

## WHY SHOULD YU STUDENTS STUDY FRENCH?

As an undergraduate, I sat in a classroom in Paris and felt the pieces of my education come together. Learning about postmodern French literary theory and philosophy, concepts of intertextuality and the playfulness of interpretation, and flexing my skills of close reading, I felt a deep comfort and familiarity. Wasn't this midrash? Didn't the rabbis teach me to read in this way? Knowing Hebrew already, YU students are in a privileged position to study another language. They are also in a privileged position to study literary texts, as they are continually sharpening their interpretive skills in the *beit midrash*. "Il n'y a pas de hors texte," French philosopher and literary theorist Jacques Derrida famously wrote. There is no outside the text. Derrida, who playfully signed his name Reb Derissa in one essay, understood his debt to the rabbinic tradition. Just as the rabbis find mountains of meaning in the shape of an *aleph*, the French tradition recognizes that the world is a multifaceted text waiting to be read. Knowing another language provides one more lens into reading, interpreting and connecting with our surroundings, the stories, peoples, cultures, images and texts that make up our universe.

*Why study French?* As someone who has devoted her life to studying French literature, I can certainly offer plenty of my own reasons. But you don't have to have a PhD in French to understand its educational value. I asked my colleagues at Yeshiva College, faculty from across the curriculum, administrators and rabbis, to answer this question. What follows are their words.

**Rachel Mesch, Assistant Professor of French. Chair, Languages, Literatures & Cultures, Yeshiva College**

*A foreign language is a window onto another culture. We all need to look beyond our own dalet amos to get to know both the world and ourselves better. Learning Hebrew and Aramaic is not the same as learning a foreign language for us. Familiarity with French, for example, provides us with a small sample of what it is to be the "other" and to see the world through the glasses of the "other." Whether you go into International Finance, Law, Engineering or Medicine, the ability to understand and project yourself into someone else's culture is an important skill.*

**David Srolovitz, Dean, Yeshiva College**

*The study of language is one of the cornerstones of a true liberal arts education. French is probably the most beautiful of all languages. For the music alone, study French.*

**Fred Sugarman, Associate Dean, Yeshiva College**

*Hundreds of years before globalization Jews understood the importance of knowing many languages. It was a requirement that the Sanhedrin have members who spoke most languages. Studying at Yeshiva College is the best opportunity that you will have to learn a foreign language. French is a language of an important country and culture as well as of the largest Jewish community outside of Israel and America. Consider the benefit of being conversant in an additional language.*

**Rabbi Yosef Blau, Mashgiach Ruchani, RIETS**

*The greatest challenge in the study of history is to enter imaginatively into the thoughts and feelings of people in other times and places. One can never do that, however, by relying exclusively on what other historians have written. Besides reading works of history, one has to immerse oneself in primary sources and study those sources in their original languages. As French has been one of the most important languages in modern Europe (from about 1650 onwards), any student who wishes to study modern European history should have at least a reading knowledge of French.*

**Jeffrey Freedman, Associate Professor of European History**

*Our languages are more than practical devices for communication. The ways we think, feel, see, smell, love and hate are expressed differently depending upon the culture in which we function. Our ability to speak, feel and dream in more than one language makes us more fully human, and more able to imagine the universes of other human beings.*

*All of us understand, intuitively, the realities expressed in American English, and have some glimpse of the languages of Scripture and of Hazal-- and thus of the Divine. Hazal often resorted to Greek when they couldn't express themselves fully in Hebrew and Aramaic, the Rambam to Arabic, and Rashi to French. The more languages we can access, the more fully we can express and comprehend ourselves and our world.*

*Why French? Because millions of our fellow humans speak it, because significant treasures of modern culture are written in it, and-- to be parochial for a moment, French helps us to better understand Rashi and the Tosafists. Why French? Because it is a major language of commerce and of culture, but most of all, because it gives expression to the minds and mindsets of millions-- as well as exciting resources for our own personal growth.*

**Steven Fine, Professor of Jewish History**

*It is important to stress, in the words of the second century B.C.E. Roman poet Ennius, the great predecessor of Virgil, that he had three hearts because he knew three languages. It is crucial for us to have an understanding of and insight into other peoples in this world, and the best way to attain this is through studying their languages and literatures. The phrase lingua franca is a key to the importance of French in modern times. Because of the contribution of French scholars in almost every field of study it is crucial for those entering the world of scholarship. Right now I am teaching a course in the Greek Myths and Their Influence in the honors program. There is no language in which the Greek myths have had a more profound influence than French, as witness such playwrights as Gide, Cocteau, Giraudoux, and Anouilh.*

**Louis Feldman, Professor of Classics**

*Studying a foreign language is essential, particularly as the world turns increasingly towards globalization. Language is the key for any critical understanding of history and culture, and can broaden a student's scope to include new avenues of enrichment, study, and overall awareness. The study of French in particular allows students greater access to European history, to ideas that have transformed the Western world, and to the rich history of Jews in France; it also empowers them to build critical connections with a significant contemporary European Jewish community.*

**Debra Kaplan, Dr. Pinkhos Churgin Assistant Professor of Jewish History**

*I think students should learn a foreign language because doing so offers them an insider's perspective on another culture and at the same time enhances their understanding of English and of language generally. They should learn French in particular because it's beautiful, directly related to the history of the English language and of English literature, widely spoken, and will enable them to read, without a translator, some of the greatest literature ever written. And it was Rashi's language.*

**Gillian Steinberg, Assistant Professor of English, Director of Composition**

*I am a theoretical physicist, and as such I participate in an enterprise in which people of all countries and all languages participate. We meet, discuss and collaborate with each other in conferences, visits and other venues. Although most of them use English as their scientific language, for me speaking several foreign languages has meant the possibility of finding more bridges of communication when I am with them, the chance to move comfortably in their culture and travel, to visit them and work with them. Understanding different points of view, and being able to look at a problem from many angles is a key tool to understanding and building models of the physical world that I need to use daily. Nothing prepares you for that better than reflecting on your own "truths," the ones belonging to your own culture, and looking at them from the point of view of another culture. In other words only from outside your own circumstances, and from relating your own framework to others can you appreciate where you are standing. And there is no better way to see and understand another culture than through the window of its language. Each language I learned to speak opened another window through which I could look at and understand my own world.*

**Gabriel Cwilich, Associate Professor of Physics**

*All Yeshiva College students know that reading in translation is no substitute for reading in the original language. Learning another foreign language is, therefore, an opportunity to encounter another culture on its own terms-- through its literature and through one-on-one interactions with its constituents. Could there be a better way to fulfill Judaism's mandate to "repair the world" (leatqen olam) than by actually bridging the language gap-- one of the deepest chasms that stands between people? Perhaps it is something of a modern paradox that globalization has only sharpened these cultural differences, but the need for the deep, intimate knowledge of other cultures that comes with knowledge of a foreign language has only grown greater in today's world. This, of course, has the most practical effect in the job market: a foreign language is an advantage in almost every career open to Yeshiva College graduates.*

*All of these arguments in favor of studying any foreign language hold true for the specific case of French. But French has a set of benefits all its own. Those students who wish to pursue careers in academia, especially in the humanities and academic Jewish Studies, will find that French is a requirement for most advanced degrees. This is because there is a large body of scholarship written in French. My own research in Bible and Ancient Near Eastern literature brings me to read French on a daily basis. Beginner-level French can also be a first step towards reading medieval French literature, and thus towards understanding the world that produced many of the luminaries known to Yeshiva College students from their studies of the Talmud, like Rashi, Rashbam, and the Tosafists.*

**Shalom Holtz, Assistant Professor of Bible**

*Besides the obvious practical reasons to study French (spoken around the world and next door in Quebec, it's an official language of the UN and the United States Postal Service, and it's on your US passport!), the language is crucial for study of many things Jewish from about 1000 and on -- and, it turns out, many earlier subjects, as well. Rashi spoke French and drew on Hebrew-French glossaries in his commentaries, and some of the Tosafists lived and worked in France and French. Jewish involvement in the modern world owes a great deal to the new policies and philosophy of the Revolution and then Napoleon. Modern Zionism took off because Herzl was in Paris for the Dreyfus Trial, and some current conflicts regarding Israel hinge on the presence of a definite article in the French version of UN Security Council Resolution 242!*

*Napoleon and his conquests also inspired the modern study of the ancient Near Eastern world to a great deal. Our understanding of ancient Israel within its historical, cultural, and linguistic contexts therefore owes a great deal to French researchers of the past two centuries, and many of the most important studies of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Levant have been, and continue to be written, in French.*

**Aaron Koller, Instructor of Bible**

*You can't know your own language well until you know another. The world is not monolingual, or even bilingual. We shouldn't be either. Different languages structure thought differently. Studying new languages enables us to perceive the world in different ways--and makes us smarter.*

**Lauren Fitzgerald, Associate Professor of English, Director of the Writing Center**

*"To imagine a language is to imagine a form of life," wrote Wittgenstein. When we extend that principle to language acquisition, crossing the border into the terrain of another language teaches some of the profoundest lessons about the language one resides in or calls "home," and is surely the greatest reward a robust Foreign Language program can bestow. The very notion of "foreignness"—and concomitantly, of at-home-ness, of being chez-soi—is put to the test and embodied in a way that only the otherness of another tongue can dramatize—quite literally in one's mouth and at one's fingertips. Every language, by definition, contains an aspect of openness to enigma, to what eludes its grasp. That gift of mystery is part and parcel of trying to understand a word in a foreign language. That openness of meaning is what makes a language "alive"; in turn, it can return us to the words and sounds we take for granted, deepening, opening, and revivifying them. If "the word in language is half someone else's" (Bakhtin), then words in other languages have the capacity to teach us the very meaning of sharing a world in common.*

*But another, equally crucial significance of language study needs to be emphasized; and this one is specifically a matter of studying French. New Yorkers (and many others) axiomatically assume New York City to be the capital of the 20th century and possibly the 21st. Through the 2nd World War, it could be argued, that distinction was more frequently assigned to Paris. Paris—and by extension, French culture—were “where the 20th century was,” according to Gertrude Stein; for Walter Benjamin, Paris was “the capital of the 19th century.” And in her recent book, *The World Republic of Letters*, Pascale Casanova offers a version of that claim with special relevance for those business-minded students at Yeshiva College. Over against the national boundaries that give rise to political belief and nationalist feeling, Casanova argues, the world of letters creates its own geography and its own divisions. As the part that represents the whole, the cities where literary resources are concentrated, where they accumulate, become places where belief is incarnated, centers of credit. “Indeed, they may be thought of as central banks of a specific sort: thus Ramuz described Paris as the universal bank of foreign exchange and commerce in literature.” Even if Paris itself was a modern myth created by literature, the exaggerated icon of a transnational crossroads, it was also because the French language signified “capital” in a parallel sense: literary capital, French as the “bourse” of literary values, as wealth to be accumulated within what the French poet Paul Valéry, in *La liberté de l'esprit*, called “spiritual economy.” In this regard, Yeshiva College students can only gain from banking that sort of capital in the afternoon program, where spiritual economy can take (for them) perhaps unexpected but no less needful and vital forms.*

**Adam Zachary Newton, University Professor. Chair, Department of English**

*Literature provides one of the best pathways into understanding individuals from other cultures: their language, their inner worlds, their actions. It also provides the best pathways to the highest, best, richest, most fraught uses of the language it's written in. To read a work of literature in the most meaningful ways, you need to know that language. The same goes for reading a subculture or a culture. And in today's world, it's both necessary and desirable to attempt to understand and communicate with non-Anglophone people.*

**Will Lee, Associate Professor of English**

*As a cognitive psychologist, I am aware of a vast amount of research evidence that supports the fact that speaking a foreign language can improve one's cognitive and critical thinking abilities. Furthermore, these days knowledge of foreign languages is critical for a great deal of interesting career paths, many of which require intermediate to high-level competence in one or more foreign languages. Learning a foreign language allows one to understand and appreciate other cultures from a vantage point that is very different from one that is unilingual. It also allows one to gain a new perspective on one's own culture because it enables the person to compare and contrast cultural values and concepts.*

*Great French minds in philosophy, literature, and film (to name a few...): Albert Camus, Jean Cocteau, Simone de Beauvoir, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean-Luc Godard, Louis Malle, Marcel Proust, Jean Renoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, François Truffaut.*

**Anna-Lisa Cohen, Assistant Professor of Psychology**