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Since my midterm report I have had four more Hebrew lessons with Josh Goodman through the Middle East Institute language program. In this short time, I think that I have been able to make a great deal of progress in my Hebrew studies. Since then, I have expanded from the initial foundation that I established with learning the scripted and block alphabet as well as basic conversational phrases. I am now better able to read more fluidly, gradually learning to recognize words without their respective vowels. In addition, I have learned personal pronouns as well as two verb conjugation patterns.

As someone who is perpetually interested in questions of gender fluidity, learning personal pronouns in Hebrew proved to be an interesting process. In Hebrew, everything is gendered, to a much further extent than English or any other language that I speak is. The gender neutrality of the plural pronoun, “they”, in English has allowed room to have an established gender-neutral pronoun that people can readily turn to should they not fit into the norms of the gender binary that society imposes upon us. In Chinese, while there are gendered differences for personal pronouns in writing (he and she each employ their own gendered radical), when spoken, there is no verbal difference between the two; he, she, and it, all sound the same when spoken.

This is not the case in Hebrew. In Hebrew, everything, whether it is he, she, they, them, you, you plural, all come with a gendered form. As conventional norms of gender become ever complicated, this poses a number of important questions. Unlike English, there is no easy fix to give people a gender-neutral option for personal pronouns. What are the consequences of this for gender-fluid people in Hebrew, and how is this reflective of Israel’s difficulty to accommodate to progressive trends.

In addition to personal pronouns, I have also begun learning two of the vowel patterns for verb conjugations (called “binyanim”), beginning with the pa’al and pi’el forms. In Hebrew, verbs are categorized into different conjugation vowel patterns that change depending on number, gender, and tense. These two forms are among the most basic conjugation vowel patterns; once I began to conceptually understand how they work it has been much easier to catch on to them. One problem that this format does pose, which will probably become more evident once I have the opportunity to converse in Hebrew more, is that this often causes words to rhyme with one another. Seeing this format in action reminds me of discussions regarding literary techniques in Hebrew literature that I had in Dr. Weininger’s class on Israeli women writers. It was in this class that I first learned that rhyming is not really considered a valued literary technique in Hebrew poetry, as it often happens without any real effort. Instead, Hebrew poetic techniques tend to focus much more on literary allusion and emulation of style.

With only 5 million native speakers, Hebrew is hardly a widely spoken language. That being said, I have been eager to capitalize upon the limited opportunities that I have in my daily life to practice understanding and speaking the minimal Hebrew that I know. Since last semester I have begun listening to Israeli music, including artists like A-WA, Sarit Hadad, and Hadag Nahash, among others. The other day, while listening to some of Sarit Hadad’s music that I realized with surprise and delight that I was beginning to be able to pick out some words and better understand the meaning of the songs. Additionally, during the hurricane, I volunteered at the home of an Israeli woman in Bellaire. Over the course of the afternoon, as we cleaned and

packed up her home, I told her about my academic coursework. After learning that I studied religion, she became very keen to teach me Hebrew and talk about her experiences with Judaism. While packing up the silverware and dishes used for Shabbat dinners she would teach me the word for each piece and explain what they were used for.

Moving forward, I am thankful that I will be able to continue to take Hebrew lessons via Skype throughout the semester to maintain and build upon the foundation that I established this summer. As school has started it definitely has been difficult to carve out the time to study Hebrew and keep up with what I have learned. That being said, I am hopeful that once I get into the swing of having lessons once a week again I will be better able to maintain a study routine. I believe that the foundation that I have established over the course of my summer will be greatly beneficial for me when I travel to Israel next semester. Not only will I be able to start my mandatory Ulpan at a more advanced level, but the chance that I have gotten to practice conversing with my teacher will empower me to be more confident in my ability to develop these skills early on during my time in Jerusalem. I am extremely grateful for the generosity of the Jewish Studies department in allowing me to have this unique opportunity to use the summer to study a language that will supplement my academic coursework.