



Giving English New Meaning

By [Rosally Saltsman](#)

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Gaila Morrison lives with her husband Rabbi Chanan Morrison and four of their five children in Mitzpeh Yericho, an Israeli community overlooking the sand dunes where Avraham Avinu once pitched his tent.

Gaila and her husband joined the new settlement when it was just a small oasis in the desert. But Gaila has the pioneering spirit—she is the founder of an organization called A.H.A.V.A., an English literacy program whose Hebrew acronym means "English Learned in a Natural Method." The program, started seven years ago, has so far reached nearly a thousand children in the Maaleh Adumim and Mitzpeh Yericho areas, but Gaila hopes her educational methods will spread countrywide as she trains teachers from all over the country.

Gaila, originally from Montreal, spent several years in the States with her husband doing kiruv work. She has a teacher's certificate from Beis Yaakov Seminary of Montreal and a B.A. in English Literature from McGill University.

Her program's manifesto is to make it less painful for Israeli children to learn English and provide the country with more adequate English speakers and more qualified workers. In other words, she works to provide the country with better-trained doctors, lawyers, accountants and nurses and anything else children grow up to be in this world, by virtue of the fact that they will have better access to professional literature by speaking a higher level of English.

"If you live in parts of the country outside the [Tel Aviv] center, the level of English is either non-existent or terrible. There are parts of the country where they can't find English teachers. I hear the same lament from parents all over the country: 'Where I live it's really bad.'

One of the problems with teaching English in Israel is that you're teaching kids with various mother tongues. You have kids whose first language can be Hebrew or Russian or Arabic or any number of other languages. They don't even all speak Hebrew at the same level. Another problem is that the Ministry of Education teaches how to pass the matriculation exam, rather than how to communicate in English."

Gaila's method is communicative, interactive and kinesthetic. She starts when the children are three years old, as opposed to in the third grade when English is first officially taught in the school system. She offers programs to children up till ninth grade and has developed a curriculum for native English speakers as well.

Gaila began her teaching career in Israel teaching in schools. Parents were always asking her to tutor their kids and to tutor them in groups to make it cheaper. That's how she developed the method she uses today which emphasizes speech and repetition.

"In the current system, teachers train the students to pass the tests - which have nothing to do with English. Fluent English speakers without training can do quite poorly on the matriculation exam." The program also helps children with learning disabilities, from lower socio-economic backgrounds and the geographic periphery. It helps give the more underprivileged children stability in their lives.

Most of her funding comes from generous citizens of North America, she says. She's trying to encourage bar and bat mitzvahs to donate some of their ma'asser money to the program. As a non-profit organization, funding goes directly to benefit the children. There's very little overhead.

The teachers are paid. "You need to pay good teachers," Gaila stresses. "You need to give them respect and show you value what they have to offer."

And the results speak for themselves. "We had one girl going into the ninth grade who, despite a year with A.H.A.V.A., was too scared to speak even one word of English. I was positive that she was my biggest failure. A few months after completing the course, her mother called me and told me she had gotten a 98 on a standardized test and had jumped from a third level group to a first level group. It boosts the kids' confidence."

Gaila's daughter Segulah - recently married and currently working

on her Masters degree in family counseling - has joined the program as a teacher. Gaila says her daughter is teaching from the same book that she learned from as a child. She's living proof the program works.

To make a donation to A.H.A.V.A., please go to: <http://ahava-english.org/>.

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Teaching English in a natural way. A.H.A.V.A

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This method sounds fantastic! It is really what Israeli children need to get progress. Kol hakavod to Gaila Morrison.

Toby Pomerantz