Learning Classical Hebrew through a Communicative Approach

Ideally, when learning a classical language, students journey to the past and inhabit another culture, where they have their assumptions challenged and learn to think differently. Learning classical Hebrew, for example, transports students to an ancient Semitic culture, one that has had a lasting impact on Western religion, philosophy, literature, and practice. Yet the traditional method used to teach classical languages does not serve students well. Most classical language courses rely on grammar instruction to develop students into competent readers, and students interact with the language in limited ways.

In order to facilitate better our students’ voyage to the past, we must adopt a new approach to learning classical languages. Research on SLA demonstrates that communicative approaches suit a greater variety of student learning styles and develop competence in a language more effectively and efficiently. Developed for teaching modern languages, communicative approaches have not been widely adopted for learning classical languages. In the case of classical Hebrew, experimentation with communicative approaches remains in its infancy.

I will use the NEH Distinguished Teaching Professorship to pioneer such a paradigm shift. I will transform UVA’s four-semester classical Hebrew language program, which will serve as a prototype for classical language instruction at UVA and beyond. Specifically, I will research, design, implement, and assess a communicative approach to learning classical Hebrew and share the fruits of my project with other instructors of classical languages at UVA and within my professional organizations. Given the advantages of a communicative approach, a redesigned sequence of classical Hebrew courses based on communicative principles will enhance student engagement with the language and culture of ancient Israel and early Judaism, yielding both more significant learning and higher retention rates. The project will put UVA’s classical Hebrew program, and potentially other classical language programs at UVA, in line with best practices in language instruction and at the forefront of a major shift in classical language learning.