



THE LANGUAGE OF ANGELS

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Eliezer Ben Yehuda had an idea: He wanted to make Hebrew a spoken language again. But that meant that somebody had to be the first person to grow up speaking it, and that someone was going to be his son, Ben Zion. This is Ben Zion's story.

JEWISH CONCEPTS

Even when the Jewish people did not use Hebrew as a daily language, millions of Jews still wrote and spoke with the Hebrew alphabet.

Several other languages use the 22 letters and right-to-left construction of the Hebrew *alef-beit* (alphabet). Ladino, a Romance language once used by many Sephardic Jews, is written with Hebrew block letters and script and was in daily use throughout the Ottoman Empire. Several Arabic dialects are spoken by Jews and written with Hebrew letters; these are known collectively as Judeo-Arabic. Yiddish is written with the Hebrew *alef-beis*, and was once spoken by more than ten million Ashkenazi Jews in Central and Eastern Europe.

When Isaac Bashevis Singer won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1978, many people said that Yiddish, the language in which he wrote, was dying. They wondered why such a talented writer would create in a language that was not in daily use. Singer explained that “for 2000 years Hebrew was considered a dead language. Suddenly it became strangely alive. What happened to Hebrew may also happen to Yiddish one day.”

Today, millions of people speak Modern Hebrew, the language developed by Eliezer Ben-Yehuda. And the beautiful letters that adorn many pages in *The Language of Angels* point to an element of Hebrew that was never lost or forgotten.

USING THIS BOOK AT HOME

The *alef-beit* is a powerful set of Jewish symbols. Ask children to think about times when they might see Hebrew letters, and discuss whether this necessarily means that someone knows how to speak, read, or write in Hebrew. Here are some examples to get the conversation started:

- You notice someone wearing a necklace featuring a *chai* (two Hebrew letters that mean “life”);
- You see the Hebrew letter *shin* on a mezuzah at the entrance to a building or apartment;
- You visit someone’s home and spot a beautiful *ketubah* (marriage contract) ornamented with Hebrew calligraphy;
- Hebrew letters are floating in the air on some pages of this book!

Ask your children why they might be seeing these letters. This is an opportunity to explore the meaning of symbolism. What do these letters mean, if they don’t make words that people necessarily read or understand? Can you think of any other times when letters are used but don’t create words?