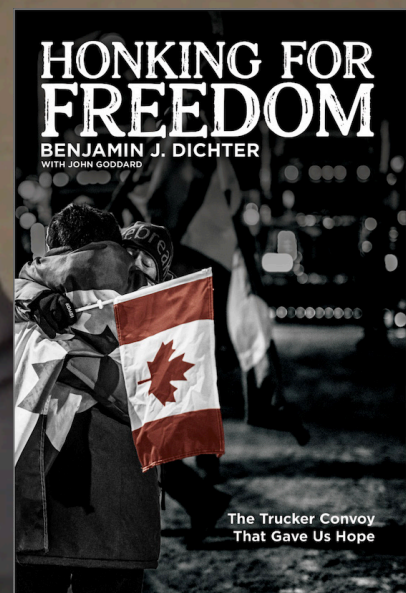


# The Canadian Jewish News

## BENJAMIN DICHTER tells his side of the story of THE FREEDOM CONVOY

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# ‘Freedom is sometimes a messy business’: The Freedom Convoy’s former spokesman Benjamin Dichter’s view of three weeks that paralyzed Ottawa

/ Ellin Bessner

**B**enjamin Dichter became a national news figure as spokesman for the Freedom Convoy which paralyzed Ottawa for three weeks in the winter of 2022—long enough to become the subject of fascination beyond these borders on Fox News and elsewhere, but also the target of some criticism.

However his own Jewish parents might have been his toughest audience of all.

Their son tried explain why he joined the thousands who converged on Parliament Hill to protest against vaccine mandates and the ArriveCan app, given that he was fully vaccinated against COVID.

“They think I’m a *meshuhgah*, but we love each other,” Dichter says, describing the scene with his 70-something Mom and Dad, in an interview in early December with The CJA Daily from his Toronto home.

“This was a movement for freedom,” says Dichter, 46, who’s promoting a new book about his experiences: *Honking for Freedom: The Truckers Convoy that Gave us Hope*.

“And I think everybody in the medical community understands that we’re not against that, but we are against being forced.”

The book was co-written with John Goddard, although Dichter insists it was much more than a ghostwriting effort. Goddard, a former journalist with the Toronto Star, spent days observing the convoy, and did extensive interviews and research about some of the main storylines.

They decided to self-publish right away and sell it through Amazon, he says, rather than shop it around. (Conservative journalist Andrew Lawton had a best-seller earlier this year with his account of events, which was published by Sutherland House.)

The publication date was intentionally slated for Nov. 11, on Remembrance Day.

Dichter was ordered to Ottawa in early November to testify before the federal government’s current public inquiry into the use of the Emergencies Act. The Trudeau government invoked the Act on Feb. 14, giving it special powers that then helped police clear the convoy, and remove border blockades in other parts of the country.

“I think there’s enough people in our political class who need to be reminded as to the significance of Nov. 11,” Dichter says.

“People didn’t storm the beaches of Normandy so these lobbyists and political hacks can turn our country into [a] banana republic.”

As part of its special powers, Ottawa forced banks to freeze the ac-

counts, credit cards and credit lines of the protest organizers. Dichter acknowledges that all but one of his accounts was reactivated as soon as the act was lifted Feb. 23— but eight days passed when he couldn’t access money.

“I couldn’t go buy myself a cup of coffee with a broken ankle (he had slipped on ice outside an Ottawa hotel). I couldn’t go buy myself medicine. Some of the drivers who have diabetes, they couldn’t buy themselves insulin.

“This was the government attacking us.”

Months later, he still sees consequences in his financial situation.

One of his accounts with the Royal Bank—which he doesn’t often use—was off-limits even in early December because his client card did not work. He was told by a clerk that the account remained frozen because of the sanctions from February.

Before the Freedom Convoy took over downtown Ottawa, Dichter had an eclectic career. The graduate of Toronto’s Associated Hebrew Schools worked as a gemologist and diamond grader in Europe.

He’d subsequently operated a printing shop near the former Ryerson University campus in Toronto. He ran (unsuccessfully) for Toronto city council in 2014, and (also unsuccessfully) for the federal Conservatives in the 2015 election.

And, together with one of his brothers, he bought a big rig truck. It gave them the opportunity to haul products to the northeastern United States—including loads of maple syrup.

But Dichter came to the attention of Alberta-based Freedom Convoy organizer Tamara Lich because of his reputation as a podcast producer, including for right-wing media personalities like Tom Quiggin—a former Canadian military veteran who advocates for free speech, and opines with conspiracy theories about Islamic terrorism.

Lich had organized smaller protests by oil and gas workers from her home in Medicine Hat, and she had ties to the Yellow Vest movement in Canada, which was inspired by demonstrations in France.

Dichter was invited to join the team to handle communications, as the convoy began driving east from B.C. and Alberta towards the National Capital Region. And he came up with a motto he hoped would show the protests were all about “peace, love, unity and freedom.”

At every turn, Dichter tried to keep spreading the message to convince Canadians that the truckers were participating in a “Woodstock” moment, with no desire to do anything violent.

“That’s why they were feeding the homeless. They had a soup kitchen. They were building saunas and hot tubs and having dance parties,” he recounts.

News reports reflected such scenes, but Ottawa police also laid over 500 charges against the protesters—including for assault, and uttering threats against law enforcement personnel. (The RCMP also seized truckloads of weapons and made arrests when they cleared a border protest in Coutts, Alta.)

And if there was goodwill that preceded the convoy’s arrival in Ottawa in January, that changed after scenes of a woman emerged showing her dancing on the National War Memorial—which Dichter brands as “fake.” News reports told of downtown shoppers being harassed, and then local residents filed a class-action lawsuit to stop incessant honking from the idling trucks. The claim was that it interfered with their daily activities and mental health.

Dichter denies the honking was part of the protesters’ strategy, rather insisting the noise was more like some dogs barking to say “hello” on a summer night. (He also claims he didn’t hear much

honking while he was walking the streets.)

As for the most damaging scenes, of Nazi and Confederate flags being spotted among the protesters, Dichter downplayed them at the time. “Who cares?” he told journalists in late January—which became the focus of an episode of *The CJN Daily*.

But these symbols inevitably galvanized public opinion and brought condemnation from federal politicians across the political spectrum. They also sparked a private members’ bill adopted in the House of Commons to ban the use of hate symbols.

The Nazi flag in particular also led to a heated exchange in the House of Commons between Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Conservative MP Melissa Lantsman, now deputy leader. Trudeau accused Lantsman, the descendant of Holocaust survivors, of standing with people who wave Nazi flags.

Jewish groups were understandably outraged by it all. The Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs issued a news release Jan. 30 condemning the small minority of protesters who “shamefully” used Nazi symbols and were “misappropriating” the Star of David symbol to “advance their political objectives.”

But today, Dichter offers a different explanation for where the flags came from: he says they were staged by political actors who wanted to make the Freedom Convoy look bad.

Who does he accuse of being behind it?

Not the known Holocaust deniers from fringe, far-right-wing elements who were part of the protest, but the Liberal government.

Dichter writes in *Honking for Freedom* that the flag was carried as a plant, and cited reports from a Rebel News journalist who said that several photographers with Liberal ties arranged to be there when the flag appeared near the Chateau Laurier hotel.

But now, he acknowledges the theory has holes in it, and it might have been someone with Conservative ties instead.

At the inquiry, a convoy lawyer suggested the man suspected of carrying the flag is Brian Cox, who works for a Conservative lobbying group. (Cox insists he has not been in Ottawa in years and threatened to sue for libel if the allegations were not retracted.)

In light of these developments, Dichter says he won’t revise his manuscript, explaining that it would be a waste of time to file Freedom of Information requests to find out more.

Despite this waffling, he admits that those hateful symbols worked against the Freedom Convoy, no matter who was behind them.

Which is why within hours of the Nazi flag photos making their way through social media, Dichter held a media conference in an undisclosed location in Ottawa with the convoy organizers. It was by invitation only, and no mainstream news organizations were invited. (The CJN was also not invited, and a subsequent interview that night with us was cancelled.)

Dichter explains why he counterattacked by asserting his Jewish religious identity, while also revealing the backgrounds of the convoy leaders Tamara Lich and Chris Barber, too.

“Listen, she’s Metis, I’m Jewish. We have a whole bunch of people here. We have Sikhs here. So button it up and let’s move on,” he recalled telling the journalists.

Did it help?

“It definitely did...you can see the collective ‘Oh, okay. So if we keep going in this direction, this Dichter guy is going to come out with a kippah and tallis.”

Dichter was adopted into a Jewish family in Toronto. After attending Associated Hebrew Schools, and having a bar mitzvah, he graduated from public high school at York Mills Collegiate.

When he was being sworn in to testify before the Emergencies Act inquiry on Nov. 3, he insisted on using a Torah for the ceremony, although he was miffed because they had only an English-language version of the Old Testament.

“For me, it’s got to be in Hebrew. That’s just my thing.”

Dichter claims he is opposed to what he calls identity politics focused on someone’s race. While active in the Conservative party, he formed a group called LGBTory, dedicated to helping gay and lesbian partisans feel welcome. However, in the past, Dichter has himself been accused of making comments that could be described as Islamophobic, according to the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Centre in Toronto.

If he could do it over again, Dichter would have banned some of the most vicious conspiracy theorists from the Freedom Convoy from the get-go. He swears he tried to, but they wouldn’t go home.

Although he describes himself as a “free speech absolutist,” he also worried that some of their videos crossed the line of Canadian hate-speech legislation.

Being part of the convoy served to catapult some of these fringe protesters from what Dichter calls “mouthy” nobodies to a much wider and more dangerous platform than they had originally enjoyed. James Bauder—one of the original organizers—is a supporter of the antisemitic and homophobic QAnon conspiracy group, and called for overthrowing the Canadian government. He was arrested and is awaiting trial.

Another volunteer, Pat King, now also facing trial, incited people to put a “bullet” into the prime minister’s head. (He has since apologized for the comments.) Jeremy MacKenzie, the founder of the far-right Diagonol movement, based in Nova Scotia, has since been charged for 13 weapons offences related to anti-mask protests.

Dichter thinks the real danger for Canadian Jews comes instead from those who are inside the corridors of government in Ottawa, including inside the political parties themselves. And he urges community leaders to focus on fighting antisemitism there.

“We ignore or excuse away sometimes the people who have power and are a real danger to us. And for me, quite frankly, it’s embarrassing (that people think) that we’re living in the 1940s, that the Third Reich is coming around the corner. No, that’s 80 years ago.

“The threat is completely different now, and everybody is ignoring

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it because of diversity.”

The protests found some support in the Jewish community. Some people decried the vaccine mandates and the resulting job losses for people who refused to get vaccinated.

Dichter describes finding allies in Ottawa’s Lubavitch community. In his book, he writes that they came out every Sunday to convoy prayer services, and asked him to put on tefillin.

In his book, he said he met a religious Jewish woman in the crowd holding up a sign equating vaccine mandates with the swastika. What she meant, he said, was the Trudeau government was acting like Nazis.

With the convoy attracting international attention and filling hours of news coverage—and an expected report still to come from the judge conducting the inquiry in early 2023—Dichter was asked what more he hopes his book can contribute to the conversation about the largest mass protest in Canadian history.

He intends it to provide some “accurate” behind-the-scenes glimpses of life in Ottawa during those heady below-zero days, rather than leaving the final word to the politicians, and the journalists who he accuses of toeing the party line.

”In the future, I want people to be able to look back and read this and see what actually went on.”

He delves into his three weeks shuttling between hotels, including breaking an ankle and having orthopedic surgery in hospital, surviving a car accident, evading arrest, and the infighting between members of the convoy’s organizing committee and their lawyers and hangers-on, who had their own agendas.

But the aftermath of the protest continues. Dichter is still in pain from his ankle injury, when he slipped on the ice, which he refers to as a “battle scar.”

He’s also facing that massive class-action lawsuit brought by Ottawa residents who are seeking over \$300-million in damages. Whether the defendants, including Dichter, will be able to afford to fight it is currently unclear.

The \$23 million raised for the truckers via crowdfunding campaigns was frozen last winter, at the request of the Canadian government. Some money has already been returned to donors. The rest is in escrow.

The convoy’s lawyers are asking the courts to overturn this, so that Dichter and his co-organizers can afford counsel.

So, as a self-published author, he also needs to sell a lot of books. The back-cover blurb on *Honking for Freedom* is an enthusiastic endorsement from Jordan Peterson.

But he also hopes the readers will realize that, despite everything, the Freedom Convoy was a success. Restrictions were lifted by provincial governments in the subsequent weeks, and vaccine mandates for travellers were gradually repealed, including the ArriveCan app.

Meanwhile, some government officials have been busy preparing for a repeat scenario, in which protesters go ahead with a planned Freedom Convoy 2.0 in February 2023. The apparent organizer James Bauder, who is facing charges, already posted on his Facebook page calling for a short four-day “olive branch” edition to take place in Ottawa on the Family Day Weekend.

Dichter dismisses the idea. He’s told the group as much.

“Some of those people, they just want to be famous at any cost and they don’t understand how dangerous any sort of fame can be, but they’re just desperate for it.” ■

**Ellin Bessner is chief correspondent of *The CJA Daily*.**

## **Drive-by antisemitism in a Montreal neighbourhood nets perpetrator a conditional sentence—and a hate charge for his accomplice**

/ Janice Arnold

**A** man arrested after allegedly yelling antisemitic slurs while driving through a Montreal Jewish neighbourhood last year has been charged with willfully inciting hatred against an identifiable group.

The trial of Jawad Jawad, 21, is expected to begin in February. He also faces counts of uttering threats and being in possession of a weapon for dangerous purposes.

A second man with him in the vehicle was acquitted on Dec. 2 of uttering threats and being in possession of a weapon for dangerous purposes after he signed a peace bond in Quebec court.

Judge Pierre Labelle however agreed with Crown attorney Cynthia Gyenizse’s recommendation that Aymane Boushaba, 21, be subject to a number of restrictions for the next six months.

He is forbidden to come within 200 metres of the Jewish community or the home or place of work of the unnamed person whose complaint led to his arrest on May 17, 2021 in Côte St. Luc. Boushaba can also not make any direct or indirect reference to Jews or the complainant on social media during the six months or possess a weapon.

The two Montreal men were stopped by police at the intersection of Kildare Road and Westminster Avenue soon after several people in Côte St. Luc reported witnessing them verbally harass Jews as they drove by.

The incident occurred during the conflict between Israel and Hamas in May 2021 when the Jewish community was on high alert for possible repercussions locally.

The day before, a pro-Israel rally at downtown Dorchester Square was violently disrupted by pro-Palestinian demonstrators, some of whom threw rocks. Police deployed tear gas after the protesters did not obey orders to disperse. At least 15 arrests were made and dozens of infraction notices issued among the Palestinian supporters.

Boushaba and Jawad, both Montreal residents, posted a widely viewed video on social media taken as they drove through Côte St. Luc, which one described as “where the Jews live.” They took it down shortly afterward.

Tensions were such that the suburb’s Mayor Mitchell Brownstein sent out a robocall the next day, at the conclusion of Shavuot, reassuring residents that police and local public security were expending necessary resources in the wake of “recent incidents targeting the Jewish community.”

Federation CJA and its advocacy agency, the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs, wrote they are “encouraged” by the decision.

“The courts sent a clear message today: roaming with knives and yelling racial slurs at Quebecers of Jewish heritage is unacceptable in any setting and perpetrators will face the consequences of acting on hatred,” federation CEO Yair Szlak stated.

“This sentence sends a clear message to those who seek to perpetrate hate that these actions are not welcome in Quebec and that the consequences are real.”

The penalty imposed on Boushaba was also welcomed by Elisabeth Prass, the area Liberal MNA for D’Arcy McGee and the official critic for the fight against racism. “I am reassured to know that the court is holding accountable the person who made antisemitic threats to Côte St Luc residents in May 2021...” she tweeted. ■

**Janice Arnold has been reporting for The CJN from Montreal since 1976.**

## Vancouver’s JWest project is getting a \$25-million boost from Ottawa

/ Jeremy Appel

**A** man arrested after allegedly yelling antisemitic slurs while driving through a Montreal Jewish neighbourhood last year has been charged with willfully inciting hatred against an identifiable group.

The federal government will match the B.C. government’s \$25 million in funding for a Jewish community hub in Vancouver, Harjit Sajjan, the minister responsible for the Pacific Economic Development Agency of Canada, said at a press conference Dec. 5.

The project, dubbed JWest, includes the redevelopment and expansion of the existing Jewish Community Centre of Greater Vancouver, affordable housing units and increased child care spaces, updated arts, cultural, heritage and athletic facilities, and an expanded Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre.

It will also house King David High School, which is currently located across the street from the JCC.

Sajjan and Vancouver Granville MP Taleeb Noormohamed attended the press conference at the JCC to announce the funding commitment on behalf of Minister of Heritage Pablo Rodriguez.

In his remarks, Sajjan pointed to how the JCC welcomes people from all backgrounds, adding that he’s picked up his kids from events at the facility “a number of times.”

“The J, as it’s also known to locals, is a pillar of our city, a unique gathering space for shared experiences and, not to mention, an important hub for a number of community organizations,” Sajjan said.

He framed the government’s support for the project in the context of combatting rising antisemitism.

“We know investments in cultural infrastructure like this one helps us to celebrate, preserve and honour the culture of our Jewish Canadian communities while strengthening a diverse and inclusive Canada,” said Sajjan.

Noormohamed said JWest is “not just a project for the Jewish community.”

“This is a project that signifies the contribution and the commitment of the Jewish community to all of us and all of Vancouver,” he said.

Ezra Shanken, the CEO of the Jewish Federation of Greater Vancouver, told The CJN that while the Liberal government had committed to funding JWest in its most recent budget, it hadn’t committed a firm dollar amount.

“The \$25 million number is really the exciting part of this announcement, in that there was a real confirmation of the support they’re bringing to the table for this project,” Shanken said. “It’s fantastic, just fantastic.”

Shanken, who’s worked for the federation since 2013, said this project has been one of its top priorities since he’s been there.

In addition to \$50 million from the federal and provincial governments, another \$50 million has been raised by philanthropists, including the Diamond Foundation. The goal is to get an additional \$100 million through private donors.

“We’re still pushing along with the private side,” said Shanken. “Look, if anybody wants to donate to a project in Vancouver, we’ll take it.”

The project is divided in two phases. The first is building a new JCC, which will be double the size of the existing building. The new building will be built where the parking lot currently sits to ensure no disruption to the JCC’s programming.

The second phase will involve the building of the new King David High School and two towers of housing, which will provide somewhere between 500 and 700 rental units, with a “fair amount” below market value “for those in need,” Shanken said.

He estimates the entire project will be completed by 2030.

Shanken said the project, which he described as “building an ecosystem,” fits with the City of Vancouver’s densification goals.

“We’re going to have a lot more people here and we want to kind of create the arteries of the body leading into the beating heart,” he said. “We’re kind of pushing people into this incredible hub of life here that’s covering cradle to grave everybody’s needs.” ■

**Jeremy Appel is a Calgary-based freelance journalist.**

## What the 2021 census reveals about Canada’s Jewish community—as examined by sociology professor Robert Brym

**R**ecently released data from the 2021 Canadian census provide a new understanding of the country’s Jewish communities. Robert Brym, a professor in the Department of Sociology and Centre for Jewish Studies, University of Toronto, analyzed the preliminary figures for The CJN.

## Canada's Jewish population

Preliminary 2021 census results reveal 335,295 Canadians identified as Jews by religion in 2021, up from 329,500 in 2011.

Based on what we know about a number of factors that determine population change over time, most demographers and sociologists expected a small increase in the size of the Jewish population as a whole between 2011 and 2021. We are apparently receiving more Jewish immigrants than we are losing through emigration, and this positive net balance probably more than compensates for the fact that women's total fertility rate is below the level required to maintain the size of the population.

## Who does the census count as Jewish?

Conventionally, a "yes" answer to either of the following questions results in a Canadian being counted as Jewish in the Canadian census: (1) Does the person identify as Jewish by religion? (2) Does the person identify as Jewish by ethnicity and identify with no religion?

We won't have a count by criterion (2) for another couple months. All we know now is that 282,015 Canadians identify as Jews by ethnicity. Some of these people reported no religion, others reported their religion as Jewish, and still others reported a religion other than Jewish. Until a new data release allows us to determine how many people fall into each category, we are left with a rough estimate of the number of people who fit criterion (2).

Accordingly, in 2021, roughly 58,200 Canadians were Jewish by criterion (2). Therefore, the total Jewish population by criteria (1) and (2) combined was around 393,500. In addition, 52,000 or so Canadians identified with a religion other than Jewish but still identified as Jewish ethnically, often in conjunction with one or more other ethnicities.

In the following discussion, I sometimes refer to Jews by religion and sometimes to Jews in general. The latter includes my rough estimate of Jews by ethnicity who identify with no religion. I do not include in my figures people who identified with a religion other than Jewish but identified as Jewish ethnically.

Canada's 393,500 Jews form the world's fourth largest Jewish community, after those of Israel, the United States, and France. If current trends in natural increase and net migration continue, Canada's Jewish population may exceed that of France within a decade. Both countries have Jewish fertility rates below the replacement level and aging Jewish populations, but Canada's net migration is positive while France's is negative.

## Jewish immigrants to Canada

Between 1980 and 2021, an average of roughly 1,500 Jews by religion immigrated to Canada annually, with little variation in the total for each decade. By the end of that period, more than 91,000 Canadian residents who identified as Jewish by religion (27.1% of all Jews by religion) were immigrants. Six countries contributed nearly 62% of Canada's immigrant Jews by religion: Israel (19.0%), the United States (12.6%), Ukraine (8.3%), Russia (8.2%), Morocco (7.8%), and South Africa (6.8%).

Immigration from Morocco and South Africa has dropped sharply in recent decades. Immigration from Ukraine and Russia continues at a reduced tempo from its height in the 1990s, although the Russo-Ukrainian war may reverse that trend. Im-

migration from Israel and the United States has been trending upward. The rightward drift of politics in both countries may be part of the reason.

## Jewish migration within Canada

Some Jews by religion born in one Canadian province migrate to another province. Four provinces account for the great majority of such people. In absolute terms, Ontario has attracted by far the most Jews by religion born elsewhere in the country—about 25,000 of them, nearly 13% of the province's Jews by religion. The second most attractive province for Jews by religion born elsewhere in Canada is British Columbia, with about 7,800 internal immigrants, or 30% of Jews by religion in the province. For Quebec, the corresponding figures are around 5,000 and 6%, and for Alberta they are about 2,850 and 26%.

## Jewish population centres

Canadian Jewry is highly concentrated geographically. More than 98% of Canada's Jews live in only five provinces: Ontario, Quebec, British Columbia, Manitoba, and Alberta. Some 95% of the country's Jewish population lives in just 17 urban areas, 10 of them in Ontario, 2 in each of Alberta and British Columbia, and one in each of Quebec, Manitoba, and Nova Scotia.

Nearly one-half of Canada's Jews live in Toronto and nearly one-quarter in Montreal, with about 6% in Vancouver, more than 3% in each of Ottawa and Winnipeg, and 2% in Calgary. Preliminary data don't permit definitive statements about which communities are growing, which are stable, and which are shrinking.

However, they suggest, perhaps surprisingly, that the decline in Montreal's Jewish population, evident since the mid-1970s, may have ceased. If so, that may be due to two factors. First, the number of haredim in Montreal has grown to about 20,000 (more than one-fifth of Montreal's Jewish population), and haredi families tend to have many more children than do non-haredi families. Second, Jewish immigration from France to Montreal has picked up over the last two decades because of the relatively high level of antisemitism in France, including violent attacks against Jews.

## Hebrew-speakers and Yiddish-speakers

The 2021 census asked Canadians several questions about their language use. Two Jewish languages were mentioned by respondents: Hebrew and Yiddish.

More than four times as many Canadians claim to know Hebrew (83,205) than claim to know Yiddish (20,155). Yiddish is still spoken by many haredim, but immediate post-Second World War Yiddish-speaking immigrants from Eastern Europe are elderly and rapidly declining in number. I estimate that there are about 7,000-8,000 Holocaust survivors remaining in Canada. In contrast, the 35,345 Canadians who claimed Israeli ethnicity in the 2021 census are likely all Jews who know Hebrew. And more than 40% of Canadian Jews have attended Jewish day schools, which emphasize Hebrew and pay little, if any, attention to Yiddish. Even if a small number of Canadians who know Hebrew are Palestinian immigrants, it is entirely plausible that more than one-fifth of Canada's Jewish population knows the Hebrew language. ■