

Heidi Rabinowitz 0:00

[Music, Intro] This is The Book of Life, a show about Jewish kidlit, mostly. I'm Heidi Rabinowitz. Welcome to our special series, Books in the Time of Coronavirus. We'll hear from authors who had to cancel their spring 2020 promotional events due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Today we'll hear from author Jeremy Benstein, about his book Hebrew Roots, Jewish Routes.

Jeremy Benstein 0:32

Boker Tov, that means Good morning, and it's morning here in Israel where I live. My name is Jeremy Benstein and I am the author of Hebrew Roots Jewish Routes, A Tribal Language in a Global World, which has been published this past year by Behrman House publishers out of New Jersey, and it is a book about Hebrew, but it's much more than just about Hebrew. It's actually about sort of Jewish identity and Jewish peoplehood through the lens of language. It is intended for the sort of educated lay audience. And while it is about Hebrew, of course, it's in English and it does not assume any previous knowledge of the language, in fact, to the target population... or the book is, in fact, people who who do not know Hebrew, and who might be intrigued or curious or the opposite of who might be intimidated and frustrated. Because Hebrew is a language and when we are confronted by a language, which we don't know, we are often intimidated because it seems to be such a daunting task, to gain mastery, to learn it, to achieve fluency. And so the whole point of the book is to say, you do not have to speak Hebrew for Hebrew to speak to you. In other words, for Hebrew, to be part of your Jewish identity, your sense of peoplehood, your Jewish repertoire of what it means to be Jewish and to do Jewish. I give a lot of examples of, I tell the amazing story of Hebrew in the book, there's sort of a really an amazing paradox at the heart of Hebrew, because it is both one of the oldest languages that's in continuous use by a community since pre Bible times over 3000 years ago. And it's also one of the newest, having only returned to a spoken, what's called a vernacular status, just a little over 100 years ago. And so that's an amazing thing and of itself, it makes it an object of interest to the world over for people trying to revive languages that are in danger, indigenous languages and other things. So it has an amazing and miraculous side to it. But it also was a very challenging side. Because there isn't just one Hebrew, there are a lot of different Hebrews and that makes it difficult to engage in. So if you have ever struggled to learn Hebrew, or if you go to synagogue and are wondering how to gain a little entry into those words on the page, or if you're curious about what's going on in Israel and Hebrew speaking culture and want to get closer to that, or if you just want to understand a little bit more about what they're saying on the Shtisel, or Fauda or other Israeli television series, if you're keyed into those, then this book might be for you. It is not a textbook. It can be an additional text to a Hebrew class. I hope it gives, it conveys some of the excitement and some of the wonder about the language itself, including a lot of fun facts, but I guarantee not a single verb has been conjugated in making the making of his book. In other words, there are some grammatical explanations, but really, most of it is really just to open it up and to see what could be there for you.

I was inspired to write this book because I've lived in Israel for almost 40 years. I was born in Detroit, Michigan, I grew up in Toledo, Ohio, and I moved to Israel after finishing my first degree, actually, which was in linguistics, which is part of the background to the book. I did that at Harvard, and then I moved to Israel, lived on a kibbutz for a very long time and I now live in Zichron Yaakov, nice little town, somewhere halfway between Tel Aviv and Haifa on the coast. And I've just been fascinated by Hebrew ever since I can remember. It's one of the things that brought me to Israel and I was, I wanted to live in Hebrew speaking culture, I want my children to grow up speaking Hebrew. And I guess that was part of a fascination with language in general. And so tying those things together, I was inspired to write a book trying to convey that excitement about Hebrew. And again, not just as a language but as something that's good not only to think in, we all think in languages, but something that's good to think with, to quote the great anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss. That language and specifically Hebrew is good to think with about Jewish identity and Jewish peoplehood.

I was meant to be in the United States right now in a nice big book tour in Boston and New York and Baltimore, in in Durham, North Carolina and Washington, DC and Chicago. And of course, that was cancelled. So I am sheltering in place here in Zichron looking out at my backyard, as I have for the past two weeks, and so I'll just share with you one little story, one little joke that I often use to start my lectures because one of the things that I like to point out about Hebrew is what an amazing bridge it is, between all these different sides of, well, Jewish identity, how it's ancient, but it's also modern and changing. It is tribal, but it's also global, it's holy, it's a connection to holiness or to transcendence, but it's also daily can be part of a daily routine, daily interaction our daily lives. So for to understand this, this joke, which uses a Hebrew word, you have to know when Hebrew word, and that Hebrew word is parashah. And if you've ever had a bar or bat mitzvah, you would have learned something about your parashah which is to say the portion, sounds like portion but no connection. The portion of the week every week is the parashah. The parashat ha-shavua, the weekly portion in reading the Torah, right, we have a yearly cycle, and so that's the parashah. So that's the sort of historical and religious use of the term parashah but there is a contemporary use as well because the weekly parashah has a story or stories, a narrative, as it were, in it. So parashah has come to mean in modern Hebrew, something like an affair or a scandal, like in Israel, we would refer to Parashat Watergate, right, the Watergate affair or scandal. Okay, so the story is told about an Israeli Prime Minister, and it could be almost any one of them. And it actually wasn't told about our current prime minister, although it certainly could have, who had been embroiled in certain affairs, certain suspicions of wrongdoing and potential crimes. And so he was making a public appearance and a woman came up to him, and she very respectfully, delicately touched the hem of his jacket and kissed her hand. And the prime minister was taken aback, and he said, Well, Madam, what's what's the meaning of this? And she said, Well, you prime minister, are for me like a sefer torah, you're like the Torah. As you would in the synagogue, you would, you know, sort of kiss the hem of the garment, clothing, the Torah. And he was, of course, very flattered. He said, Oh, that's, that's lovely. That's wonderful. Why do you say that? And the woman said, well, with you, Prime Minister Just like the Torah, it's a new parashah every week. So parashah, the old and the new and the holy and the daily.

The book Hebrew Roots Jewish Routes can be purchased wherever you purchase fine books. I have a good Amazon page but for many reasons maybe not to buy an Amazon, so get it where all fine books are sold. And you can also learn more about me and about the book on my website, which is [www. Jeremy Benstein, that's b e n s t e i n JeremyBernstein, one word, dot com](http://www.JeremyBenstein.com) and I know that the Book of Life "Books in Time of Coronavirus" who was encouraging me to do this said to possibly add something for a Tikkun Olam segment. And while I think there might be a lot of Tikkun Olam in people connecting to their Jewish identity and to making Hebrew a part of their Jewish literacy, my other hats, or my other life as it were, is I was one of the founders of the Heschel Center for Sustainability in Israel and promoting a sustainable world. We're talking a lot about what we can do now, both during the time of coronavirus emergency but also really trying to help the world grapple with that other great emergency which has somehow taken a backseat to coronavirus, which is climate change emergency. And so I would want to encourage you while you're sheltering, while you're keeping yourself and your loved ones safe to also think about that world that we are building, that we will live in as we come out of the end of this epidemic, because it will end at some point, but we will still be faced with many challenges to our well being, to the flourishing of our societies and our civilization. And we really need to think critically about our lifestyles, about our daily diet, about our means of transportation, about the structure of our economy. And so there are plenty of places to go for inspiration and for direction on that. They're even a growing number of people who are trying to relate to these two things together what the coronavirus is trying to teach us about our lifestyles and what can it should be changed. So I'll leave you with that thought and with another Hebrew word, l'hitraot, goodbye.

Heidi Rabinowitz 9:05

[Music, Outro] If you write or illustrate Jewish books, and your new book's spring 2020 promotional events have been canceled due to the pandemic, I invite you to take part in The Book of Life's special series Books in

the Time of Coronavirus. Visit tinyurl.com/booksCOVID for instructions or get in touch with me at 561-206-2473 or BookofLifepodcast@gmail.com.

Listeners, you know the drill: check out BookofLifepodcast.com for links to every way to reach me, every way to support the show, every way to get more information, and to hear every Book of Life episode since 2005, since you've probably got extra time on your hands right now. Thanks as always to the Freilachmakers Klezmer String Band for our background music. Please stay healthy. And everybody please wash your hands.

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