

Should I learn Hebrew?

The three pillars of Jewish practice are worship, study, and good deeds. A knowledge of Hebrew is not essential for any of those things, or to become a convert. Many congregants participate in synagogue services without understanding the words they pray, and learn Torah from translations. If you just want to join the others all you need do is attend for long enough to learn the sounds of the prayers by rote, or memorize them by reading the transliterations that are available on the internet and in certain prayer books.

However, most people find it easier to have a meaningful prayer experience when they know what they are saying. Many Bibles and prayerbooks are printed with English text facing the Hebrew, but the translation is seldom word-for-word and even when it is precise the English never conveys every emotional nuance of the Hebrew poetry. It is easier to study the classical texts of the tradition if you know the language in which they are written, and in a community where most people know at least some Hebrew it is much easier to fit in when you do too. So if you are a Jew, or hope to become one, the answer to this question is a resounding **YES**.

Should I take this course?

If you don't find yourself described below, ask my advice.

People for whom my answer is YES

- When you attend synagogue you voice the Hebrew fluently, and you know some prayers by heart, but you don't understand the words. You would like to know what you are saying, and to be able to learn from Hebrew texts.
- You attend synagogue and know some prayers by heart, but you can voice the Hebrew only if it has been transliterated into English characters. You would like to be able to sound out the Hebrew letters so that you can follow the service and the Torah reading.

People for whom my answer is MAYBE

- You were taught in high school to never mark in a textbook, and you consider any such alteration to be just **WRONG**. *The course notes that we will read together on Zoom consist mainly of pages from the required text, but they also include revisions and insertions which I will give you. It will be necessary for you to study those materials outside of class so you must be prepared to use them.*
- You learned Hebrew using the Ashkenazic pronunciation, in which the letter taf is pronounced s and the chiriq vowel is always pronounced e, and you consider any other way of saying these letters to be just **WRONG**. *This course uses the Sephardic pronunciation of Hebrew (see *Voicing Hebrew*) so if you take it you must be prepared to do that too.*

- You can voice Hebrew only haltingly, but you would like to be able to lead services in the synagogue. *Knowing the meaning of the words can make it possible for you to read them faster, but if you did not learn Hebrew as a child it is unlikely that any amount of study now will equip you to lead like someone who did.*
- You are a candidate for conversion to Judaism, or think you might become a candidate, and you want to learn Hebrew as part of your preparation. *Learning Hebrew is a worthy goal, but you should ask your rabbi whether it is important enough to deserve a place in your crowded curriculum.*
- You are an observant Christian who wants to read the Bible in Hebrew rather than in translation. *Theological questions rarely arise in class, but students must agree to refrain from challenging the fundamentals of traditional rabbinic Judaism or promoting another religion, such as Messianic Judaism.*
- You hope to study the Hebrew Bible as literature or as an artifact of Jewish culture. *This course teaches biblical vocabulary and syntax, but it uses only a small number of quotations from the Bible itself. Participants are expected to show respect for Jewish tradition, which precludes the introduction of sociology, the documentary hypothesis, or any kind of critical theory.*
- You simply enjoy learning foreign languages. *No language can be mastered without some understanding of the culture in which it is embedded, and classical Hebrew is embedded in the Jewish religion. The course has only scant religious content, but objections to it are not permitted. If you are philosophically committed to a secular worldview, you might feel uncomfortable in this course.*

People for whom my answer is NO

- You are about to become bar or bat mitzvah, and you need help mastering the Hebrew that you will be expected to use in celebrating the occasion. *This course provides a general introduction to classical Hebrew and is unlikely to be of much help to you in preparing to read a particular Torah portion, Haftarah, or synagogue service.*
- You hope to visit or move to Israel and want to speak the native language of the country. *This course is about classical Hebrew, which is significantly different from modern Hebrew, and it is about the written rather than the spoken language. Using classical Hebrew to order a cup of coffee in Israel is like using Shakespearean English to order a cup of coffee here. You should take an ulpan course instead.*
- You are fluent in modern conversational Hebrew and want to contribute your expertise. *This course is for beginners, and one instructor is sufficient.*
- You are looking for something to do one evening per week. *Idle curiosity is not enough to sustain the serious commitment to learning that this course demands.*

- You hope to learn Hebrew so that you can use it in proselytizing Jews, or to use your presence in class to proselytize the other students, to criticize Israeli government policy, or to make political statements. *Any such motivation or behavior is a disqualification from taking the course.*