

Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (1858 - 1922)

The Hebrew Language Expert

Biography

In biblical times, the Jewish people spoke an ancient form of Hebrew, now referred to as Biblical Hebrew. Hebrew was the Jewish language for speaking, reading, and writing at that time. Following the destruction of the Second Temple and the exile of the Jews from Israel in 70 CE, Hebrew gradually ceased to be a spoken language and Jews adopted the local languages of their host countries; however, it remained a sacred language used for prayer, religious study, and legal discussions.

Famous Jewish scholars, such as Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi, wrote the Mishna, the basis for Hebrew law, in Hebrew. Rashi and Ibn Ezra wrote biblical commentaries in Hebrew. Maimonides (Rambam) wrote his Mishneh Torah, a comprehensive Jewish legal code, in Hebrew. In daily life, Jews primarily spoke Aramaic, Ladino, or Yiddish, depending on where they lived.

During the Enlightenment (18th–19th centuries), language became an important marker of national identity. Early cultural Zionists, who sought to create a Jewish homeland with a distinct Jewish culture, recognized the need to revive Hebrew as a spoken language, unifying Jewish immigrants to Israel.

It was this idea that inspired Eliezer Ben-Yehuda. In 1881, he and his family moved to Ottoman Palestine, where he dedicated himself to creating a modern Hebrew language by inventing new Hebrew words and adapting familiar biblical Hebrew words. Ben-Yehuda insisted that his own family speak only Hebrew, and his children were thus the first native Hebrew speakers in 2000 years. He was so dedicated to Hebrew being the only language spoken in Israel that when he heard someone complaining in Yiddish, he reprimanded her for not speaking Hebrew.

Despite his efforts, Ben-Yehuda faced a lot of resistance as, to most Jews living in Palestine at the time, Hebrew was a sacred language, meant only for religious study and prayer. Members of the Jewish community were so angry with Ben-Yehuda that they reported him to the Ottoman authorities, accusing him of treason, and he was jailed for two weeks.

In 1890, Ben-Yehuda founded the Va'ad HaLashon, known today as the Academy of Hebrew Language, which is still responsible for developing and monitoring Hebrew vocabulary. In 1904, the Zionist Congress declared Hebrew the official language of the Zionist movement. In 1921, the British Mandate officially recognized Hebrew as the language of Jews living in Palestine. Finally, in 1948, with the establishment of the State of Israel, Hebrew was declared the country's official language. Modern Hebrew contains approximately 85,000 words. Ben-Yehuda began

creating the first comprehensive Hebrew dictionary in 1922, but died before it was completed in 1959.

Thanks to Eliezer Ben Yehuda's efforts, an ancient, nearly extinct language was revived into a vibrant, fully functional modern language spoken by millions today.

Framing

Learn how Eliezer Ben-Yehuda transformed Hebrew from an almost extinct language, used only in religious texts and prayers, to the vibrant national language of Israel. Assist Ben Yehuda on his mission and create your own Hebrew words. Play some Hebrew word games and learn new Hebrew words along the way.

Scope

This unit can be completed in 2 classes of 45 minutes each

- Introduction and Video: 5 minutes
- Activity #1 (Learn Hebrew Posters): 25 minutes
- Activity #2 (Create a Hebrew Word): 20 minutes
- Activity #3 (Hebrew Dominoes): 25 minutes

Preparing the Time Capsule

- Large color prints of the Learn Hebrew Posters for a gallery wall – optional
- Paper for students to create their new Hebrew word posters.

Printing

- Print the [Learn Hebrew Posters](#), preferably in color, and **NOT** double-sided.
- Print [Hebrew Domino](#) sets, preferably in color, or each domino set on a different colored paper. One set for each group.

Activity #1: Primary Sources: Learn Hebrew Posters

- Individually or in pairs, students chose two of the posters to complete the [Learn Hebrew Posters worksheet](#).
- Students share their comparisons, opinions, and the effectiveness of the posters.

Activity #2: Create a Hebrew Word

This activity is intended for students with a background in Hebrew and an understanding of its structure.

- Each student creates a new Hebrew word. This can be a new Hebrew word for an English word whose transliteration is used in Hebrew (see table below) or an entirely new Hebrew word.
- The student then designs a poster to teach everyone their new word, encouraging them to use it. The poster should include a picture, the word in Hebrew, and the word in English.
 - [Create a Hebrew Word](#) is an example of new Hebrew words and posters.

Here are some examples of Hebrew words that are a transliteration of the English word:

English	Hebrew	English	Hebrew	English	Hebrew
Chocolate	שוקולד	Jacket	ז'קט	Radio	רדיו
Course	קורס	Jeans	ג'ינס	Sweater	סוודר
Dinosaur	דינוזאור	Pancake	פנקייק	Telephone	טלפון
DJ	די-ג'יי	Penguin	פינגווין	Television	טלוויזיה
Encyclopedia	אנציקלופדיה	Popcorn	פופקורן	Vanilla	וניל
Internet	אינטרנט	Project	פרויקט	Volume	ווליום

Activity #3: Hebrew Dominoes

Before playing, we recommend reviewing the definitions of homophones and homographs, as well as reviewing the correct Hebrew-English word pairs in each category (correct pairings are listed in the appendix).

- Divide your class into groups of 3 to 5. Each group starts with a [set of dominoes](#) and rotates through both sets of dominoes (5 minutes each set).
- Each player, in turn, adds one domino card to the board to correctly match a Hebrew and an English word. If a player cannot play a domino card, they miss a turn. The winner of the game is the first player to finish all of their domino cards.
 - **Homophones (pink)** - match the Hebrew word with its correct English translation
 - **Homographs (green)** - match the Hebrew word with its correct English translation
- The correct answers for this activity can be found in the Appendix.

Appendix

Additional Links

- Guidelines (in Hebrew) for creating a new Hebrew word from the [Facebook page of האקדמיה ללשון העברית](#)
- The Librarians Blog: [Eliezer Ben Yehuda Writes From Prison](#)
- [Hebrew and English Lyrics](#) to the song *Eliezer Ben Yehuda*, by Yaron London
- Additional Hebrew-English word pairings that can be used for additional activities

False Cognates (words in 2 different languages that sound the same but have different meanings)					
English	Hebrew	English	Hebrew	English	Hebrew
Car	קר (cold)	Me	מי (who)	Who	הוא (he)
Door	דור (generation)	Or	אור (light)	Shy	שי (gift)
Ear	עיר (city)	See	שיא (best)	Ten	תן (give)
He	היא (she)	Alone	אלון (Oak Tree)	Key	כי (because)

Correct Activity Answers

- The correct answers for the Hebrew Domino Sets

Hebrew Homographs (words that are spelled the same way but have different meanings)					
קל	Easy	כף	Tablespoon	הודו	Turkey (bird)
	Lightweight		Palm of the hand		India
בול	Stamp	כיכר	Roundabout	פקק	Traffic Jam
	Exact		Loaf of bread		Cork
זכר	Male	אולם	Event hall	עץ	Tree
	He remembered		However		Wood
לקשקש	To scribble	שלום	Hello	להזמין	To order
	To ramble		Peace		To invite

Hebrew Homophones (words that sound the same but are spelled differently and have different meanings)							
To wait	לְחַכּוֹת		If	אִם		Brother	אָח
To imitate	לְחַקּוֹת		With	עִם		But	אֲרִי
No	לֹא		Tasty	טָעִים		Voice	קוֹל
To Him	לּוֹ		Cells	תְּאִים		All	כָּל
Light	אוֹר		I	אֲנִי		Palace	אַרְמוֹן
Skin	עוֹר		Poor	עָנִי		Chestnut	עֶרְמוֹן
Yes	כֵּן		Read	קָרָא		Idea	רְעִיוֹן
Nest	קֹו		Happened	קָרָה		Interview	רְאִיוֹן