

Episode 5 - Hebrew Slang

Hey everyone and welcome to the new episode of “Yalla: Learning Hebrew with Steph”. I’m Steph and today I want to talk about Hebrew slang and some of the things I’ve noticed throughout my time learning Hebrew.

Maybe you have heard some of these words before, like ‘Sababa’, ‘Achi’ and of course ‘Yalla’, and thought to yourself what do they actually mean? Well, by the end of this episode, you’ll not only know the meanings but also how to use them!

As a learner, I feel like slang can sometimes be the hardest part [about learning a language]. Despite the fact that slang is usually simple and easy to understand, it’s hard to know when exactly to use it. However, to use and to understand slang is an important step to becoming fluent in the language.

Let’s start! Hebrew slang is connected not just to language, but also to culture. It reflects Israeli society, history and culture - it’s fast-paced, direct, and full of humor. Let’s talk about where Israeli slang comes from and what are the cultural roots that influence the Hebrew language.

The first slang word of this episode is of course “Yalla”. The word “Yalla” comes from Arabic and translates to “Let’s go” in English. It is used all the time in Hebrew and it has lots of different meanings depending on the context. It can be used to urge or push people to start doing something, for example, “אללה הולכים” or “אללה תזיז” meaning “Let’s go” or “Come on, move!”. It can also be used to finish a conversation e.g. “אללה נדבר מחר” meaning “Okay, let’s talk tomorrow”.

A lot of popular slang words in Hebrew come from Arabic. The reason for this is the shared geographical, historical, and cultural proximity of Jewish and Arab communities in Israel and the Middle East. Another example of an Arabic word that is slang in Hebrew is the word “וואלה”, the second slang word that we will speak about in this episode. The meaning of “וואלה” in English is “Really?” or “No way!”. For example, “וואלה? זה חדש לי”.

The final slang word from Arabic that we will speak about in this episode is “חלאס” which means “enough” or “stop it”. For example, you might say “חלאס לריב” or “stop fighting!”. It is similar to the word “די”, which is another slang word for “enough” or “stop it” and is also used a lot in casual Hebrew. I have a funny story about the word “די”. When Alon and I first got together and I was meeting some of his Israeli friends for the first time, we went to their house for dinner and they had two sweet dogs. At one moment, one of the dogs was misbehaving and someone was saying “די, די” to the dog. This was the first time I had heard this word and of course, in English, it sounds like “Die” or “למות” in Hebrew and so I thought they were telling the dog to die.

Another language in which many words are used in Hebrew slang is Yiddish. The first word is a word that I use all the time, even when speaking in English, and that is “בלגן”. The word “בלגן” means “messy” or “chaos” in English. You might say “וואו איזה בלאגן” when something is not organised. For example, if the kitchen is a mess, if my life is a mess, or if I am confused or overwhelmed. Another popular word taken from Yiddish is “חוצפה”, which is also a word

you sometimes hear in English. It means cheeky or audacity in English and is often used to describe someone that is brave or daring. For example, "צריך חוצפה כדי לפתוח עסק כזה". But mostly, when using the word "חוצפה" it has a negative meaning, that is to be rude or disrespectful. For example "איזו חוצפה להתנהג ככה בפגישה".

Something that I find interesting about slang in the Hebrew language is that even though Hebrew is one of the oldest languages in the world, modern spoken Hebrew was only revived about 100 years ago. Slang is something that is very important to this renewal. Slang is an important part of the ongoing development of the Hebrew language. You can see that the Hebrew language continues to change from generation to generation. Young Israelis create new slang all the time and are influenced by the rest of the world and social media TikTok and Instagram.

The next group of slang words I want to focus on are those where their real meaning is different from their meaning in slang. As a language learner, these words and phrases are the most difficult to understand and use correctly.

The first example is: "סוף הדרך", whose literal meaning is "end of the road" but in slang the meaning in English is "Awesome" or "Unbelievable". For example, "הופעה אתמול הייתה סוף הדרך". It's possible to think about it like we are on a really great trip, that with each moment gets better until we finally arrive at the last point which symbolizes the best that can be achieved or reached.

The next example has more of a negative meaning. "על הפנים" literally meaning "On the face" but in slang is used to mean something that is "Terrible" or "Awful" in English. For example, "המבחן היה על הפנים, לא הבנתי כלום". The exact origin of this slang word is not known but I like to think of it as being similar to "falling flat on your face" in English. It evokes a sense of failure, embarrassment, or disappointment.

The last and most confusing example for these types of slang phrases is "חבל על הזמן". Literally it means "waste of time" in English but is used something that is "Incredible" or "Fantastic". This is definitely an ironic use of Hebrew slang. For example, "השיר הזה? חבל על הזמן". Historically, this phrase was used negatively, similar to how it's used in English, to suggest something is not worth the effort or attention. But in slang the meaning is the total opposite, this positive meaning likely comes from the idea that something is so good that words can't fully capture it—talking about it would "waste time" because it's just that incredible. You can sometimes see people using "חבל על הזמן" on their friends photos on social media or on advertisements where businesses use it to describe their products or services.

In the last part of this episode, I wanted to talk about a couple of the Hebrew slang phrases that I have come across in my Hebrew journey.

That's everything for today's episode. I hope that you found this episode fun and interesting and hopefully you also learned something new! I have a challenge you: the next time that you are speaking Hebrew to try and incorporate some Hebrew slang or if you are listening to

another Hebrew podcast of native speaker try to see if you can notice any Hebrew slang that they are using. And of course, if you do, I will be happy to hear from you! You can write me an email or leave a comment on my website. I will put a link in the podcast description.

Finally, if you have any questions or ideas for future episodes, let me know! Remember you can also find the transcripts for this episode, in Hebrew and in English on my website.

Thank you very much for listening to this episode of "Yalla: Learning Hebrew with Steph" and until next time - take care and keep learning!