

A Love Letter to the Ulpan: Ulpanim as Centres of Cultural Absorption and Exchange in Israel



Residents Of Dimona Study Hebrew After Work, 1955.

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For the past five months, I have been studying Hebrew four hours a day, five days a week with the Israeli Ministry of Education (*Misrad Hachinuch*) and the Jewish Agency for Israel in what is known as an *ulpan* in Israel. Although the main objective of ulpanim programs is to quickly and effectively teach new immigrants Hebrew, the nature of their participants and the realities of life in Israel make it so the ulpanim today function as critical centres of cultural absorption and exchange. Appreciating that this topic is a bit of a departure from the fine arts world, as a commentator on Israeli *culture* I feel it would be a mistake to overlook the importance of the ulpan, especially in light of the current discourse surrounding the funding of State run ulpanim in Israel.

Not surprisingly, ulpan classes tend to reflect broader immigration and demographic trends in Israel and around the world. When my mother studied in the ulpan at Hebrew

University in the 1980's, her classes were full of new immigrants from South America. In my class, the majority of my classmates are from Russia or Russian speaking countries, and many of them cite the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war as a determining factor in their decision to immigrate to Israel. Other countries such as Argentina, Brazil, and South Africa are also represented in my ulpan. I am the only Canadian. Some of my classmates have been in Israel for less than a year, while others have lived here for three or four years. At any time in the classroom, at least three languages can be heard, with Hebrew acting as the unifying tongue between us. How special and wonderful it is to hear sentences in Russian or Portuguese punctuated with Hebrew vocabulary!

Learning Hebrew in an ulpan connects me to my mother, who, before she ever attended Hebrew University, initially learned Hebrew on Kibbutz Gal-On. It is an interesting piece of trivia that her first Hebrew teacher was, in fact, the well-known Israeli singer Ruchama Raz. The ulpan also ties me and my classmates to the history of the State of Israel. A uniquely Israeli institution, the ulpan model has been a foundational part of Israel's history since the first ulpan opened in 1949, and every immigrant who studies in the ulpan today is able to feel a part of Israel's history by way of participating in this learning tradition.

The full spectrum of Judaism also finds representation in my ulpan class. Expressions of religiosity run the gamut; the class includes converts to Judaism, Orthodox Jews, Reform Jews, secular Jews, and everything in between. Regardless of where exactly one fits in this Jewish 'mosaic', we have all had our understanding and appreciation of Judaism enriched by the ulpan curriculum. My class has marked and celebrated every Jewish holiday since September, and we frequently study texts and vocabulary connected to Jewish history and culture. Judaism is present in details large and small; for example, every morning my teacher, Michal, will write the day's date according to both the Hebrew and secular calendars.

When asked about what helps immigrants to Israel feel "Israeli" and integrated into Israeli culture, many point to the IDF and army service as one of the best State supported assimilation and cultural models. For immigrants too old or unable to participate in military service, however, the ulpan offers a valuable model of its own. Although not brought together by military rank and experiences, there is no question that in the ulpan

immigrants feel a sense of camaraderie as they battle their way through the Hebrew alphabet and irregular verb conjugation.

A special element of the ulpan which perhaps distinguishes it from the IDF's model of integration is the cross-cultural appreciation it facilitates. Undoubtedly, I am finishing the ulpan feeling more Israeli than I did five months ago. However, I am also graduating the ulpan with a deeper understanding of, and appreciation for my classmates' cultures which they have shared with me over the semester. From celebrating Argentina's World Cup win, to presenting all of our cultures on Yom Aliyah, to even just the simple act of bringing cultural snacks every day to share with classmates, I have learned so much about places and peoples which, quite frankly, I can say I was quite ignorant of before. This is not just limited to secular cultural information. In discussions we have had about how we each celebrate Jewish holidays and culture in the Diaspora, I also feel that as a Jew my worldview and cultural understanding of Judaism has been wonderfully expanded. This cultural exchange is also quintessentially Israeli, a reflection of a country which has been shaped and influenced at every level by the many cultures of her immigrants.

Of course, as with any education, student success is often reliant on the teacher. My Hebrew teacher Michal is an example to all Hebrew teachers in the State of Israel. She, like other ulpan teachers, is a woman who wears many 'hats': she is a language teacher, yes, but she is also a counselor, an accountant, a news anchor, and a cultural consultant. Michal shows up to class every day with a smile on her face to teach us Hebrew. Over the past five months, she has made a special effort to celebrate every students' birthday with homemade cakes and flower crowns, making each and every one of us feel special. I cannot overstate the importance of these extra-curricular moments and experiences for new immigrants, especially for immigrants who, like myself, have no immediate family in Israel. Michal has helped us with everything from paying electricity bills to translating election information, and she can often be found helping students during her break. In her role as ulpan teacher, she has acted as a guide to Israeli culture, sharing with us Israeli music by artists such as Ofra Haza and Arik Einstein, introducing us to classic Israeli films such as *Sallah Shabati*, and starting each day with a discussion of current news stories. Michal's dedication to teaching Hebrew, but, more broadly, her dedication to ensuring immigrants succeed and feel at home in Israel, is what prompted me to title this article as a *love letter* to the ulpan. I

feel as though I have gained an extensive international family, and it is all thanks to Michal and the love she has for her students and teaching Hebrew.

Language acquisition is critical to successful integration into any society at all levels. Israel is no different in this regard. At present, Israel faces a severe shortage of ulpan availability for new immigrants, as a result of compounding issues of high immigration levels and ever decreasing numbers of ulpan teachers due to low salaries. There are reports of thousands of immigrants waiting over six months for spots in State-run ulpanim.¹ Although the current government has offered vouchers to private ulpanim as a temporary solution, these programs are widely viewed as less effective compared to the State ones. I hope the government is able to find a solution to this problem which will respect the needs of both ulpan teachers and new immigrants. As hopefully made clear by my experience, the government ulpanim offer new immigrants education which goes far beyond Hebrew learning – they offer an irreplaceable model of cultural absorption and exchange that is critical to immigrant success in the State of Israel.

Please note: In last month's article, "Drorit Dror: Never-ending Stories of Moments, Memories, and Myths", there are two errors. Drorit Dror's full name is Drorit Amitai-Dror, and her mentor's name is Bruria Hasner. I apologize for the errors.

¹ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/mks-demand-solutions-to-hebrew-teacher-shortage-vexing-new-immigrants/>