fully experiencing their Judaism.” These questions were asked after participants identified their Hebrew language abilities and put those abilities to the test. The researcher believes the recent testing of their Hebrew literacy abilities might impact how they viewed the actual role that Hebrew plays (or does not play) in their Jewish experiences and that that would then be reflected in their responses. Finally, participants were asked to provide any reflections after having completed the survey.

The surveys were distributed in hardcopy format, and not online. This was done to maintain the integrity of the survey, preventing participants from asking for help or going online to research the Hebrew language-related questions.

The rabbi and cantor were each asked the same questions during separate interviews. They were asked if they felt that Jews of today are more or less connected to their Jewish religion, culture, and overall Jewish identity, and why; what each of their own relationships is with the Hebrew language, in terms of both the oral and written language, and how that relationship has influenced each of their connections to Judaism; how each learned the Hebrew language; and what steps each thinks we could take to increase Hebrew literacy. Lastly, they were asked whether or not such literacy would have a positive impact on a Jew’s relationship to his or her religion and Jewish identity. As previously mentioned, the rabbi and cantor are both prominent figures at the synagogue and are guides in the Jewish community and religious domain. They are also members of the synagogue and larger community. The answers
to these questions were intended to give the researcher insight into how they see the Jewish community and how Hebrew has played a role in that community and in each of their own lives. As they are the Jews that many others look up to and aspire to emulate, the place that Hebrew has played in each of their lives and the value they put on it is important to examine on its own but also in relation to one another as well as the larger Jewish community of Temple Beth Abraham. It also afforded the opportunity to compare their opinions with those found in contemporary literature and, of course, with the participants in this study.

**Procedures:**

Once the survey (Appendix, fig. 1) and interview questions (Appendix, fig 2) were approved by Bridgewater State University’s Institutional Review Board, the researcher corresponded with the rabbi and cantor at Temple Beth Abraham to schedule their interviews and to iron out the logistics of survey distribution. The researcher was given five time slots to conduct the survey. While the researcher brought the surveys to the location and remained in the building while the surveys were distributed, completed, and collected, she was not in the room, so as to ensure participants’ anonymity. The third party who distributed and proctored the survey is a teacher and board member of the synagogue. As the researcher was in the building at the time, she was available for any questions that participants might have asked, had the proctor, who had been briefed about the survey, been unable to answer. As it turned out, this was unnecessary; the participants had no questions that could not be answered by the proctor apart from, of course, specifics about the origin of the questionnaire. That was not divulged, regardless of participants’ curiosity.
Prior to taking the survey, participants were assured that all questionnaires were anonymous and that only the researchers would be reading them. They were also told that, if uncomfortable, they could stop taking the survey at any time and were under no obligation to finish. However, no one refused to take the survey once it was begun. The only questions left incomplete or unanswered were those that participants did not know how to answer. There were no inherent or foreseeable risks to the questionnaire. All of the participants were adults and willingly agreed to respond to the survey.

The rabbi’s and cantor’s interviews took place on different occasions. Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes. The interviews took place in their respective offices to ensure that they were in a familiar and comfortable environment. The interview questions that had been approved by the Institutional Review Board were used to structure the meeting. While both the rabbi and cantor discussed ideas and issues that somewhat departed from the initial questions, the interview remained on topic/task for the most part, and all of the approved questions were addressed.

**Statistical Analysis:**

The researcher read through all of the survey responses. These were, as previously mentioned, all initially in hardcopy form. She then created a SurveyMonkey with the same questions, worded precisely the same way as the questionnaire. Each respondent’s answers were input by hand, allowing the researcher to more thoroughly review each individual survey. More importantly, inputting them into an online web-based program allowed the researcher to collate and see various survey responses at one time. SurveyMonkey also compiles statistical data for multiple-choice questions, which the researcher was able to use for the background information
as well as the participants’ Hebrew language proficiency. Unfortunately, SurveyMonkey cannot provide statistical analysis of open-ended questions. This resulted in the creation of a second SurveyMonkey, which served to better analyze the data. None of the questions were changed but specific response choices were created for open-ended questions. The first question, asking about gender, was changed to two options: male and female, as the researcher was aware that those were the only two identified genders. The second question which asked for the participant’s age, was changed to age categories 20-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, 60-69, 70-69, 80-89. The responses for the Hebrew knowledge based questions, asking whether or not the participant could name the letter, letter-vowel combination, and translate the three given sentences were changed for data collection as well. Participants were essentially graded based on how correct their answers were when identifying letters, letter-vowel combination, and accuracy of translation. The last three questions (how they felt their ability to speak or not speak Hebrew has influence their Jewish identity; in what ways they saw the Hebrew language as a connector to other Jews around the world; and finally, their responses to the statement: “The Hebrew illiteracy of Jews disconnects them from fully experiencing their Judaism,”) were input into the new SurveyMonkey based on the judgment and interpretation of the researcher. For example, the last question, which asks for participants to respond to the statement were analyzed as: “Response suggested he/she does not agree,” Response suggested he/she somewhat agrees,” “Response suggested he/she agrees.” While these categories are more general, it was for the researcher’s purposes of understanding the data and did not discount the actual responses of the participants. A document was created by the researcher with all of the responses for each question in order to compare them to one another. The researcher also used the participants’ subjective responses on Hebrew language abilities; i.e., “Can you read Hebrew?” to compare to
the results of their actual Hebrew knowledge, as demonstrated by their answers to questions related to letter recognition and sound; letter-vowel (syllable) combinations; and recognition, identification, and ability to translate from the Hebrew into English. The researcher was able to thus determine if a participant’s perception about his or her Hebrew reading ability was in line with his or her demonstrated ability. The responses also provided statistical evidence indicating how many participants can and cannot speak Hebrew and how that compares with how strongly they feel about their Judaism.

The interviews were analyzed after the surveys were reviewed to see how differently or similarly the rabbi and cantor feel about this topic by comparing them both to one another as well as to the anonymous respondents of the questionnaire. The answers to each question in the interviews were typed up and cross-examined; each of their responses were compared and contrasted with one another and noted. The results were then compared with the survey responses in terms of how the respondents felt that the Hebrew language influenced their Jewish identity: how it might be a connector to the Jewish community, or a point of disconnection, preventing Jews from fully experiencing their Judaism.
Chapter 4: *Results*

**Survey Results:**

Out of the 44 survey participants, approximately 66 percent were female and 34 percent were male. While the survey was open to anyone 18 years old and above, there were only three participants between the ages of 20-29; this was the smallest sample aside from a single participant in the 80-89 age group. The largest participating demographic was in the 50-59 age group, followed by 40-49, 70-79, 60-69, and 30-39, respectively. Therefore, the information obtained is primarily representative of participants aged 40-79. Ninety-five percent of the participants identified themselves as being Jewish and of those, 90 percent were born into Jewish families and have experienced Judaism their whole lives. Approximately five percent are not Jewish by ancestry but consider themselves to be Jewish, and five percent converted to Judaism. While these percentages are small, they provide another lens to the issue at hand.

Sixty-eight percent of the participants attended Hebrew school, yet only approximately 52 percent had a bar or bat mitzvah. Being bar/bat mitzvah is a pivotal religious moment in a young Jew’s life, and the four or five years prior to this are when he or she comes into contact with the Hebrew language the most, in terms of reading but often not comprehending sacred texts, aside from translations. Fifty-four percent of the participants state that they can read Hebrew, which may be connected to the experience of a bar or bat mitzvah. However, as mentioned above, the participants are also of an older demographic and aside from adult bar/bat mitzvahs, these religious passages occur at age 12 or 13 (for girls) and 13 (for boys). What is most interesting is that, while 54 percent of participants stated that they can read Hebrew, in fact, only 17 percent can understand what they are reading; an overwhelming majority of 83 percent cannot. Interestingly enough, there was a 50-50 split between the participants’ feelings that Jews
should be literate in Hebrew or not. While only 17 percent are literate in Hebrew, half of the survey participants believe that Jews should be literate in the language. The survey results also show that participants do see the distinction between Hebrew literacy and oral proficiency. When the participants were asked if they feel that Jews should be able to speak Hebrew, 44 percent responded yes and 56 percent said no. While there is only a slight difference in the results of how the participants felt about speaking Hebrew versus Hebrew literacy, it does show that there is some understanding of not only the difference but also the value each has. Also, it should be noted that although 54 percent of the participants stated that they could read Hebrew, only 23 percent were able to identify all seven of the Hebrew letters on the survey. Twenty-three percent were able to identify 5-6 letters, five percent identified 3-4 letters, 16 percent could identify 1-2 letters and the majority of respondents, 34 percent, could not identify any letters. The survey allowed for participants to identify the sounds if they could not identify the letters. This ability was not factored into the numerical data collection but was included in the survey so that the researcher could see if there was some sound recognition. Participants were also asked to identify the sounds that were created by the ten consonant-vowel combinations given. The degree of ability was similar to previous questions regarding letter recognition. Again, 23 percent were able to identify all of the combinations. Eighteen percent identified 7-9 combinations, 11 percent identified 5-6 combinations, 16 percent identified 1-2 combinations, and 32 percent were unable to identify any combinations. The percentage of participants who stated that they could read was significantly higher than their demonstrated abilities showed. While the participants had said they could read Hebrew, they struggled with simple letter recognition as well as consonant-vowel combinations. Participants were also asked to translate three Hebrew phrases (See Appendix A). The first was a common prayer/blessing; the second was an uncommon
prayer/blessing; and the third was a regular sentence. As the researcher expected, the common prayer had the highest rate of accuracy, at 45 percent. Seven percent were unable to completely translate the sentence but understood the meaning, most often writing main parts of the prayer. Fourteen percent incorrectly translated the prayer. However, it should be noted that although these participants’ responses were incorrect, it was due to the fact that they either wrote the transliteration or simply identified what the prayer was called or the reason it is recited. This shows the lack of comprehension but also highlights that many Jews are able to transliterate either by word recognition (word/phrase recognition) or through memory of the prayer as a whole through frequent contact during services. In terms of the identification of what the prayer is called, this also shows that while some participants do not know exactly what they are saying/reading they do know the purpose of the prayer, demonstrating an understanding of Jewish practices. Lastly, an alarming 33 percent of the participants left the question blank; revealing that one of the most common prayers is unrecognizable to them. The second question that participants were asked to translate was the blessing for the tallit, which is the prayer shawl that is worn during morning prayers. Only 25 percent of the participants answered this question correctly; 14 percent made a few mistakes but understood the meaning; 16 percent were incorrect in their translation, illustrating the same information previously discussed, and 46 percent of the participants left the question blank. Two possibilities for significant differences between the abilities to translate these prayers are: this second prayer is less common and said only before putting on the tallit, so it is not heard aloud in services but rather said individually to oneself; and many Reform Jews do not even wear a tallit. The survey results showed that 52 percent of the participants had a bar or bat mitzvah and 48 percent did not. Nearly half of the participants have not had the religious experience that would have provided them with this prayer/knowledge.
However, roughly half of the participants, 23 to be exact, did have this experience. Out of these 23 participants, 11 of them correctly translated the prayer. Interestingly enough, about the same percentage of participants translated the regular Hebrew sentence correctly as the prayer for putting on the tallit. Twenty-six percent of the participants were correct in the translation of, “the boy wants to go/walk with his friend.” Nine percent made a few mistakes but understood the meaning. These responses ranged from “the boy wants to go,” “the boy wants _____ his friend,,” “the boy wants,” etc. Another nine percent incorrectly translated the sentence and 56 percent of the participants did not answer the question. As the Hebrew abilities shown through the survey questions suggest, the majority of participants (45%) provided responses that reflected notions that knowing Hebrew has not influenced their individual identities. A small seven percent of the participants’ responses suggested remorse in not knowing Hebrew, which supports the claim that Hebrew does influence identity. Fourteen percent provided responses that suggest that knowing degrees of Hebrew has greatly influenced their Jewish identity. Sixteen percent shared responses that suggest that not knowing Hebrew has somewhat influenced their identity, and five percent shared responses that suggest that Hebrew has no influence on identity whatsoever.

It is clear that the majority of participants do not view the lack of Hebrew proficiency as having an impact on their ability to feel Jewish, and yet, 62 percent of the participants do believe that Hebrew is a connector to other Jews in the world. In comparison to the previous question, this response illustrates that there is a discrepancy between being a Jew and being part of a wider Jewish community. This conflicts with the ideology that was frequently mentioned by participants, which is, that being and feeling Jewish is in large part a sense of belonging to the Jewish community. For example, it was felt that “in the modern world, Jews connect culturally
and socially despite their lack of Hebrew language skills.” This coincides with the feelings of
the cantor, who says, “You can be Jewish on the soccer field.” However, the rabbi does not
agree with this notion, as he feels that in the modern world, Jewish practices and ways of life are
no longer a daily ritual. Jews are now welcomed in, and are a part of, a larger community that is
not entirely comprised of Jews, as it once had been. The rabbi does not view this as a negative at
all but rather admits his displeasure in the fact that while embracing a world that was once not
available to the Jewish people, Jews seem to be leaving the rich religious and cultural
components of a truly Jewish life.

On the other hand, survey participants present ideas reflective of the belief that Hebrew is
not necessary for a full Jewish experience; “I am a reform American Jew, am proud of my
heritage and feel fully connected to other Jews and don’t speak a lick of Hebrew,” and they
“...believe religions should not have any identifiers other than philosophy.” Respondents also
felt that Yiddish was the language of their ancestors and that, if they were to learn a language to
connect to Jewish heritage and culture, it would be Yiddish. In fact, one respondent felt that
“Yiddish is more a connector than Hebrew will ever be.” There were also responses that present
conflicted ideologies, showing a level of interest in Hebrew literacy while in the same breath
stating that the lack of Hebrew doesn’t create a disconnect. For instance, “I do not feel a
disconnect(ion) because of a lack of Hebrew language because I am drawn to Judaism because of
the values and belief. But being able to read would enable me to be able to recite the prayers
better.” While this response does show that there’s a desire to know how to read Hebrew despite
the feeling that lack of Hebrew abilities has not disconnected them, it remains clear that this
interest is for in-group participation rather than for comprehension and/or spiritual connection.
Others supported this way of thought, sharing feelings such as, “I don’t feel I need to know what
all the Hebrew means. I care more about the singing and rituals.” As briefly mentioned above, the participants view Hebrew as a way to participate in services by way of reciting prayers but many have no interest in comprehending what they are saying. This could be due to the availability of translations that was mentioned by participants who point out that there are “many English translations of all Hebrew writing for the Torah…” and that “we live in an age of vast translations of almost every traditional text.”

There were, however, participants who saw Hebrew as what “keeps the religion going and ties people together,” positioning the language as “a very important connector. It’s our ancient language, our biblical language, it brings us back to our roots.” A participant who is fluent in Hebrew stated, “I feel that people who don’t know Hebrew are missing out on pieces of conversation that are so deep and meaningful and truly would define them as a Jewish person. When I explain a Hebrew word or phrase to a person who doesn’t know Hebrew and I go back to the *shoresh* (root) and talk about how one word leads into another and means ‘this’, there is always a sense of wonder and enlightenment and a desire to know more.” This emotion is evoked in another participant who shares that Hebrew has “powerfully” influenced her identity, and that she “love(s) the spiritual impact of understanding the Hebrew words in a spiritual context during prayer, holidays, and life-cycle events.” The connection made during prayer is mentioned by others who express Jews “should be able to follow along and understand the Torah”; “the ability to read along in Hebrew during services had a huge influence on my feeling of belonging” and that “reading Hebrew totally connects me to my Jewish identity.” The majority of participants did not feel Hebrew influenced their identity, but others feel that Jewish people “have one (common) language to communicate… (And) language is a big part of culture” and Hebrew “is a way to connect Jews as a people and not as a separate nation.” It is clear that
those who are literate in Hebrew view their ability as what fosters a strong connection to Judaism and their Jewish identity.

**Interviews:**

The interviews with the rabbi and cantor brought an interesting perspective to the issues at hand. When asked if either of them felt that the Jews of today are more or less connected to their Jewish religion, culture, and overall Jewish identity, both felt that Jews are less connected. However, the cantor believed that Jews are less connected in almost everything but identity because Jews are more comfortable today in saying out loud that they are Jewish because history has changed. This feeling of comfort is what enables Jews to be Jewish anywhere without needing to be religious. The rabbi also thinks that there is a disconnection but does not separate the religion from Jewish identity as the cantor had. The cantor mentions that Jewish ancestors needed the religion to be Jewish, but now you can be Jewish anywhere and experience a Jewish world through Jewish concerts, Jewish comedians, Jewish restaurants, etc., which did not exist 100 years ago; all that existed was the synagogue. The rabbi does not see the Jewish way of life this way. On a religious level, rituals are being less frequently done. For example, in the Jewish religion and tradition, Jewish boys are supposed to be circumcised, which takes place during a religious ceremony (a bris). Not only does the bris occur less frequently, but also the act of being circumcised is decreasing as well. The rabbi’s and cantor’s perspectives also differed on a social level. The rabbi feels that grandparents have more of a sense of being Jewish because “they lived in a Jewish world and saw life through a Jewish lens.” The rabbi believes that this is the result of how open society is to Jews and things that were once unwelcome to Jews are now available (i.e., jobs, interreligious marriages etc.). Judaism is now seen as a religion, like
Christianity, and not a way of life. In the past, one could be culturally Jewish because life revolved around Jewish things. The Jewish culture that appears to be available now, as mentioned above by the cantor, is not the Jewish culture that the rabbi had in mind.

The role of Hebrew in the lives of the rabbi and cantor also differ from one another. The cantor admits that she “surprisingly” does not speak Hebrew. She is not alone, as the rabbi does not either, at least not fluently. The cantor can read Hebrew fluently, as can the rabbi, but her comprehension is lacking compared to his. The cantor has a small list of vocabulary words that are recognizable to her, and will look up anything that she doesn’t know. The Rabbi admits that while he can’t read novels, he can “get by.” He also notes that he has a relationship with Jewish texts: “knowing Hebrew and using Hebrew is an integral part of my being Jewish.” He feels that language is a big piece of being Jewish. While the cantor stated that she could look up any words that she did not know, she does regret that she doesn’t speak Hebrew; “I regret not being able to think in Hebrew as I pray,” and that she can’t be connected to individual words and prayer as she is going through the prayer.

Regardless of the state of their current relationships with the Hebrew language, there was once a time where the cantor and the rabbi both could speak some Hebrew. The rabbi started Hebrew school at age eight but had not truly begun to learn Hebrew until he studied Hebrew in college and rabbinical school. The most influential experience in his Hebrew learning was living in Israel for a year. However, not being immersed in the language on a daily basis, as he had while living there, he wasn’t able to maintain much of the advancement that he had made in the language. The cantor learned a little Hebrew in Hebrew school but not a significant amount. When she first went to cantorial school, she knew only four Hebrew words. While in cantorial school, she relearned the alphabet and vowels. It wasn’t until she took Ulpan (intensive study of
Hebrew) that she had to really learn to read the language. Like the rabbi, the cantor spent some time in Israel. While there, she could speak broken Hebrew but, like the rabbi, she could not maintain it when she came back to America.

The rabbi and cantor were both asked what action could be taken to increase Hebrew literacy and if they believe this would have a potential positive impact on a Jew’s relationship to religion and identity. The rabbi felt that Hebrew literacy would “definitely connect them to Judaism as a people,” but the cantor did not completely agree. She did feel that it would connect Jews to the religion, but she doesn’t know if it would make a cultural connection. The cantor made a point to say that Hebrew is not a dying language but after some discussion, she came to the realization that more and more people in America do not know Hebrew as a language and that, for prayer, English is being used instead, so Hebrew can become a dying language as a result. She also reflected on her religious experience with Hebrew use: “Words are more scaffolding for my conversation with God than a real connected conversation with God.” In terms of steps taken to increase Hebrew literacy she does not think it should occur in high school and that the only way to learn Hebrew is if immersed in Hebrew every day. The rabbi’s response demonstrated that he takes an opposing stance on this issue. He thinks that day school education could help with increasing Hebrew literacy. Also, like the cantor, the rabbi believes that Hebrew immersion with extended stays in Israel could help as well. Both of their responses reflect the need for being immersed in the Hebrew language and, at best, immersed at a young age. Regardless of the degree of each of their Hebrew abilities as well as the level of how connected they feel to the language, it is clear that both the rabbi and cantor see value in Hebrew and wish they were proficient.
Limitations:

There were many limitations to this study. The study took place in a single Jewish community in a suburb outside of metropolitan New York and may not be representative of the entire Jewish community in New York State or, for that matter, of the entire United States. Another limitation was the selection process. Due to limited access, the researcher was unable to be more specific regarding participant requirements or qualifications. During specific, but limited, hours during the week and on Sundays, there is a Hebrew school. With parental permission, student participation in the survey could have given a different and interesting perspective of the issue at hand. However, because religious school meets infrequently (twice a week for students in grades 4-7, when they have learned, or are learning to read Hebrew; and one evening a week for students in grades 8-12), there was not enough time to distribute consent forms and, further, to conduct the survey without significant disruption to their classroom schedule and curriculum.

The age group of the actual respondents was also limiting. While the questionnaire was made available to anyone age 18 and above, most of the respondents ranged in age from 30-60. The results represent a certain age demographic of the Jewish community and their responses cannot speak for the entire community.

Another limitation was time. As the study took place in the researcher’s home synagogue in Westchester County, New York, she was unable to return to the temple for follow-up studies or to ask further questions. Time was also a factor on a larger scale. Given more time, the researcher would have undertaken the same research but at more than one location in New York and elsewhere. This would have allowed for a more thorough examination of the current role and place of Hebrew in the larger, multi-generational, community in America.
Chapter 5: Conclusions

Conclusions:

Rudolph (2014) refers to the Hebrew language as the lingua franca of the Jewish community, stating that Hebrew is often the only common language in the room of Jews from different parts of the world. He also observes that for the most part, native English speaking Jews are exempt from this. The lack of a unifying language (Hebrew) “creates a great gulf between people” leading to misunderstandings and frustrations that “ultimately lessens the fraternal bond” (Rudolph, 2014). In fact, Yemenites (Black Jews) were mistrusted when they first emigrated from Yemen to Israel in the 19th century, but gained their acceptance from the Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities because of “their high level of biblical scholarship (which) proved their deep connection to Judaism” (Spolsky, 2014). Hebrew is the “liturgical language of Judaism, thus connecting the Jewish people to their faith” and as the biblical language, it binds “the Jewish people to their history” (Rudolph, 2014). My research has led to the conclusion that the American Jews of today are disconnected from their Jewish identity as a result of their lack of literacy in Hebrew. It is not a necessity to be able to speak Hebrew in order to connect to the religion, which seems to be understood by the survey respondents. However, the Hebrew language has the profound ability to reconnect the Jews of the world in an anti-Diaspora. In fact, modern Hebrew was “meant to form the New Hebrew Man, an antithesis of the Diaspora Jew” and would lead to “an entirely unprecedented kind of Jewish life” (Saposnik, 2008; Rabkin, 2010). If Hebrew were to become a vernacular of the American Jews, it would not replace English as the everyday language of the Jewish community; however, it could be the “bulwark against assimilation” (Rudolph, 2014). Rudolph believes that Hebrew can be introduced into the American Jewish community through “appropriately encouraging Hebrew in a variety of formal
and informal settings, supporting Hebrew literature, film.” The writing system of modern Hebrew, however, is not easy to learn; “it takes several years to achieve proficiency in writing Modern Hebrew, with its complex grammatical vowel system” (Spolsky, 2014). Adding Hebrew as a vernacular of the Jews of America “will be no small task but (it is) nothing compared to the miraculous revival of Hebrew itself” (Rudolph, 2014).

The question remains: which language of Jews should be learned? Both Yiddish and Ladino were, and are, colloquial languages and Hebrew runs through both of them. In terms of Jewish heritage, Jews have two languages in their linguistic toolboxes, both of which play a role in understanding oneself as a Jew. In the ideal world, Jews would learn the colloquial language of their ancestors as well as Hebrew while speaking the dominant/local language. Also, one must consider that due to the continual migration of Jews throughout history, it is fair to assume that pinpointing the specific Jewish culture of one’s ancestors (i.e., Sephardic or Ashkenazi) isn’t clear-cut. While many Jews identify culturally with being either Ashkenazi or Sephardic, there is a possibility that their ancestry can be traced to both. In America’s Jewish community, Ashkenazi/Yiddish culture is dominant, yet unless one takes a DNA test to determine their ancestral background, they could very well be blindly ignoring a part of their Jewish identity, culturally and linguistically. As previously mentioned, the Hebrew language was once a spoken language but became a language used purely for literacy and religious purposes. Therefore, I believe that Jews should not learn the biblical language but should learn modern Hebrew, the reason being that learning biblical Hebrew would not allow Jews to use Hebrew as a vernaculat with the current Hebrew-speaking world. On the other hand, the ability to be fluent in modern Hebrew can allow for the understanding of Biblical Hebrew despite the grammatical differences. Modern Hebrew speakers may be unable to speak ancient/biblical Hebrew but they can
understand it. The Hebrew language is the religious language of the Jewish people, and yet, the results of my survey illustrate that most Jews are struggling to comprehend what they read in Hebrew (in both religious and secular texts). Modern Hebrew would remedy this inability.

While American Jews and Jews around the world “can’t be united by religion or geography or politics… (their) common ancient language opens unlimited doors of deepening, enriching and ultimately creating new, exciting expressions of Jewish life” (Hazony, 2012).

Spolsky (2014) claims that, “Jewish history has shown short periods of relative peace and calm and shorter periods of prosperity, broken by regular persecution and expulsion, each has modified the sociolinguistic ecology.” But this historical trend has come to an end and in effect Jews no longer have to be separated but can come together as a community, and with the Hebrew language, they can do so without having to physically relocate to Israel. Throughout history, the forced relocation of the Jewish people exposed them to new languages and cultures, which resulted in the need to compromise. When the Hebrew language first entered a multilingual society, it functioned in the Jewish community with Aramaic and Greek. There was no either/or mindset and mixtures (in terms of pronunciation due to demographics, domains, or functional setting); they were socially acceptable because it was a multilingual time. The United States is a multilingual society and we live in a multilingual world. However, the linguistic repertoire of the Jews in the United States is lacking in the fundamental languages that exemplify the distinctiveness of the Jewish community. It is my belief that Hebrew language is needed to rebuild the ties that once bonded the Jewish people in a cultural community that is more than just one of shared faith. Yiddish and Judeo-Spanish are Jewish languages and Jewish cultures that should not be endangered but should thrive within a larger Jewish community. In today’s world, Jews have the opportunity to be a community once again. However, there is a dichotomy
between both religious and cultural groups. In terms of religious sects, there are: Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Hasidic, etc. These “types” of Jews practice differently; however, they are all Jews. The differences and separate communities should not go beyond prayer. In terms of culture, the two dominant cultural groups are Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews. While Yiddish thrives in comparison to Judeo-Spanish and there are more numbers of Ashkenazi Jews than Sephardic, this does not mean that the culture of Sephardic Jews should wither away. With an incredibly complex past full of tragedies like expulsion, genocides, migrations, forced conversion, there should be an effort to strive for cohesiveness. Ruldolph (2014) states that a common language is a key component of how a people or nation are unified and the Jewish people are no exception as the Hebrew language is an “essential element of what constitutes the Jewish nation,” and Hebrew is an extremely powerful cultural force whose impact on the future of the Jewish world (including America) cannot be denied (Mintz, 1990). No matter what religious sect or cultural group one associates with, it is one’s responsibility, as a Jew, to ensure the survival of the Jewish people regardless of differences. In order to fully comprehend who he is as a Jew, one should know his people’s history and language; regardless of his ancestral migration, he is still a Jew. One survey participant viewed Hebrew as the Jewish language of the future, functioning as the Jewish languages of the past did; “like Yiddish, Judeo-Spanish or Judeo-Arabic, it is a way to connect Jews as a people and not as a separate nation.”

**Recommendations:**

While this study was successful in determining what the Hebrew status was in this particular Jewish community, it also revealed a plethora of questions and highlighted the need for potential future research. I recommend that future research be undertaken to determine what
the linguistic abilities of American Jews are in terms of other Jewish languages (i.e., Yiddish, Judeo-Spanish, and even Jewish-English). The research performed in this study highlighted what the Hebrew abilities of one Jewish community are and are not; however, it did not assess other Jewish cultures that, whether recognized by its own people, exist in America. I also suggest that research be conducted to determine the Jewish knowledge of American Jews, to determine if they are aware that not all of the Jews within the American Jewish community are Ashkenazi Jews; that there are different religious and cultural practices within these different Jewish cultures; and that there are more than just Yiddish and Hebrew in the conversion of Jewish languages. It also made clear that many Jews are uneducated about Jewish history, the history that they are a part of. Lastly, I recommend to those who teach speakers of other languages, that they educate students about heritage languages, and allow students to share their own heritage languages in the classroom so that they become prouder of and more curious about them. If students are not encouraged to embrace their heritage languages while immersed in American culture, we risk the annihilation of rich cultures and languages, leaving them in a situation like the American Jewish community, moving forward without even knowing what they’ve lost. We risk becoming a true melting pot, a watered down soup with indistinctive flavors.
References:


Appendices

Appendix A:
Thank you for volunteering to respond to this survey about the relationship between one's ability to read and understand Hebrew and one's connection with his or her Judaism. Although you may not personally benefit from responding, this study is important to society, as it will highlight the role that Hebrew is currently playing in the lives of Jews. There are no foreseeable risks, your responses are anonymous, and you may refuse to answer particular questions or withdraw from this survey at any time.

Questionnaire:

1. My gender is

____________________

2. How old are you?

____________________

3. Do you identify yourself as being Jewish by religion?
   - Yes
   - No
   - It's complicated (Please Explain)

4. Were you born into a Jewish family?
   - Yes, I was born into a Jewish family
   - Yes, but I do not consider myself Jewish
   - No, but I consider myself Jewish
   - No, but I converted
   - No, and I do not consider myself Jewish

5. My mother is/was Jewish?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Other (Please Explain)

6. My father is/was Jewish?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Other (Please Explain)
7. **I was raised:**
   - Reform
   - Conservative
   - Orthodox
   - Reconstruction
   - Not Jewish
   - Other (Please Explain)

8. **I consider myself:**
   - Reform
   - Conservative
   - Orthodox
   - Reconstruction
   - Not Jewish
   - Other (Please Explain)

9. **Have you attended Hebrew School?**
   - Yes
   - No

10. **Did you have a bar/bat mitzvah?**
    - Yes
    - No

11. **Please rate how connected you feel to your Jewish religion**
    
    Not at all (   ) A little (   ) Somewhat (   ) Very (   )

12. **Please rate how connected you feel to your Jewish culture**
    
    Not at all (   ) A little (   ) Somewhat (   ) Very (   )

13. **Do you speak Hebrew?**
    - Yes, fluently
    - Yes, I speak a little Hebrew
    - No, but I know some words and phrases
    - No, I do not speak Hebrew
14. Can you read Hebrew?
   ○ Yes
   ○ No

15. Can you read Hebrew and understand what you're reading?
   ○ Yes
   ○ No
   ○ Sometimes (Please Explain)

16. Do you think that Jews should be able to speak Hebrew?
   ○ Yes
   ○ No

17. Do you think that Jews should be literate in Hebrew?
   ○ Yes
   ○ No

18. Please identify the following letters by name. If you don’t know the name but can identify the sound, write that. (if you do not know the answer, leave it blank)

   א ( ) ק ( ) ע ( ) ר ( ) ל ( ) א
   ( ) ש ( ) צ ( ) א

19. Please identify the sounds created by each letter-vowel combination

   ב ( ) ש ( ) ע ( ) ג ( ) ד ( ) ה ( ) ל ( )aida
   ( ) ד ( ) ש ( ) מ ( ) ל ( ) או ( ) א ( ) ש

20. Please translate the following sentence

   שמע ישראלי יהוה אלהינו יהוה אדונינו.
21. Please translate the following sentence:
ברוך אתה יי, אלוהינו מלך העולם, אשר קדשנו במצואותיו וציו להשתפך בבריאת.

22. Please translate the following sentence:
מלמד רצה ללקט עמاءlemen שול.

23. How do you feel the ability to speak, or not speak Hebrew has influenced your Jewish identity?

24. In what ways do you see the Hebrew language as a connector to other Jews around the world?

25. Please respond to the following statement: “The Hebrew illiteracy of Jews disconnects them from fully experiencing their Judaism.”

26. Please provide any reflections you may have after completing this survey.
Appendix B:

**Interview Questions:**

1. Do you feel that Jews today are less or more connected to their Jewish religion, culture, and overall Jewish identity? And why?

2. What’s your relationship with the Hebrew language, both oral and written? How has that influenced your own connection to Judaism?

3. How did you learn the Hebrew language?

4. What steps do you think we could take to increase Hebrew literacy, and do you think this will have a positive impact on Jews’ relationship to their religion and Jewish identity?