

# The holy tongue in unlikely places

Brooklyn's Hebrew Language Academy students visit Israel

By Linda Gradstein

**ZHARA ADEYEMI**, 13, nervously takes a deep breath as she gets ready to make a short speech in Hebrew in front of a group of adults in Jerusalem.

"This is my first time in Israel and it is the longest flight I have ever been on," she began haltingly, gaining confidence as she spoke. "My father was born in Nigeria and my mother was born in Jamaica. I was born in Brooklyn. I have friends at school from all over the world like Ukraine, Israel and the Caribbean."

She sat down, relieved to be finished. Adeyemi is part of the graduating class of the Hebrew Language Academy (HLA) from Brooklyn, New York. She has been attending the charter school since second grade, where she studies Hebrew for several hours a day. There are currently more than 700 students at the school with a long waiting list.

She is not Jewish and has no Jewish heritage. She says her parents chose HLA, also called Hebrew Public, because it is a good school and studying Hebrew is a welcome addition to the normal curriculum.

Another student Victor Oleynik, 13, is actually trilingual. His parents are immigrants from Ukraine, and speak Russian at home. One of his grandparents is Jewish, and he has been at Hebrew Public since kindergarten.

"I think it's nice to speak different languages," he said. "I read and write Hebrew terribly, but I can speak and understand."

Hebrew Public is a network of 13 charter schools around the US in New York, New Jersey, Washington, DC, and Minnesota. A school is set to open in Philadelphia in 2019, and one in Staten Island in 2020. The



concept of charter schools, which are tuition-free public schools with an additional focus, has been growing recently in the US. Just as a point of comparison, the Qatar Foundation International has 120 charter schools that aim to foster "meaningful connections with the Arab world," according to its website, and where all students learn Arabic.

A total of 3,000 students currently study in the network of Hebrew Public schools, some of which go to 8th grade. Eventually all of the schools will continue until 8th grade. The schools have long waiting lists with a total of 800 to 1,000 students vying for the 75 open spots each year in kindergarten. A few spots open in higher grades

if students leave the school for any reason.

Acceptance is by lottery with a preference for children in the neighborhood. Adeyemi and Oleynik study in the school in Brooklyn.

"One thing we do really well is language education," Chief External Officer Valerie Khaytina said. "We use the oral proficiency approach, which mimics how a small child learns the language. The students come into kindergarten not knowing a word of Hebrew, and the Hebrew teachers start speaking to them only in Hebrew."

She said they are partnering with various Israeli organizations to bring Israeli teachers for two-year fellowships at Hebrew Public schools. Along with a daily period of



The visiting students enjoy an Israeli meal in Jerusalem



HLA



HLA

Students from the Hebrew Language Academy on their Israel trip

Hebrew language, Hebrew-speaking teachers of other subjects teach only in Hebrew.

“If I’m teaching social studies or science I teach that in Hebrew, while the general studies teacher might not know Hebrew,” Elana Weinberg, who teaches in the Harlem school said in an interview. “There is sometimes a struggle. Do you teach in Hebrew so they get the Hebrew, or in English so they really understand it?”

There are some exceptions, however, like math, which is always taught in English.

Weinberg says it is illegal in the US to ask students their religion, but she estimates that about 40% of the students at Hebrew

Public in Brooklyn have some Jewish connection, while the number is about a third in her school in Harlem.

Some, like Adeyemi’s parents, chose it because they want a good school. Evangelical Christians want their children to learn the language of the Bible. While the school is not religious, the parents committees in both Harlem and Brooklyn voted for kosher food, which attracts Muslim students who observe the halal dietary rules. Any food that is kosher is automatically halal, although the reverse is not true.

The focus is not only on Hebrew, but on Israeli culture as well. The classrooms are

named after cities in Israel, including Ramat, a Bedouin township in southern Israel. The children learn popular Israeli songs as well.

So far, school officials say, they have not experienced any fallout from BDS (the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement). They say enrollment in their schools are up, with new schools opening every year.

One question they do have is what happens after 8th grade. As the schools only go until 8th grade at the latest, the students need to transfer to other high schools.

“After they leave we want them to have a connection to Hebrew and to Israel and to keep them engaged with Israel,” said Khaytina, who is herself not Jewish but speaks fluent Hebrew.

The trip to Israel, called the Capstone Trip, brought 32 students from the Hebrew Language Academy in Brooklyn and Hatikvah International Academy in East Brunswick, New Jersey. The trip was heavily subsidized from a fund-raising campaign.

Along with hiking and seeing all of the sites, the students visited a school in Israel, where their former teacher Gal Witelson now teaches. Before the trip to Israel, they skyped with her new students in Hebrew.

“This is something that we want to foster and nurture – our students’ connections with their Israeli peers and our Israeli teachers’ continued involvement even after they leave the system,” Kaytani said.

Zhara Adeyemi, the 13-year-old student on her first trip to Israel, said that so far she was having a great time. She said she did find one thing surprising.

“I thought there’d be more English,” she said. ■