

The Story of Hebrew Braille

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I was graduated from the Jewish Institute of Religion in June, 1929, with the degrees of Rabbi and Master of Hebrew Literature after completing in three years the prescribed four-year course. About a month later, I explained the Hebrew Braille system I had developed for the reading and writing of Hebrew to a sightless friend who had retained his interest in Hebrew and mathematics despite his blindness. After studying it for a week, he called to tell me that I should also have been awarded, at my graduation, the degree of M.H.B., Master of Hebrew Braille.

In 1923, the consensus among my doctors was that I had inherited an eye condition through my mother, who, though unaffected by it herself, nevertheless transmitted it to me from her father, Rabbi Zeev Wahl, of Mogilev, White Russia. My grandfather had lost his sight at the age of sixty. This condition of mine was severely aggravated by my having fallen victim, on three separate occasions, to the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1917-1919.

When I came home from the last visit to my Philadelphia oculist in 1925, I gave my parents a brief report and retired to my room. It was nearly midnight but I didn't switch on the lights. I took a book off a shelf and sat down at my desk. I clasped it to my breast. It was destined to remain a closed book to me forever. It was a searing experience. I was twenty-five and had been practicing law for two years. I decided to leave the law and become a rabbi.

Through correspondence with Dr. Stephen S. Wise, president of the Jewish Institute of Religion, it was agreed that I would be admitted as a student in the fall of 1926. I had a little less than a year to wind up my law practice, to prepare for a new life and a new profession — and to learn Braille. Of these three, the last was the simplest by far.

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Braille was invented about a century and a half ago by a Frenchman named Louis Braille and is based upon a simple mathematical plan. The Braille cell consists of six raised dots on thick Braille paper, three dots high and two across. The first ten letters of the English alphabet are formed by a combination of dots in the upper two-thirds of the cell. The next ten letters are formed by adding a dot to the first ten symbols in the lower left corner of the cell. The following ten characters are formed by adding the two bottom dots to the first ten letters. Since the six-dot cell allows 63 possible combinations of dots from one to six, the system is capable of providing symbols for the twenty-six letters of the English alphabet, the several punctuation marks, plus a number of symbols representing a series of abbreviations and contractions to reduce the otherwise bulky system of embossed type.

The theory of Braille is easy to understand, but facility in reading and writing can be acquired only through a great deal of practice. Only then can one attain the ease necessary to make Braille a useful tool for the blind person.

After learning English Braille, I proceeded to inquire about the existence of books in Hebrew Braille. To my amazement, I found that there were only two schools throughout the whole world where Hebrew Braille was taught to children on an organized basis — the Jewish Institute for the Blind in Jerusalem and the Blindeninstitut in Vienna. From these two schools I learned that the only available texts in Hebrew Braille were prayer books and readers on a very elementary level.

There were also desultory attempts to develop Hebrew Braille codes by sightless scholars in England and Germany, but their efforts failed to receive the financial support necessary for such undertakings. After a great deal of correspondence with scores of individuals in Palestine, Austria, Germany, and England, I accumulated five embossed systems of Hebrew Braille which were cumbersome and unwieldy, and so much more difficult to learn and to use than the English Braille code I had recently learned. In sheer desperation, I determined to create my own code more suitable to my needs as a rabbinic student.

During my college and law school days, I found that taking

copious notes frequently interfered with my understanding of the subtler points the lecturer tried to convey, and occasionally even with the main theme. I learned to follow the speaker as he outlined his theme and marshalled examples and proofs of legal cases, and at the end of the lecture I was able to reconstruct the salient features from beginning to end. This method of concentration without transcription stood me in good stead throughout my seminary days.

I used it successfully in history, Bible, ethics, and literature. Talmud, however, was quite another story. Professor Hayyim Chernowitz, a talmudic scholar of international renown, loved to lecture on the juridical, ethical, and historic currents of the mishnaic and amoraic periods and the differences he discerned between them. But he always came back to the word or phrase he was trying to elucidate. It was evident that, in the face of such complexity, I would have to have the text before me in order to be able to follow his subtle reasoning. It became apparent that I would have to transcribe the text into Braille.

Also, in his Talmud class, Professor Chernowitz used the *Kitzur Hatabmud*, an abridged edition of the Talmud he had published some years earlier. After several lectures on *halachah*, rabbinical law, we were introduced to our first talmudic text, the tractate *Berachot*. Since I was not satisfied with any available embossed code, I was forced to utilize phonetic transliteration of the text into English symbols. From the outset I recognized that, in order to make the transliteration intelligible, I would have to devise symbols for sounds not present in English as well as for Hebrew letters which have the same sound, but are represented by different symbols. The word *hachamim* ("sages" — the initial *h* is a guttural), in the very first mishnah of the tractate, illustrates the problem. I used the X-symbol in English Braille for the *het*, and the *ch*-symbol for the guttural *chaf*, undoubtedly showing the Spanish and German influence. I similarly adopted new symbols for consonants and vowels without counterpart in English Braille. After consulting several Hebrew scholars, I decided to delete the final orthographic forms of the letters *chaf*, *mem*, *nun*, *fay*, and *zadi*.

Hebrew is read from right to left, and the problem of changing

the direction to conform with European languages seemed quite complicated. When I first began to write Hebrew, I used the Braille writer and slate and was, of course, forced to write from left to right. Contrary to expectation, I found this switch comfortable from the very outset. I discussed the question with a number of Hebraists, both Orthodox and Liberal in their religious orientation, and found that that question had been thoroughly aired in the Hebrew press some years earlier when Itamar Ben-Yehudah proposed the official adoption of the Latin alphabet in place of the traditional Hebrew. The switch seemed inevitable and, in the forty years during which I have been involved in this new medium, I have not heard a single word of protest raised against this phase of my work.

Within six months, I developed a code adequate to my needs. In the next two years, I made several additional modifications as a result of my work with a group of sightless high school children to whom I taught Hebrew and Bible. By that time I had smoothed out most of the difficulties, and I began to regard the code as a workable Hebrew Braille system.

In 1930, the Jewish Braille Institute of America, organized for the promulgation of education among the Jewish blind in this country, brought to the attention of the Synagogue Council of America the need for the adoption of a single Braille code for the use of sightless people, both here and abroad, interested in reading and writing Hebrew. The Synagogue Council undertook to create a worldwide committee for the specific purpose of adopting a unified embossed code to be used by sightless people throughout the world. Leopold Dubov, executive director of the J. B. I. A., was appointed secretary of this committee, and I was named chairman. It was our task to enlist additional members to represent Palestine and other countries with sizable Jewish populations.

Within a year, this committee came into being constituted as follows: Isaac Maletz, representing the Jewish Institute for the Blind, Jerusalem; Dr. Max Geffner, of the Blindeninstitut of Vienna; Canon C. F. Waudby, of the National Institute for the Blind, Great Britain; Leopold Dubov, of the Jewish Braille Institute of America; and Rabbi Harry J. Brevis, representing the New York Board of Rabbis. This committee functioned as a single body until

the International Hebrew Braille Code was officially adopted two years later.

Since distances prevented the committee from convening, its business was transacted by transoceanic mail. Literally hundreds of letters were exchanged among the several members of the committee as we examined the five Hebrew Braille codes previously mentioned, plus the one I had developed in the preceding three years. In 1933, after careful deliberation, the committee unanimously agreed to approve and sponsor my code as the one most suitable for international use. It was decided that it be called the International Hebrew Braille Code, and that it should supersede all other systems then in use in the United States, in Palestine, and in Vienna. I was authorized to compile and publish a reader in this new code.

Some years earlier, the United States Government had undertaken a massive program to publish Braille books for the blind and had established a number of distributing libraries for that purpose throughout the country. Herbert Putnam, the scholarly Librarian of the Library of Congress, was keenly interested in the educational and cultural development of all blind persons. In correspondence with him, I related the circumstances surrounding the adoption of the International Hebrew Braille Code and the importance of publishing a volume to present this new system for the previously deprived sightless readers of Hebrew. I also told him that I had compiled a volume of choice readings from the Bible, Mishnah, and modern literature and enclosed a table of contents. He replied that he would be more than gratified to authorize the publication of this book under the imprimatur of the Library of Congress. This volume appeared in 1935 under the title *A Hebrew Braille Chrestomathy*. Some years later, it was included in the library of the United Nations in New York City.

Subsequently, Mr. Putnam expressed the belief that, after the publication of the *Hebrew Braille Chrestomathy*, other books would soon follow in the same medium. His prediction came true in full measure: in 1946, the Jewish Braille Institute of America began the monumental task of bringing out the Hebrew Braille edition of the masoretic text of the Bible in twenty volumes.

Because of the limitations inherent in Braille, only three cantilla-

tion marks have been included in this Bible: *zakef katan*, which also serves to signify a minor pause in a verse; *etnachta*, as a major pause; and *sof pasuk*, the full stop. Of the numerous masoretic notes, only those essential for a correct reading of the biblical text are found in this Bible. They are of three kinds: *ktiv-krei* (written-read); *nusha ahrina* (another recension); and *svirin* (conjectures). These appear as footnotes in the usual manner. For the benefit of bar (and bat) mitzvah youngsters in congregations where they are expected to chant the *sidra*, or pentateuchal portion, and the *haftarah*, or prophetic portion, in the traditional manner, the Jewish Braille Institute of America provides recordings on disc or magnetic tape.

In the more than three decades that have elapsed since the publication of my *Hebrew Braille Chrestomathy* in 1935, many great historic events have affected the lives of Jews in all parts of the world. The happiest of these was the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, with its consequent reemphasis on Hebrew. In a land where scientists, industrialists, laborers, and farmers use the language of the Bible in their daily activities, it is also to be heard on the lips of children at play or of students in schools from the Kindergarten to the University.

By reason of mass immigration to Israel in the last four decades from Arab countries (where trachoma is prevalent), the number of sightless in the Jewish state has risen to 7,000.* For these people, Braille is the only means of acquiring an education, for reading books, and for writing letters.

Among the approximately 10,000 Jewish blind in the United States (exact figures are unavailable), there is a sizable number who wish to learn Hebrew Braille. During the past forty years, I have communicated with at least a dozen sightless non-Jews interested in Hebrew for scholarly or religious reasons, among them an Episcopal priest who is the director of the Episcopal Guild for the Blind in Brooklyn, N. Y. For most of these blind people, Hebrew Braille is, at best, an inadequate tool. Until someone invents an electronic means of transposing printed books into embossed type, most of these people will have to depend on sighted readers to help them acquire

* *Jerusalem Post*, November 9, 1967.

a familiarity with the vast field of Hebrew literature. The process of Brailleing books by hand is difficult and expensive despite the kind efforts of volunteer transcribers.

For the benefit of interested blind persons who have no sighted readers to assist them, and who have no easy access to the twenty volumes of the Braille Bible, the Jewish Braille Institute published, in 1966, my *Anthology of Hebrew Literature* in two volumes. The first volume contains sixteen lengthy passages from the Bible and the full text of the *Pirké Avot* ("Ethics of the Fathers"), with English translations. Volume Two is devoted to twenty-one poems, stories, and essays from modern Hebrew, including a story by the recent Nobel Prize winner for literature, Shmuel Yosef Agnon.

My most recent task in the field of Hebrew Braille was in response to a request from the Hadley School for the Blind of Winnetka, Illinois, which has a branch in Natanya, Israel. I was commissioned to prepare a primer to be used in Israel's campaign against illiteracy. According to Dr. Shlomo Haramati — formerly with the Israeli Ministry of Education, and at present Educational Consultant to the Jewish Education Committee of New York City — the number of illiterates in Israel was 12 percent in 1961, due largely to mass immigration from Arab countries after the establishment of the State in 1948. It is important to recognize that the high incidence of blindness and illiteracy may be ascribable to the same cause.

In English there are three levels of the Braille System known as Grade One, Grade One and a Half, and Grade Two. Beginners start with Grade One, which reproduces in Braille all the letters of the printed word. Because Grade One takes so much time and effort, a progressive series of contractions and abbreviations has been adopted in Grades One and a Half and Two. One example from Grade Two will suffice: the word "will," instead of being written out in full, is represented by the single letter *w*. The word "work" is represented by the letter *w* preceded by one dot; the word "word," by *w* preceded by two dots; the word "world," by *w* preceded by three dots. There are many such contractions, abbreviations, and word-symbols with which the blind reader becomes familiar after a certain amount of practice. In Hebrew Braille, there were almost no such symbols for contractions, and with the exception of a few

changes made in Israel and the United States in 1946 and 1957, the IHBC is the same as when it was first adopted in 1935.

Since my retirement a few years ago, I was moved to develop a number of symbolic contractions for Hebrew Braille comparable to Grade Two in English Braille, and in 1967 I spent two months in Israel in an attempt to introduce this new system to the sightless teachers and pupils of the Jewish Institute for the Blind in Jerusalem.

My new addition to Hebrew Braille consists of three parts: (a) contractions; (b) special use of the hyphen to be employed largely in prayer books; and (c) word-symbols. From lists of frequently-occurring basic Hebrew words compiled by Dr. Eliezer Rieger, Dr. Samuel Nachshon, and Dr. Arye Spotts, all recognized writers in Jewish education, I culled five words for each letter of the alphabet and let them be represented by the initial letter plus an additional dot or more to precede it. I believe that this system reduces the bulkiness of Hebrew Braille by at least 30 percent, i. e., spatially and temporally. My work in Israel was unfortunately interrupted by the Six-Day War, which necessitated my return to the United States. Since then I have been urging the adoption of this advanced system of Hebrew Braille through correspondence.

Although the sightless constitute but a tiny part of American Jewry, the Jewish community has nevertheless taken note of the developments in this field. The New York Board of Rabbis in 1958, and the Jewish Braille Institute of America in 1967, presented to me testimonial scrolls expressing appreciation for my activities. In 1959, Dr. Nelson Glueck, president of the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, in conferring on me the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity, said in his citation: "Creative scholar whose development of a Hebrew Braille Code brings the light of Jewish learning to the sightless. His work will endure for generations to come."