

Ella's Trip to Israel

The children's book *Ella's Trip to Israel* by Vivian Newman and illustrated by Akemi Gutierrez demonstrates the journey of a Jewish, presumably North American girl, named Ella traveling to Israel. Ella goes on various adventures in Israel and interacts with the culture with her family and her stuffed monkey named Koofi.

Throughout this children's book, themes of forgiveness and problem solving are demonstrated, along with the recognition and importance of ancestry and cultural heritage. Ella is not from Israel, but she is Jewish so she is familiar with a few Hebrew words. Her parents most likely language mix, meaning that they include features from both Hebrew and English when they speak to her. At the beginning of the story, Ella is introduced alongside her parents in the airport and immediately, her stuffed monkey named Koofi is made known to be named after the Hebrew word *kof* (meaning monkey). Even though both Ella and her parents are familiar with the word *kof*, language mixing can be used by people with "little or no competence in a heritage language" (Benor 126). Seemingly, being able to integrate Hebrew words so seamlessly into English sentences might suggest bilingualism. However, for people who grow up attending places of worship and interacting with others familiar with the language, this integration may occur naturally within their primary language.

Repetition is also very prevalent in the story as the phrase *eyn ba'aya* (Newman) is repeated every time Ella spills or tugs at Koofi. *Eyn ba'aya* is Hebrew for 'no problem,' demonstrating the various adults' forgiveness of Ella when she makes small mistakes. The first time Ella spills on Koofi, she is on the airplane and gets juice all over him, to which the flight attendant tells her that it is no problem right after saying it in Hebrew. She later helps Ella clean

it up. A more specific version of the language mixing is called Hebrew infusion, which are “words, blessings, prayers, songs, and signs” (Benor 128) of Hebrew integrated into the main language someone is speaking (in this case English). Right after the flight attendant tells Ella *eyn ba’aya*, she says “no problem,” in a way that is almost teaching Ella a Hebrew word or reminding her of the meaning so she can begin using it. The flight attendant is identified as Israeli, so she could also be recognizing Ella as an American Jew who could benefit from hearing a common phrase used in Hebrew from a known speaker. As Ella is around four or five years old and already traveling to Israel, it is likely that she will travel there again in her lifetime. People who attend Israel more often are more likely to include Hebrew in their speech; therefore, Ella will be able to recite more new words.

The first thing Ella and her family do when they arrive in Israel is attend the Kotel (otherwise known as the Western Wall). The Kotel is the remnants of the Second Holy Temple. The Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans when they conquered the Persians (Kem Rogue). At the Western Wall, people rock back and forth and recite their prayers as well (Kem Rogue). Here, Ella is first exposed to authentic Jewish history and culture, similar to the groups of people brought to Israel on group sponsored trips. An organization called Hillel is a worldwide Jewish nonprofit organization. They focus on bringing college students to Israel to form a sense of community. Ella is shown to be surrounded by other children that she can relate to. The Hillel organization states that loneliness is prevalent among young Jewish people and is “as deadly as smoking up to 15 cigarettes daily” (Zinn). Since Ella is exposed to her religious community so early in age, Jewish children reading this story can begin to build a mental connection to Israel since they relate to Ella’s Jewish identity. *Kotel* is Hebrew for ‘wall,’ and even though it is in Hebrew, this time it is not given a direct translation immediately. Instead,

Newman refers to the Kotel as “the wall” in the next sentence. Ella observes the religious practices of writing prayers on slips of paper and inserting them into the cracks in the wall and participates along with the people. Engaging in this sacred process connects Ella with other people of her faith and she can relate to not only the people in Jerusalem, but also other Jews who visit the Kotel. Not only does this create a relatability aspect to Ella, it also creates a story that she can share with other Jewish children since this is such an important monument.

While at the wall, a boy around Ella’s age tells her the Hebrew word “shalom” and rips off Koofi’s tail right after. Similar to Kotel, the word *shalom* is not given a direct translation. Instead, it is illustrated through the boy waving, implying a greeting. Ella could be a part of a metalinguistic community at home where she “use[s] select words and phrases” of Hebrew without completely understanding most of the language (Benor 127). After the boy says hello to Ella, he tugs at Koofi’s tail hard enough to rip it off. Instead of showing Ella upset, her mother is there to sew the tail back on, repeating “*eyn ba’aya*” to demonstrate to the children reading this book that small problems have easy fixes. Additionally, the repetition of ‘no problem’ in Hebrew and in English can reiterate the phrase for not only teaching purposes, but also to learn the Hebrew language.

As the book progresses, Ella’s next adventure is to the market where she has “falafel” and tahini sauce. Both falafel and tahini are Arabic (falafel is spelled the Hebrew way), but are commonly used in English because the foods are familiar in English speaking countries, including America. The switch from all Hebrew words and phrases integrated in the story switching to Arabic shows the diversity in Jewish American English, reflecting the variety in language adoption from historical migrations. Even though the Jewish population is spread out all over the world, as young adults they have the opportunity to take a trip to Israel to explore

their heritage. The Taglit-Birthright organization was established in 1999 to connect Jews ages 18-26 globally to Israel. Seventy two percent of people who attended this trip are predicted to feel closer to Israel and one participant even said they “returned to Israel 2 additional times” (Saxe, Leonard, et al). Generally speaking, people who visit Israel find it empowering to be in touch with their culture and want to keep exploring. This story could be the jumping point for children as an introduction to a young girl traveling to her homeland. Additionally, the Birthright trip could definitely be in Ella’s future because of the likelihood of people returning to Israel once they visit.

Another one of Ella’s adventures includes her and her family visiting “a kibbutz” (Newman). Again, this is a Hebrew word given with no direct translation after. Context in the next sentence is provided by saying that Ella does farm work and in the illustrations of the family at a farm. The images show other children exploring and picking at the growing produce. She can create a mini community not only within her family, but also the other children at the farm. A similar community can be created at Jewish summer camps that are common in America. For example, at Camp Ramah in California, productions of plays are done completely in Hebrew (“Jewish Languages and Names – Episode 2”). Not only do camps like this include various creative methods of language mixing, but they also bring Jewish children closer together if they do not have that community where they live. These camps also can be considered a metalinguistic community for children because the words in Hebrew that they may be learning do not necessarily have to be important to speaking it, it is more the fact that it is being spoken among the campers. Similarly, the word *kibbutz* may not seem important for a new speaker to learn, but it can be important to Ella’s Jewish identity to know some Hebrew to feel connected and involved.

When Ella and her family return from the trip, Koofi's fur is stained from all of the adventures that took place in Israel. Although he looks an utter mess, Ella simply hugs Koofi and tells him "*eyn ba'aya*. No problem, Koofi" (Newman). Throughout the entire story, it is adults telling Ella and Koofi no problem when Koofi is damaged. The Hebrew loanwords that Ella hears are resonating with her, and potentially with more language mixing, Ella can pick up more and more words. In fact, camps like Camp Massad in Montreal are completely spoken in Hebrew ("Jewish Languages and Names – Episode 2"). This culture based informative trip would be an incredibly constructive foundation for Ella (if she was a real person of course) to build upon her Jewish identity as she ages. At the end of the story, Koofi is shown wearing a button that reads "I heart Israel," implying that Ella's trip was not only informative, but she discovered a new love for a cultural area.

Overall, the jumpoff point of Ella's trip at such a young age opens up a multitude of doors of curiosity about her culture. Although trips to Israel are not necessarily plentiful all of the time, in North America there are ways to express and learn about Jewish culture among various groups. The language mixing in this story also provides an example of a Jewish American household and how they are able to flow so seamlessly between two languages. This story definitely gives classic examples of how a Jewish American family functions in a way to stay in touch with their culture inside and outside of Israel.

Works Cited

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