**Why Study Hebrew?**

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[CHOMRONG VILLAGE, Nepal – 2011](http://www.panoramio.com/photo/12286151) – I was sitting in the courtyard of Chomrong Cottage, a charming lodge and the second stop of a 10-day trek into the Annapurna mountain range.

The towering snow-capped Himalayan peaks in the distance guarded the gateway to our final destination, a valley at the foot of the 10th tallest peak in the world, [Annapurna I](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annapurna), and her seven surrounding sister peaks. Deedee, our hostess for the night, was in the kitchen preparing dinner.

With an hour or two to spare, I engaged our guide and porter in the task of teaching me the [Nepali Sanskrit alphabet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanskrit). They carefully inscribed the 36 letters into my notebook. When I learned that each letter also had a corresponding half-letter form and that there are an additional 12 vowels, I realized this lesson would have to continue into the days to come.

After several tries, I knew from the smiles on my teachers’ faces that I had finally managed to legibly write namaste, the universal Nepali greeting. Satisfied for the moment, I thanked them and expressed the joy it is to learn other languages. I mentioned that I was also learning Hebrew. At that, my guide pointed over my shoulder and said, “You should talk to him.” I glanced over and was surprised to see a young man sitting about 10 feet away, his feet propped up on the courtyard wall, a book in his hands.

I had overheard him and his trekking companion earlier in the day negotiating for a room, but I had been so engrossed in my Sanskrit lesson that I had not sensed him coming out to enjoy an evening of reading next to us.

At the mention of [Hebrew](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hebrew_language), he glanced up. He acknowledged being from Israel, a student attending the university. With a quizzical expression he asked, “Why are you interested in Hebrew? It’s not a very practical language, outside of Israel at least. Where would you use it?” He had no idea what a loaded question that was.

I led off with a simple, seemingly safe, response, “Well, I want to read the Old Testament in Hebrew, the Tanakh.” I could tell by the look on his face that he was less than impressed. I glanced down at the book he held in his hands and understood why—Ayn Rand’s The Fountainhead. I soon learned that he was enchanted with her philosophy of rationalism and logic. That became the catalyst to a very interesting conversation about the merits and limitations of that epistemology…but that is a topic for another time.

The call to dinner interrupted our discussion before I could return the conversation to the virtues of studying Hebrew. I had so much more I wanted to discuss with him, but unfortunately the opportunity was lost.

So, to my new Israeli friend, Gabi, (and any others who may be interested) please…allow me to continue.
As a general rule, that question is posed with the same quizzical look that Gabi had on his face. That same question, but from the other end, could just as well be asked of Monticello College. Why teach Hebrew? Why would a fledgling liberal arts college located in the [Blue Mountains](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abajo_Mountains) of southeastern Utah claim Hebrew as its central classical language?

Surely it must be more than a marketing gimmick. Few people know to even ask what the central language of an institution of higher learning is; even fewer would expect Hebrew to be one of the possibilities.

The central language defines the educational mores, the environment, and the curriculum; and influences the values and goals of an institution. Greek is the language of knowledge. Schools that emphasize the Greek classics (Plato, Aristotle, Homer, Thucydides, etc.) in their curriculum primarily train “thinkers”—scholars, philosophers, and academics.

Latin, on the other hand, is the language of power, instructing from the medieval classics (Plutarch, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Augustine, etc.) in the nuances of business, government, and law. Of course, the central language of most universities today, whether by deliberate choice or by default, is the language of the job market: pragmatism. Students are primarily trained in a practical set of skills to fashion them into a marketable commodity for employers.

So, if not of knowledge, power, or employment…of what is the language of Hebrew?

I answer the question in part with another question: What is an education, and what is its purpose?

**Hebrew Complements Greek**

Must an education be limited to completing a checklist of courses in order to receive a certificate of conformance to present as evidence to a prospective employer of having met a minimum standard of proficiency in practical, productive job skills?

Is an education limited to passing through a “liberal arts” program at a name brand institution in order to gain entrance into the power circles standing guard and carefully bestowing limited access to positions of power in government, business, and law?

Or is an education limited to the fine art of intellect-building, culling knowledge from the great ideas of the past and the present, simply for the sake of knowledge?

What is an education, and what is its purpose?

The study of languages offers a portal into the exploration of at least a partial answer to such a worthy question. Learning begins with an awakening to something previously unknown—a glimpse of the view from a different vantage point—an expanded perception of the world.

Right learning takes our perceived reality a step closer to actuality. The true language of math trains our minds to recognize patterns, think in the abstract, and logically reason.

The true language of science increases our capacities to observe, to measure, to think in the concrete, and to make and test theories. The true language of art teaches us to both appreciate and express beauty, symmetry, elegance, emotion, and feeling.

The study of foreign languages introduces us to human cultures and worldviews distinct from our own, allows us to recapture nuances once lost in translation, and offers a gesture of respect to others with whom we want to seek common ground and understanding.

A personal worldview may be likened to peering through a monocle. Depending on the quality of the lens, the view can be clear and magnified or in places it may be somewhat clouded and distorted. With only a single eye, the view is inherently limited in scope and depth.

Learning another language is much like adding another monocle, thus creating binocular vision. It adds another vantage point that in many ways complements, enriches, and completes the original picture.

Of course, in another sense, the new monocle may also compete to be fitted to the dominant eye. The challenger may present alternative values and goals that, by definition, are incompatible with the status quo. A hearing will be demanded and a choice must be made.

The virtue of Hebrew is that it offers both a completing and a competing lens to consider.

**Completing Features**

I live in a western world that is highly influenced by our [Greek and Roman heritage](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Byzantine_Greeks). The Greeks teach me the static nature of things at rest. Things simply are. They are fixed and inflexible, ordered, calculated, reasoned, planned, and rational. Ideally, life is peaceful and harmonious; it is meant to be lived in moderation—a virtuous compromise centered between the vices of the extreme.

The Hebrews offer me a distinct, yet complementary, alternative. Theirs is a verb-oriented language. The foundation of nearly all ancient Hebrew words is a three-letter root whose basic meaning expresses movement or activity.

Other letters are then added as prefixes, infixes, and suffixes to derive the other grammatical forms: verb conjugations, nouns, adjectives, etc. Thus, the very construction of the Hebrew language emphasizes the dynamic and active nature of things. They are changeable and in motion.

Take, for example, a mountain, a decidedly static object to my Greek eye. Point at it. Declare it a noun. “But wait…” interrupts the Hebrew. “Do you see ‘that which looms’ in the distance?” The primitive root for mountain is a verb meaning to rise up or loom.

In the same sense, a door is that which opens wide. Mountain and door—that which looms up and that which opens. The nuance is dynamic, masterful, and energetic. In contrast to the peaceful and harmonious, life is vigorous, passionate, and explosive. Life in all its light, color, voice, sound, tone, smell, and taste is meant to be experienced, not spectated.

To my Greek mind, appearance holds highest priority. It favors an objective, outsider’s point-of-view: observe beauty as displayed in the ideal form and symbol. Consider, for example, the golden ratio and other optical refinements in the Parthenon and the vast architecture, sculptures, and paintings of Ancient Greece.

Hebrew, in contrast, teaches me to value impression, a subjective, experiencing, insider’s perspective: feel beauty as revealed in function—that which fulfills it purpose—that which lives in excitement and rhythm. Rather than the architecture, the sculpture, or the painting, see the transformation of the stone, the clay, and the canvas in the master’s hand.

How is [Noah’s ark](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noah%27s_Ark) to be constructed? Of what is the [Tabernacle](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tabernacle) made? Dimensions and materials are defined, but a visual image of these edifices does not come easily to mind. Compare that to the much more visually descriptive cave in [Plato’s allegory](http://webspace.ship.edu/cgboer/platoscave.html), or to the gods of [Homer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homer) and [Hesiod](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hesiod).

The Greeks argue that the power of the mind is measured in its capacity to think logically, to gather and synthesize, and to reason its way to truth. Points, lines, and planes offer visual and spatial elements for working Euclid’s geometry. Aristotle’s logic systematically reasons to a right-minded conclusion.

To know for the Greek is to see what is. “Seek learning” in order to furnish a proof.

Hebrew, on the other hand, proposes to me that the power of the mind be measured in its capacity for psychological understanding, its ability to analyze by dismembering and separating. Experience, rather than observation, is the primary path to knowing.

Truth is steady, faithful, sure, constant, trustworthy, and certain; and that certainty comes through recollection. Time, rather than being expressed spatially—timeline, point in time, from time to time—is rhythmic. It has a beginning and an end; but it alternates between light and darkness, warmth and cold. Again, this notion is carried in the very construction of the language.

In English, verb tenses are related to time: past, present, and future. “He spoke. He speaks. He will speak.” In Hebrew, verb tenses are related to action. The action is either complete or incomplete. “The speaking is finished. The speaking is not finished.” To know for the Hebrew is to hear and feel what becomes. “Seek learning” to find a point.

The challenge before me is to somehow attend equally to both of these heritages; to find a synthesis between what at first glance appears to be diametrically opposed biases—similar to resolving the dual-nature of light, which at times demonstrates a wave-like structure and at other times a particle nature. Studying Hebrew is another monocle to awaken my awareness to other possibilities, offering a distinct, but complementary, vantage point—a more accurate perception and an expanded worldview.

**Competing Features**

Now, consider possible ways in which Hebrew will compete with the Greek heritage, and vie for the dominant eye. For some things there cannot be two masters; one, and only one, must be granted superiority.

In [*The Republic*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Republic_%28Plato%29), Plato identified three classes of citizens in his ideal society:

1) the merchants and artisans, or the makers of the marketplace,

2) the soldiers and defenders of the civil order, or the doers of the community, and

3) the guardians and philosopher-kings, or the elite knowers, the final class held in highest esteem.

This implicit and pervasive ideal permeates our modern schooling. Bestowing of awards, giving scholastic grades, and granting degrees celebrate the accomplished knowers; while the makers are similarly rewarded in the marketplace for bottom-line results and net profits. Pragmatism reigns supreme.

Well, what of the doers—those who serve and protect?

Knowing, making, and doing are important in every society and culture. It may be tempting to declare them all of equal importance, but not so. Education is vastly different for one who emphasizes knowing or making, rather than doing. Knowers and makers seek to build monuments. Doers seek to build community.

There is a story timelessly fostered in human culture: Man is born, nurtured, and raised in a safe place…his home, his place of origin, his point of departure. As man grows the time eventually arrives when he must leave his home and venture out to make his way in the world, to embark on a journey.

He seeks a gift with the intent to find it and bring it back home to share with others. The journey is risky. The unknown must be faced and fear must be conquered. Timely help arrives along the way, the gift is acquired, and the return trip is endured.

He returns a changed man. This is an adventure, an adventure in learning and refining. To miss the journey is to live a life unfulfilled.

This quest narrative is pervasive. It is easily recognized in almost any culture from primitives to our “modern” societies. However, there are two very different versions of this story. One version is clearly Greek. It is the path of the hero’s journey. The other is Hebrew.

It communicates a completely different set of values. The Hebrew is a pilgrim, a stranger in a strange land seeking to find the way home. The Greek hero is embodied in the image of the lonely individual. Odysseus, Promethius, and Achilles come to mind.

The hero’s journey is generally characterized by reckless courage, cleverness, and individual ability, with a defiant attitude—a chip on the shoulder. Success lies in finding a way against all odds to gain the prize and return as victor. Requiring no stretch of the imagination, this pattern is clearly seen in our modern race to self-fulfillment.

Any barriers standing in the way of our achieving personal power, recognition, and wealth must be stepped on, blasted through, around or over…at any cost. Intellect, heroism, competition, and perfection are all part of the game.

The Hebrew path, in contrast, is a search for and a response to a calling—a personal mission of service. The pilgrim’s journey is characterized by very different qualities than those exhibited by the classic hero. The dominant paradigm is not the lonely, masculine hero, but marriage—man and woman standing side by side.

Think of Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel: two people working together to somehow survive the journey and pass the test.

Marriage as a metaphor is repeatedly used by the prophets to convey God’s love and concern for his people. He loves them passionately, is jealous of and hurt by them, yet always faithful to the covenant.

Mission, submission, and commission are keywords. The strength to endure the journey is found in voluntarily submitting to God and relying on His timely directions. Power, glory, and recognition are deferred.

Contribution, rather than achievement is the desired end; rendering humble service, rather than public recognition. These two different views of the human journey foster very different forms of education.

They foster different values and create different types of societies.

Why study Hebrew?

The 22 characters of the Hebrew alphabet are consonants. There are no vowels, per se. Vowel sounds are indicated by small marks above and below the text to aid in pronunciation.

Unlike English, which is a very literal language, each character can be thought of as having multiple dimensions.

Each character not only has a corresponding sound (b, g, d, etc.), it is also a pictograph (ox, house, door, etc.), has a numerical equivalent (1, 20, 100, etc.), and an associated set of mystic symbols from the Kabbalic tradition.

This means that the same passage in Torah can be read and interpreted differently, according to which dimension of the character is applied. It could be read literally one time and then read as a series of numbers the next.

Some Jewish traditions have spent hundreds of years manipulating characters through gemetria, notarikon, and temurah, seeking for esoteric meanings in the text.

Unlike English, one can rearrange the characters in a Hebrew word and still end up with a sensible word or phrase.

Granted, this practice is somewhat controversial. Are there really hidden truths to be found in the scrambling and unscrambling of letters? Maybe. Maybe not.

The real value of the exercise is to train the mind to read between the lines…to seek meaning beyond the literal reading of a classic work. What are the implicit assumptions?

What general principles can be extracted? Are there answers to contemporary challenges lying in wait, ready to be discovered and applied?

With practice, one can begin to see lessons in forms of free government in Genesis, in just and equitable law in Exodus, in prosperity economics in Leviticus, in administration and leadership in Numbers, and in family, community, and local government in Deuteronomy.

I study Hebrew to remember.

Remember to experience life, not just observe its passing.

Remember the beauty that lies beyond appearance.

Remember humility, while striving for nobility.

Remember to hear and feel in the quest to see the truth.

Remember to be, in the journey to become.

Remember to do rightly, while seeking to know rightly.

I study Hebrew because it demands I make a choice:

1) What is the primary end, or purpose, of my education: to know, to make, or to do?

2) Which path will I follow, that of the hero or that of the pilgrim?

Allow me to conclude by returning to Monticello College. Why teach Hebrew? If Greek is the language of knowledge and Latin is the language of power, of what is the language of Hebrew?

Preserved in Exodus is the great liberation epic, the story of a people freed from the bonds of slavery. In the backlash of the revolution against Britain, Hebrew was proposed as a replacement for English as the official language of the new American nation. Hebrew was once considered a cornerstone of liberal education.

[Newly founded Ivy League schools required Hebrew of incoming freshmen and it was heard during annual commencement addresses.](http://books.google.com/books?id=HwjMhtY1BzcC&pg=RA5-PA19&lpg=RA5-PA19&dq=hebrew+in+American+commencement+addresses&source=bl&ots=nxXOBXigdu&sig=EL27S4KopAt46WbW-ToVbCb-7_k&hl=en&ei=JMydToWLBsGysAL829nvCQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=6&ved=0CD0Q6AEwBQ#v=onepage&q=hebrew%20in%20American%20commencement%20addresses&f=false)

The foundation of the “greatest experiment in freedom” in the history of the world was laid by a generation who were Hebrew literate. Hebrew is the language of liberty. In its truest form, liberty encompasses both the knowledge of the Greeks and the power of the Latins. To knowledge it adds the wisdom of right action.

For power it reveals the crucial, and oft misunderstood, distinction from force.

The mission of Monticello College is to foster self-sacrifice, induce moral character, emulate courage and foresight, and guard the principles of liberty. To this end, our students rely on the guiding hand of Hebrew.

For New American Founders, the Torah returns to take its place as a crucial part of the curriculum…and Hebrew is its language.

**Suggested Reading:**

The Old Testament

Great Books of the Western World, Vols. 4-11 (The “Greeks”)

Great Books of the Western World, Vols. 12-15, 18-21, 23 (The “Latins”)

Learn to Read Biblical Hebrew by Jeff A. Benner

Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek by Thorleif Boman