

# Interfaith wedding? Biblical Hebrew meets the Internet

• DORIT OFEK

**A**t 7:30 in the evening, I realized I had only 30 minutes to get to my 8 p.m. biblical Hebrew class. I rushed home, prepared a quick dinner and put a load of laundry in the washing machine. By the time I was done, it was 7:55, and I wondered if my fellow students had already gotten to class. At this point, I was getting a bit worried about whether or not I would make it to class on time. Nervously, I walked from our living room to the study. I turned on the computer. Just a few clicks and less than a minute later, I joined my classmates and teacher, and sighed a sigh of relief: I had made it on time to my first on-line class.

According to eTeacher ([www.ClassicalHebrew.com](http://www.ClassicalHebrew.com)), an on-line language school whose biblical Hebrew course was recently accredited by the Hebrew University, thousands of students from all over the world click their way into Internet-based language classes every year. A brief Google search reveals a scattered offering of biblical Hebrew courses, most of them through self-study books or tapes, or by universities or Christian seminaries. Very few are on-line, and eTeacher's appears to be the largest.

Headquartered in Ramat Gan, eTeacher Group is an on-line school specializing in structured language programs that are delivered live over the Internet through advanced videoconference technology. Founded in 2000, the company employs 350 certified teachers all over the world. eTeacher offers structured language programs in modern and biblical Hebrew, English and Chinese. The company is currently expanding its offerings and plans to provide additional languages this year. eTeacher's partner, Panmaja Capital, is a Switzerland-based private investment firm that believes in creating value through long-term, socially responsible global investments in various fields, including education.

"In 2002 eTeacher won a Foreign Ministry tender to establish an on-line school for all its overseas embassy employees' children," says Yairy Birnman, its co-CEO.

"This was a pioneering project, providing all levels of education, from Kindergarten to graduation. The emphasis was on reading and writing skills, but all subjects were covered... we are still operating this school, with some 300 pupils, for the seventh year now. This experience empowered us as we recognized our strength in teaching language skills. That's how we developed, and began marketing on-line language courses internationally. In 2004 we established [hebrewonline.com](http://hebrewonline.com), which is an on-line Hebrew ulpan. I'm fairly certain our school is the largest Hebrew school in the world, with the most students."

At the end of 2007, eTeacher established its biblical Hebrew courses, developing a structured, five-level classical Hebrew school. Here, too, Birnman believes it is the largest provider of such courses.

"What is special about us is that we are a school. Study is done in small, structured settings, with a program we developed. From a content point of view, it's a very high quality product. From a technological perspective, the infrastructure is highly advanced, and the technical support is first rate," he says.

Judging from my one-time, first-hand experience, the biblical Hebrew class is fascinating. Even as a Hebrew speaker, I found it gripping. I had planned to watch the class for about 10 minutes, just to get a sense of how an on-line class is taught. However, something about the structured lesson and smooth presentation kept me watching for the entire hour.

How does it all work? Once a student registers, s/he receives a learning kit that includes the relevant textbook, headset with a speaker and a microphone. The student downloads the eTeacher software, and can then access the class, tapes of previous classes and varied teaching materials. For technophobes like myself, there is an impressive call center that operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It offers quick, efficient and patient technical support for eTeacher's clients. Birnman says that "the center has 130 representatives."

As with other providers of Hebrew courses, the students who choose to study modern Hebrew tend to be Jewish, whereas biblical Hebrew students are mostly

Christians, by and large Protestants. All the faculty teaching its biblical Hebrew courses are academics, most with at least a master's degree. All have extensive experience in Mideastern languages.

"eTeacher's strength is in adapting and delivering courses through e-learning," Birnman says. "For content, we find the best developers and providers, eTeacher's pedagogical philosophy is to take the most traditional teaching methods that have been used in classrooms for thousands of years - and adapt them for use on-line. We don't try to reinvent the wheel... I am very proud that we did not invent study methods, we adapted the best available methods, and coupled them with the best concepts that Internet has to offer."

eTeacher uses advanced technology to support its highly-structured on-line lessons. The teacher uses slides that depict biblical phrases, with colorful illustrations. The teacher has access to an array of teaching aids - from blackboard to markers and varied materials that are instantly displayed on the students' computer screens. As in a regular classroom, the students can raise their hand, by clicking the amusing "hand icon" on their screen. Once the teacher calls on them, they can click on their camera or just speak into their microphone, if they prefer.

THIS YEAR ushers in a new era for eTeacher's biblical Hebrew courses. Starting next month, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, in collaboration with eTeacher, will offer its very first credited on-line biblical Hebrew courses to overseas students.

The biblical Hebrew on-line program, facilitated by eTeacher's [ClassicalHebrew.com](http://ClassicalHebrew.com) campus, is now part of the Hebrew University's credited courses and is fully recognized by the Faculty of Humanities. In accordance with the university's academic requirements, the program includes obligatory attendance, paper submissions and examinations and will award students four credit points. While offering these newly accredited courses, eTeacher will continue to offer its regular, non-accredited biblical Hebrew courses.

To date eTeacher is the only e-learning company



## A fly on the virtual wall

As a student-for-the-day, I received a "user name" and "password," and entered the magical world of e-learning. When I first entered the eTeacher site, surprisingly I felt like I was suddenly part of a real school. I received a "locker," where I had access to a wide variety of teaching aids and very long lists of exercises and preplanned classes I could use. There is a magazine put on-line by eTeacher, a weekly "Torah portion" and even a blog.

In the virtual classroom, the computer screen is divided in two: On the right-hand side, there is a narrow strip that displays the "administrative" or technical aspect of our classroom situation. It holds a column of icons, each representing one of the class participants. When I entered our class, there were seven icons on the screen: The top one was our teacher, Miriam. Her icon was officially titled "Miriam, moderator," and so the computer program automatically grants her the moderating powers in this classroom. Then there was a "frommoderation" icon.

...of Humanities at Hebrew University, told *The Jerusalem Post Magazine*. For the Faculty of Humanities, this is "an extraordinary breakthrough."

Bartal explained that the faculty has a rich and vast body of knowledge that had not been finding its fullest expression vis-à-vis the world outside the confines of the university, due to technological limitations.

"We expect and hope, and are very interested in expanding this type of cooperation into additional areas, not only Judaic studies," he concluded. Binnum, too, said "I think it's a win-win" situation. He added that eTeacher had several offers for cooperation with various foreign universities, but "from the get-go, we had a preference for achieving this cooperation with the Hebrew University."

**MOST** Of the students registering for the biblical Hebrew course are Christians. Dr. Bruce Chilton, Bell Professor of Religion at Bard College, says, "As works have been published which have brought to popular attention that you can't really understand Christianity without Judaism, the result has been that an increasing number of people have looked for resources in order themselves better to understand Judaism, and also to study Hebrew... In the past 10 years or so, this interest, on a popular basis, has probably gathered pace."

In his own experience as an Episcopal priest and college professor, "there is considerable interest, certainly among students and among members of my congregation... That's one of the advantages in the prospect of some kind of electronic development [of biblical Hebrew courses]. It is conceivable that... we can widen the circle of people who read Hebrew and other languages at a reasonable standard."

eTeacher biblical Hebrew student Wayne Klinstrom lives in Queensland, Australia, and owns a company that pours concrete floors for construction. He originally thought he'd study ancient Greek, as "it's a lot closer to the English, so I thought the structure might not be as hard. I just put that on the shelf for years and years... About a year and a half ago I was up late at night, and I saw an advert [for biblical Hebrew] on the page I was looking at... I couldn't believe it, it was so accessible. So I hit the link... I pursued it, and within three weeks I was in my first class."



Klinstrom has been studying for about 18 months and "I plan to do the whole lot" and complete all levels of biblical Hebrew available through the eTeacher courses. He has also participated in eTeacher's Dead Sea Scrolls seminar.

Klinstrom says he's heard of people who study biblical Hebrew in regular classes, but that "it's usually fairly drawn out and good [as those that come from eHebrew - eHebrew is the best results I've ever heard of]."

Other advantages of e-learning, according to Klinstrom, include "the ease of operation... it's very user-friendly... the convenience, you can do it in your own home... you don't have to get in the car and go to some class, it's in small groups (we're a class of three), and my teacher had taught biblical Hebrew in London University for 25 years... Australia doesn't have people like her... I'm being taught by world-class professors... I can't express how very privileged I feel to have someone of that standard teach me, in my own home, without even having to leave the house."

David Emanuel has been teaching biblical Hebrew with eTeacher for some two and a half years. He, too, views the main advantages of e-teaching to be "convenience, the fact that you don't have to travel and can work from home. It saves time." For students, he says studying on-line can be a good solution for some, as "not everybody who wants to study Hebrew can do so in a university setting." In cases where university is geographically too far or difficult to get to, as a teacher, he says he enjoys being "exposed to students from all over the world." The only disadvantage he could think of was that "I'm usually animated as a teacher; this doesn't come across as much on-line."

Emanuel, whose background includes high-level computer training and a PhD from the Hebrew University's Bible Department, says e-teaching is "a hugely undervalued area," that "has terrific potential, but is treated as a fad or a gimmick... Many academics in humanities don't generally engage in computer technology as much as they should... [and] are not aware of the existence, potential, capabilities of the concept of e-learning."

become an eTeacher student for the week. Finally, there were icons for each of my classmates and me, real classroom. Though I was sitting in front of my computer, same as every day, I was also sitting with six people from all around the world, learning how to read a sentence from the Bible. The sentence appeared on the left side of the screen, in the larger area that serves as the "learning" side. On this side, I could see our teacher, whose face appeared in a small box in the upper left corner of the screen. She smiled, said "shalom" and greeted each of the students by name. I was like the proverbial fly on the wall. My classmates and teachers could see my icon in that narrow column on the right side of the screen, I could see and hear all of them and yet I was a silent observer watching the lesson. Although I know Hebrew and even understand some biblical Hebrew, as the class progressed there were moments when I really wanted to participate. It's hard to explain just what made the lesson so gripping. The teacher was a middle-aged woman, who reminded me a bit of my late grandmother, Warm smile, short dark hair, very patient disposition. To participate, all I'd have to do was press on that small "raise hand" icon on the top of the screen, where the technical icons lay in a quietly inviting row.

It's a cute option I'd practiced with the technical support representative earlier that day. When a student wishes to speak, he clicks on the small "raise hand" picture, and the teacher can then choose to grant the "right of speech." The student has an option of then turning on his camera so the class can see him, or just speaking into the microphone, so he can only be heard.

For some reason, my classmates only spoke by microphone. There was Bob from Oklahoma, Jeremy from London and Stuart from France. Stuart barely participated; Bob was happy to read aloud whenever the teacher asked. The teacher helped him along or corrected his reading where necessary. She asked questions, sometimes directing them at quieter students. She switched slides on our computer screens, explaining words and pointing out grammatical rules. When we neared the end of the lesson, I wanted to stay, and finally understood what one of my interviewees felt when he said he wished the lessons could go on just a little bit longer.

-D.O.

## EDUCATION

**CALL CENTER** for eTeacher  
in Ramat Gan. It operates  
24 hours a day, seven days  
a week in its work to  
spread the holy tongue.

