THESIS REQUIREMENTS FOR F.T.A.

READING HEBREW: A BARRIER or a GOAL to becoming a Fellow-in-Temple-Administration (FTA)

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It is the dawn of a new day - Monday, February 8, 1982. I am about to begin a new career as the "Temple Administrator" of Temple Israel in Dayton, Ohio. I have come to this position from a totally unrelated field. This is a new field, one in which you might say I had only a taste of as a chaplain's assistant in the United States Army some twenty-five years earlier.

Strangely enough, twenty-five years ago, when I asked the chaplain if there was a similar job in the "real world", he responded with a "yes, but you would not like it". Now I have called to tell him I now have that "real world" job. He is both surprised and pleased. But, let me continue on toward my goal.

On this first day, I will become acquainted with my staff (two of whom are my cousins) as their "new boss", the building (it's part of my life), and the many various aspects of the job. My predecessor, during the course of these first few days, will mention the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, Office of Synagogue Management located in New York City. This will become of significant importance as I grow into this job.

My future in this new field of endeavor will raise the question of (with apologies to William Shakespeare) "TO BE OR NOT TO BE?" a Fellow-in-Temple-Administration (FTA). This is the question which I will ask myself many times during the course of my now six years on the job and perhaps other Temple administrators may have asked themselves during their tenure.

I know every inch of this building and most of the members for it has been said that "half of them are my relatives". The job would be a challenge, but the surroundings are familiar. It was within
these walls that I was consecrated, received my religious education, and was confirmed. I was present at the groundbreaking for our sanctuary building in 1950 and now I am here to serve as the Administrator of "my congregation".

In the years before, I had had my eldest son's B'rit and my daughter named by its rabbi, his Bar Mitzvah, some moments of sorrow, and eventually, my marriage in the Chapel of the Sanctuary building that I watched grow from my "football field". The B'rit of our son from this marriage took place in the room that was once the Sanctuary where I worshipped as a child, but now is our multi-purpose room.

My religious upbringing in this, then Classical Reform congregation was Jewish but typical of Reform Jewishness in the late 1930's and early 1940's. Our rabbi always wore a dark gray pin-striped suit on the pulpit. Hebrew was almost non-existent during the service, perhaps only the Barechu, the Shema, and the Kaddish. To wear a Yarmulke or a Tallit was a "no-no".

In this city, there were then three Jewish houses of worship. There was a Conservative synagogue (or Lithuanian Shul, as my grandfather of blessed memory called it), an Orthodox synagogue (the Russian Shul, to which my grandfather belonged) and our Reform temple. In those days, the Reform movement did not have any Bar Mitzvot. Only the Orthodox and Conservative had them.

Hebrew education was given in a small building known as the Cambridge Avenue Center. My one or two days in "Chader" were, needless to say, a disaster. The teacher spent more time disciplining (not me!!) than teaching. I can remember that first day the lesson
was the Hebrew letter "bes" (it was Ashkenazic Hebrew then) with a few vowels thrown in for good measure. It was driven home by repetition of the letter with the various vowels. Little did I know that someday this method of teaching would become the way I would learn to read Hebrew.

In typical fashion, I told my dad about this horrendous day or two that I had spent and being the typical Reform Jewish father, realizing that there was not a Bar Mitzvah to be concerned with, said that I could drop out. My Hebrew education continued in religious school on Sunday mornings but really did not have much value, for it too, was given, for too short a time and, unfortunately, by the same teacher from the Hebrew School who had the same problems here.

If I was asked to read the four questions in Hebrew at the Seder, in my grandparents home, someone would transliterate them for me. Then in a monotonous voice, I would rush through so that if I made a mistake, perhaps no one would catch it.

In 1947, a young rabbi became our new spiritual leader and we turned from Classical Reform to a more Traditional Reform congregation. More Hebrew was read during the service. Shabbat morning services started and the rabbi even read from the Torah in Hebrew. B'nai Mitzvot became a part of Saturday morning services. Men were allowed to wear Yarmulkes and Tallisim.

My command of ritual Hebrew was by rote. The old "Union Prayerbooks, 1 & 2" were nearly committed to memory when lo and behold, along came "The Gates of Prayer". Now, you really did not need to know how to read Hebrew for the transliteration of most of the key prayers and songs were in the back of the book or even on the
same page in the service.

Not being able to read Hebrew really did not bother me, even when my son's Bar Mitzvah approached. It was easy to have a tutor help him. I did not need to read Hebrew, he did for he would be conducting the Shabbat morning service including the entire Torah service.

The years passed and now, here I am, a Temple Administrator. I contact The Office of Synagogue Management at the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in New York City and speak to Myron Schoen. In a few days the information I requested concerning the National Association of Temple Administrators arrives. Included with this information is a blue folder with the letters "F.T.A." on it. I read it along with the other materials and, realizing there are some time restraints involved, I put the folder aside.

At each annual convention and workshop of the National Association of Temple Administrators, I see my colleagues receive a kiddush cup and plaque for earning their Fellow-in-Temple-Administration. There are discussions with other colleagues about the F.T.A. program, some who feel that Hebrew should not be a requirement for certification and others who feel it important to be able to read. I have mixed feelings about it.

As, in many communities, there are adult education programs where Hebrew is taught. There are many reasons not to go, such as the time the class is held is not convenient for me, or yes, the embarrassment of not being able to read and maybe "too old" to learn.

Then the 1987 Scottsdale, Arizona convention-workshop of N.A.T.A. - N.A.S.A. provides a brief taste of learning to read Hebrew.
Unfortunately, it was too much and in too short a time to really digest it. However, it did stimulate some desire to learn, but not enough to do anything about it at the time.

And then, the catalyst came as the Educator of our congregation received her recognition as a Reform Jewish Educator (R.J.E.) from the National Association of Temple Educators. I suddenly felt that, if our congregation was privileged to have an educator with an R.J.E. then it was certainly entitled to have an administrator with an F.T.A.

But alas, the old roadblock, reading Hebrew from the prayerbook once again stood in the way. I was sure that if I would attend the next summer Institute of N.A.T.A. in Pittsburgh it will help prepare me in the areas of study required for the examinations that I will have to take on the way to earning my F.T.A. The understanding of the purpose and significance of the principal prayers in the "Gates of Prayer" for the Sabbath and for the High Holy Days should not defeat me. It is just that old nemesis, Hebrew, Hebrew, Hebrew!

"How can you overcome this?" is the question I ask myself. And then in the winter 1987/88 issue of "Reform Judaism" I see the advertisement from a Canadian firm for a three-cassette program with an accompanying textbook to learn to "Read Hebrew". I order it and in a few weeks it arrives.

Once I have it at home, I take out my portable cassette player and put the first tape on. I am about to embark on a new adventure. I am going to remove the "BARRIER" and learn to read Hebrew. My "GOAL" is to become a Fellow-in-Temple-Administration. That ultimate goal will soon be within my reach when I conquer my old nemesis, Hebrew.
Once again, I call the Union of American Hebrew Congregations Office of Synagogue Management to request that an application for the F.T.A. program for certification be sent to me. The office refers me to Henry Fruhauf and several hours after my call to Henry, he responds to the message left on his answering machine and tells me that he has called back to the Union to advise them to mail me the information. In a few days, a letter from Myron Schoen, now retired, arrives with the application enclosed. I would soon fill out the application and send it with my check to begin the formal process.

But, back to the Hebrew. The lessons are geared to studying a few letters and vowels in about a 30 minute session. Sometimes I repeat the lessons for several days just to make sure that I know them. Repetition is the key to success. It seems that I had heard this method being used before.

Day after day, you might say, almost "religiously", the cassette player comes out for my nightly half hour of "study time". With my wife's encouragement and my four year old son's nagging, "Daddy has to do his lesson", I charge ahead. The days pass by and slowly I was becoming "Hebrew literate".

Then there was that Friday evening some four weeks after beginning my first lesson when I routinely arrived at Temple about 30 minutes before Shabbat services. I greeted congregants, exchanged a few remarks with a Board member or two as I had done the Friday night before and on Friday nights before that and checked to make sure that everything was ready for the service.

It was 8:00 p.m. and the rabbi, our rabbinic intern, and cantor entered the Sanctuary. The cantor announced and sang the opening
hymn, our candlelighter kindled the Shabbat candles, and as usual, the cantor invited his "kiddush corps" (a group of youngsters who regularly attend Shabbat Services) to come to the B'ima to join him in chanting the kiddush. He then asked the congregation to "Turn to page 777 and join in the chanting of the kiddush in Hebrew or in transliteration". As he began to sing, I began to "sing" along, reading from the Hebrew side of the page. I was reading H-E-B-R-E-W!

After another hymn, the rabbi approached the lectern and the service continued. He asked the congregation to rise for the Barechu and there I was reading along in Hebrew, and then the Shema. Everyone was seated. "Ve-Ahavta eit Adonai Elohecha" began the rabbi as I read along, but not just going through the motions of saying the words that I had committed to memory so many years before, some of which I had forgotten and just mumbled over. It was a strange, but good feeling to be able to read and not just say the words nor the ones which preceded them, nor those that followed.

An amazing thing had happened - "an old dog had learned a new trick". It could be done. I did it. I was able to read Hebrew. Yes, I need to gain proficiency and will do it. Eventually, I hope to learn grammar and even to translate what I have read. This is another step not necessary for F.T.A. but then, why not be able to understand what you are reading?

As I was learning to read Hebrew a question crossed my mind. "How does a person feel who can't read their own language?" I began to sense what a person feels like who cannot read a newspaper, a book, a menu, or anything for that matter. The message of the public
service TV commercial for the "PLUS" program to "Promote Literacy in the United States" now made a definite impression. Now I can understand how those who cannot read must feel and how they must feel when they learn to read.

I am glad that I accepted my personal challenge to learn to read Hebrew. With continued work and learning, I will try to improve my own understanding of it and hopefully will be able to help my son as he begins his education in our local Jewish Day School (he may even teach me something as he now brings home books in Hebrew from their library to read to him) and in the preparation for his Bar Mitzvah, some eight years from now, g-d willing.

If there is a moral to this story it is that if you want to learn, you must try; if you try, you can and will succeed. Maybe the road to becoming a Fellow-in-Temple-Administration has a few BARRIERS but the GOAL can be reached.

To my friends and colleagues in the field of Temple Administration who have not faced the challenge of the F.T.A. program because of "the BARRIER - Hebrew", I think I can honestly say that you can put that excuse behind you. The program of learning at home does work. You can do it. You can reach "THE GOAL" and be a Fellow-in-Temple-Administration.