

**Peoplehood Papers 33**

September 2023

**The Relations Between  
Peoplehood Education and  
Israel Education**



## Linguistic Hospitality as an Opportunity to Practice the Skills of Peoplehood

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Jewish peoplehood is an encounter with Jewish diversity. It involves balancing our similarities and our differences, attentiveness to the needs of the other, and most significantly, taking ownership of one's perspective by being open to broadening that perspective and looking at the world through the eyes of other Jews.

In cross-cultural Jewish encounters, mutual understanding is a primary goal that is notoriously difficult to achieve, particularly when facing language barriers. Understanding is not only about linguistic comprehension; it's about appreciating others. Through twenty-six years of bringing together diverse groups of young Jews from North America and Israel as part of The Bronfman Fellowship, we have learned that careful attention to translation is the most important educational tool for enhancing cross-cultural empathy, patience, and curiosity – skills that are essential to strengthening the ties of Jewish peoplehood.

Translation can make possible a successful encounter between Jews who speak different languages (and sometimes, even the same language). The philosopher Paul Ricoeur wrote that translation is “linguistic hospitality, the act of inhabiting the word of the Other, paralleled by the act of receiving the word of the Other into one's own home, one's own dwelling.”<sup>1</sup> We welcome the stranger into our home, but we acknowledge that something is lost, and the other's meaning can never be ours. To hope that someone will completely understand you is, in part, to wish for that person to be exactly like you; perfect translation is never possible. When one accepts translation, one must learn to let go of the perfect encounter, mourn that dream, and face the other's otherness as a source of meaning.

In 1998, we launched our joint seminars. These multi-day seminars take place twice a year, once in Israel and once in America. English was initially the *lingua franca* of these encounters, since most Israelis knew some English. The Israeli cohort was less diverse because language requirements often limited Fellowship eligibility. Even Israeli Fellows

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1 Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation*, trans. Eileen Brennan (New York: Routledge, 2006), 10.

with good English skills could not always follow the high level of discussion and simplified their comments to enhance comprehensibility. The North American Fellows also missed out -- without Hebrew in the communal discourse, they did not experience the healthy frustration that comes from hearing words one cannot immediately understand. Like poet Chaim Nachman Bialik wrote, in this sense, the encounter was more akin to "kissing through a veil," limited and unsatisfying for all involved.

Linguistic hospitality acknowledges and responds to the anxieties people bring into a multilingual environment. Fellows with limited to no knowledge of another language worry that the language barrier will strip them of their humor and intelligence, reducing their ability to make friends. Lacking a voice can be extremely frustrating. It's all too easy for individuals from the "other" country to mistake someone's silence for agreement with those from the same country, thus adding to the potential trap of a joint encounter serving to reinforce stereotypes.

As the program has evolved, the focus on language as both a tool and a philosophical concept has too. Currently we explore the themes of language and identity with each group separately, prior to and throughout the joint encounter. Fellows study Jewish texts, participate in experiences, and hear from speakers that help them explore language -- including non-verbal forms of expression. Fellows consider the relationship between our values and the words we choose, and how power relations play out through language. They also discuss the cultural capital associated with different Jewish languages and how that relates to notions of authenticity.

On the first day of the Context Seminar, we establish a set of linguistic norms and commitments:

**Everything shared in group settings is translated into both English and Hebrew.** This takes more time, and it can sometimes be experienced as repetition. This translation process means that one's own language and the other's language are always present, and that everyone has the potential to understand and be understood. Perhaps not completely, and not always in exactly the way they wanted -- but this, as Ricoeur suggested, is an essential part of the process. In fact, the presence of two languages is rooted deep in Jewish tradition: we are obligated to read the Torah "shnayim mikra ve-echad targum" (*lit.* twice scripture and once translation). In Talmudic times, readings from the Torah in synagogues were translated verse-by-verse into the spoken language of the time, Aramaic. Today there are still Jewish communities that maintain this tradition. Extending this philosophy within our contemporary seminars recognizes that sometimes you can understand a text -- or yourself -- better when you hear things in another language, even if you do not speak that language.

**Everyone is welcome to speak the language they want.** A Fellow can make full use of the nuances of their language and know that others will do their best to translate for them, or they can take a chance and speak in the other language. Staff are crucial at modeling, offering announcements in their non-native language, for example. All small sessions are co-led by an American and an Israeli staff member, who translate for one another, getting confirmation from their colleague (and from the group) that the translation did their partner linguistic “justice.” Modeling collaboration facilitates trust. Participants see the process of understanding, and of peoplehood, as an iterative process that requires multiple steps of checking for meaning.

**Translation is a communal endeavor. It is crucial to invite all members to strive towards the creation of a shared process of translation in which neither English nor Hebrew takes precedence, and which mirrors the equality we seek to inculcate between Jews in the two largest centers of Jewish life. Translation encourages young Israelis and North Americans to take responsibility for clarifying and distinguishing the nuance that underpins each individual's perspective.**

Over the years, we have tried a variety of methods of translation. Working with professional simultaneous translators sped up the pace of comprehension and enabled guest speakers to deliver remarks in their native language. Hiring bilingual translators to join small-group discussions reduced the burden on staff to both facilitate and translate, but limited relationship-building between participants. Speakers and listeners tended to direct their eye contact to the translator, paying less attention to body language and tone. Even Fellows with strong second language skills took fewer linguistic risks. Eventually we moved away from professionals, choosing to use a combination of staff-and-group-led translation.

From a peoplehood perspective, the use of formal translators sent a message that the divide was vast and could never be bridged, that the considerable effort of translation was something to be handled by “professionals.” This technique dampened curiosity and did not teach the value of patience.

Communal translation works best in multi-day gatherings where there is time to build norms of discourse and trust. All staff members need at least some facility with the “other” language which can sometimes limit the diversity of the team. The group also needs to include a range of language skills. Despite the effort directed at bringing in all voices, there still remains the danger of some voices going unheard or taking an outsized role. This, too, mirrors the power struggles inherent in Jewish peoplehood discourse where dominant narratives can limit creativity to imagine a new set of shared Jewish stories.

The writer Yossi Klein Halevi frames Jewish cross-cultural encounters as an opportunity to create something new together. Halevi describes the ancient Jewish tradition of bridging and birthing new languages like Yiddish, Ladino, and Judeo-Arabic. Today, the encounter between the two largest Jewish communities in Hebrew and English can also cultivate a new Jewish language. Even without speaking one another's actual languages, the mindset of linguistic hospitality and the tool of translation can make visible additional dimensions of Jewish diversity, forging an understanding and sense of collective responsibility grounded in mutualism, respect, and empathy – attitudes that are essential for peoplehood to thrive.

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