

On the Remediation and Teaching of Chumash

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The title of this article reverses convention and places remediation before teaching. I do this because we generally become aware of the need for well thought-out approaches to teaching Chumash (Bible) (as well as many other subjects) only when we are faced with the need to remediate. Until such an occasion arises, teaching Chumash involves doing what comes naturally:

- ▶ Read the *psukim* (sentences) and translate them.
- ▶ Get the students to do the same.
- ▶ Tell them some *drush* (interpretation) and *mussar* (ethics) on the *psukim* you learned.
- ▶ Learn some *meforshim* (commentaries) where applicable, e.g., Rashi and Ramban (commentators).
- ▶ Make the message of the Chumash relevant by showing how it relates to current life issues.
- ▶ Ask some questions to see if they understand and remember what you have taught them.
- ▶ Go on to the next *parsha* (weekly portion).

This pattern remains constant, with minor changes. Thus, some schools do more teaching of *shorashim* (word roots), some do less of the *mussar* and "relevant" stuff. Beyond translation, little time is devoted to direct teaching of textual comprehension. Those that do focus on comprehension, focus on comprehension of the content -- story line, details of the *mitzvot* (commandments), and ethical implications of the Chumash. Textual comprehension is said to come automatically with much exposure to the text and to the ideas contained therein.

This may be true for some students, e.g., the top third of the class who are linguistically adept. For

those students, exposure to great amounts of text will suffice. They will "get the hang of it" even without the direct teaching of subskills. It is when we are faced with the student who is less linguistically adept, and who may even have a problem with language, that we are forced to define more precisely what our goals are and what methods we should be using when we teach Chumash. When we deal with children who are having difficulty, it no longer suffices to just "do what comes naturally." When dealing with learning difficulties, planning, which is always important, becomes indispensable.

To teach a subject properly we must take into account the characteristics of the student and the characteristics of the subject. We must also think through and make explicit our ideas, theories and philosophies about learning and teaching. Thus,

- ▶ How is the knowledge organized?
- ▶ Are we to teach facts or (learning) skills?
- ▶ Are we to aim for mastery or is "knowing it pretty well" sufficient? Another way of asking this is, are we to "cover ground" or learn things thoroughly?

Taking all these factors into account, we must decide and make explicit our long and short-term goals. It is only in light of the above that we can decide on our methodology.

Students with problems in Judaic studies are usually having difficulty with some or all of the following areas:

They are unfocused, are easily distracted, and have difficulty organizing information. The greater the amount of information they have to deal with, the less they are able to function successfully. They have problems

processing language (even in their native language), especially with second language learning. They have problems with working or short-term memory. Often they have difficulty abstracting or even understanding abstractions (especially verbal abstractions).

All the subject areas in Judaic studies involve second language learning, focusing on and organizing text without the benefit of paragraphs or punctuation, textual comprehension, meta-linguistics (thinking about language), retaining complex information and using it in "mental" (as opposed to written) reasoning tasks and using material which is meant to be learned and understood at different levels of verbal analysis.

Thus, student and subject would seem to be poorly matched. But that need not be so if we focus on our approach to education and on proper methodology. First we must understand that knowledge is organized hierarchically. We must teach children how to learn, not merely facts. We must teach to mastery, for approximate knowledge confuses and ultimately cripples.

Our long-term goal for Chumash is fully independent **TEXTUAL COMPREHENSION**. Chumash is a very rich subject. It serves as a vehicle for teaching all that matters in *Yiddishkeit* (Judaism). However in our eagerness to impart important concepts and values, it is important that we do not rush ahead of the vehicle, or leave it entirely behind. If Chumash is to serve as a vehicle for anything, our students must first master it, and learn to navigate their way through it. In teaching Chumash we must make the understanding and appreciation of the text, known as Chumash, our primary goal. No student can succeed in Chumash without learning to read it, understand it, and become intimately familiar with its style. Knowing about it, no matter how much or how well, is no substitute for knowing it.

Chumash is the *D'var Hashem* (word of G-d), a document authored by *Hashem Kabeyochal* (G-d, if you will). It deserves at least as much attention and

love as, *lehavdil* (to distinguish), mortal authors receive from their students who read and re-read their words again and again, and commit them not merely to memory but to their very veins, as the saying goes, "He's got Shakespeare flowing in his veins." We must encourage and help our students to have Torah (Bible) flowing through their veins.

To attain the long-term goal we must first identify our short-term goals.

SHORT TERM GOALS FOR CHUMASH

1. Vocabulary (including basic *dikduk* (grammar))
2. Phrases (every literate Jew should be able to quote)
3. Content (basic facts in the Chumash)
4. Textual comprehension, including:
 - a. getting the facts;
 - b. finding the quote;
 - c. sequencing;
 - d. getting the main idea, and
 - e. noticing anomalies and deviations in the text.

If clearly delineated and defined, the first three goal areas can be mastered by each and every student. Thus, although not all students will know all of the Chumash learned in class that week, and some students may not even know a full *posuk*, all can master a few (15? 10? five?) carefully chosen basic words (which will serve the student well in future chapters of Chumash), two or three phrases, and the basic facts of the story. If these are clearly laid out for the student he/she will master them. In time, the cumulative effect of attaining these goals will bring the student to a level which will allow him or her to become part of the class and begin to learn Chumash with the class¹. When this begins to come

¹ The "partial knowledge" of what the class is learning described here is very different from the "partial knowledge" a child picks up in a classroom where the goals are not delineated by the teacher in a number of ways. On his own, the student will not necessarily retain that information which will be most useful for future learning (e.g. the most frequent

without undue difficulty, we can begin to turn our attention to higher levels of comprehension.

The fourth goal, that of comprehension (and I speak of textual comprehension as opposed to story or content comprehension, which for all practical purposes could be done with a closed Chumash), can be worked on only after the student has mastered the *posuk* at least at a surface translation level. It makes little sense to work on the comprehension of a text which the student can barely make out at a surface level -- not to mention analyzing that text, talking about how it might have been phrased differently, and what it is that might be inferred from the particular choice of words and sentence structure.

Our approach rests on the following general principles:

Identifying and avoiding all the "obstacles" which stand between the student and the material, and which are not integral aspects of the material. Some of these "obstacles" may later be re-introduced, because of their widespread presence. But there is no reason that a student must master all difficult aspects of a subject simultaneously. There is certainly no reason to allow an essentially incidental aspect of a subject (e.g. the ability of a child to read in a regular Chumash without being confused by the *ta'amae hamikra* (cantillations) to stop a child from learning the essence of the subject (the ability to read the words of the Chumash).

To give another example, if children have difficulty

words). Because he is trying to focus on everything the class is learning, it is also unlikely that he will actually master anything; what he has mastered this week is unlikely to be focused on and strengthened next week. And perhaps most importantly, when the teacher has delineated for the student what he is to master, the student has a sense of accomplishment when he does. This sense of accomplishment motivates him to keep working. The student who attains part of the information in a situation in which the teacher expects him to know it all comes to feel only failure. In time he stops trying.

remembering all the translations to the words of a *posuk* after an oral presentation by the teacher, there is no reason to allow them to struggle and fail when they can learn the Chumash while reading from a written linear translation. This way they can continue reading, translating, and learning with the class. In time as they become more familiar with the language of the Chumash, they will need the written translation less and less. At the end they will no longer have any need for it.²

Identifying units of learning small enough for a student to master. At first children should be encouraged to master a few *psukim*. (Given a choice between knowing 20 *psukim* "approximately" or five *psukim* fluently, I would choose the latter. Knowing 20 *psukim* "approximately" is the same as "not knowing even one *posuk* of Chumash! It leaves the student wanting for both skills and, as importantly, for a sense of accomplishment). Then gradually, as the student's skills and self-confidence grow, he or she can master more and more *psukim*, at least at the surface level of translation. (If students need to keep up with a regular class which is doing more *psukim* than they can possibly master, it should be acceptable to define which *psukim* they should be able to read and translate, and which they should be required only to know the content of.)

Giving students some context. some background information about the material they are about to learn. This is important in order to set the stage so they can relate to and orient themselves to the

² I know that at this point some readers are thinking to themselves that a child learning this way will use the written translation sheet as a "crutch" and will never learn to translate Chumash independently. This "Crutch Hypothesis" is very prevalent in education. I believe it to be wrong in most instances. Oh yes, there will be a "lazy" (or scared) little fellow among the students, here and there, who will try to hold on to the security of the translation sheet, but he can gradually and easily be encouraged by the teacher to try to read without it. Most students are eager to show the teacher that they can read the *posuk* without looking at the translations just as soon as they can.

material they are about to learn.

Giving the student an outline of what he/she is about to learn to help guide his/her thinking and help him/her remain focused and organized.

Presenting the material in a graphic mode allowing students to more easily "eyeball" and comprehend it. This is essentially "meeting the students halfway" by doing the organizing for them.

Making certain that students have mastered the material at one level of comprehension before we ask them to proceed to the next level of analysis of that material (as aforementioned). For example, it makes little sense to ask a student to understand Rashi's problem with a *posuk* so long as the student hasn't achieved thorough and intimate knowledge of the *posuk*.

Using questions to help students focus and organize the material, as well as to help them focus on something specific which we want them to notice and which would otherwise probably escape notice.

Using examples and exercises in the student's native language to help him or her understand a linguistic problem in the Hebrew text.

Avoiding unnecessary digressions from the text, so as not to distract the student's focus and not to confuse him/her. Our objective is to **teach** not to preach!

Following is an outline of an approach to teaching Chumash to children with learning problems. It relies primarily on examples to carry the message without really elaborating on the "why's" of each kind of exercise (it would simply take too much space). It is only in the totality of this approach that the reader will appreciate its strengths.

The specific methodology for Chumash involves the following steps:

1. Give students a brief introduction to the segment of Chumash they are about to learn. (Who are the

people involved? What are the central issues?, etc.).

2. Provide students with a brief oral and written outline of the segment of text you will be studying.

3. Provide students with the text graphically organized for easier comprehension. If necessary provide the translations as well.

4. If necessary have students read the text out loud a few times without bothering to translate it. This is important so that they become familiar with the proper pronunciation of the text. If necessary, do exercises simply to focus the student on the text.

5. Do oral reading and chanting of the text with translation to help commit it to memory.

6. Give the student exercises to do for each of the following areas:

a. becoming familiar with the words of the text;

b. mastering the translations;

c. discovering and learning the structure of words in *lashon kodesh* (Hebrew), roots, prefixes and suffixes;

d. noticing and becoming aware of synonyms and antonyms;

e. classifying words; and,

f. noticing and becoming aware of parts of speech (verbs, nouns, adjectives etc.).

7. Give students practice exercises, which will help them remember important phrases in the text.

8. Give students exercises which will help them better organize and remember the content of the text (story and/or *halachik* facts).

9. Give students exercises which will help them focus on all the areas of textual comprehension outlined above:

a. getting the facts;

b. finding the quote;

c. sequencing;

d. getting the main idea; and

e. noticing anomalies and deviations in the text

These exercises may of course grow in complexity, and in the amount of independent work needed as the student progresses in comprehension.

Following are examples for each of the methodological steps outlined above (see pages 14 - 20).

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address many of the unique needs of our students and our schools. There has been a growing awareness of the benefits of such technologies within the general special education community, with increasing professional interest and legislative mandates. Jewish special education needs to remain open to these technological advances, as they will ultimately prove beneficial to the many students with disabilities in our classes.

Dr. Joel Mittler is Associate Professor of Special Education at the C.W. Post Campus of Long Island University. He recently served as President of The Council for Exceptional Children's international division for Technology and Media. Mittler received his Doctor of Education degree from Teachers College, Columbia University.

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The following examples contain Hebrew phrases without vowels. Please note that when developing your own worksheets for individuals with learning disabilities you should include vowels.

Examples

1. Give the students a brief introduction to the segment of Chumash they are about to learn. (Who are the people involved, what are the central issues etc.)
2. Provide the student with a brief oral and written Outline of the segment of Text you will be learning.

Thus for example in teaching the wars between the 4 Kings vs. the 5 Kings in פרשת לך לך, it is sufficient to give the following brief introduction:

Remind the students about אנדום and לוט. Tell them that there is a מצוה to save someone in captivity (you may mention the name of the מצוה פדיון שבויים, but don't make a big deal of it. Don't require the students to remember it.) Tell the students they will be learning a story wherein;

1. 4 Kings have a war with 5 Kings and לוט is captured
2. אברם is told about it, goes out to war to save לוט and with Hashem's help does so
3. The Kings come to thank and bless אברם

3. Provide the student with the Text graphically organized for easier comprehension. If necessary provide also the translations.

and it was in the days of		א. ויהי בימי	
AMRAFEL	King of SHINAR	מלך שנער	אמרפל
ARYOCH	King of ELASAR	מלך אלסר	אריוך
KEDARLAOMER	King of EILAM	מלך עילם	כדרלעמר
and THIDAL	King of GOYIM	מלך גוים	ותדעל
they made war		ב. עשו מלחמה	
with BERA	King of SODOM	מלך סדם	את ברע
& with BIRSHA	King of AMORAH	מלך עמרה	ואת ברשע
SHINAV	King of ADMOH	מלך אדמה	שנאב
and SHEMEVER	King of TZEVOYM	מלך צב"ים	ושמאבר
and the	King of BELLA	ומלך בלע	
which was	TZOAR	היא צער	

4. If necessary have students read the text out loud a few times without bothering to translate it. This is important so that they become familiar with the *proper pronunciation* of the text.

a. If necessary do exercises simply to focus student on the text

CIRCLE THE WORD MISSING FROM EACH POSUK

ד. שתיים עשרה שנה _____ את כדלעמר

_____ ושלוש עשרה שנה

ויכו

עבדו

מרדו

חברו

5. Do oral reading and chanting of the text with translation to help commit it to memory.

6. Give student exercises to do for each of the following areas:

a. Becoming familiar with the words of the text

Word Find:

מ א ת י מ ו ח ה ל
נ כ ר פ ח ש נ ו ה
ח פ ד ג י א מ ד ר
ה ר ע ש ו ל נ ב ש
ע ה א כ ו כ ש ל ע

פרה	ואנה	מנחה
יפגשך	ישא	עדר
אכפרה	מאתים	לבדו
ושאלך	עשרה	רוח

Unscrambling Words:

1. תריג _____
2. גרחיל _____
3. נח _____
4. וויצ _____
5. חכ _____
6. חזל _____
7. סרפי _____
8. יחזץ _____

b. Mastering the translations

Matching words to their translation (not necessarily grouped the way they were presented on the Translation Sheets):

1. ALL	מלחמה	_____
2. THEY MADE	בימי	_____
3. IN THE DAYS OF	ויסו	_____
4. WAR	חברו	_____
5. AND THEY HIT	כל	_____
6. CAME	עשו	_____
7. UNTIL	עבדו	_____
8. JOINED TOGETHER	בא	_____
9. THEY SERVED	מרדו	_____
10. THEY REBELLED	עד	_____

Crossword puzzles:

Crossword Fun

Across

1. כי עמך ואחה אלקינו _____
3. ... אחה _____ מלכנו אחה הוא ...
6. Bread
8. There is
9. and he made you hungry
11. In poverty
14. you will lack
17. המוריה _____
18. A Ban
19. Name of a תנא _____
20. Love of the land — הארץ _____
23. water



c. Discovering and learning the structure of words in לשון הקודש roots, prefixes and suffixes

	A	BLESS	ING		ב	ר	כ	ה		
AND	I	WILL	BLESS		ו	א	ב	ר	כ	ה
AND	I	WILL	BLESS	YOU	ו	א	ב	ר	כ	ך
THOSE	WHO	BLESS	YOU		מ	ב	ר	כ	י	ך

d. Noticing and becoming aware of *synonyms and antonyms*

Match the word in column A with the word in column B which is (somewhat) opposite to it		Match each word in column A to the word in column B which means almost the same	
B	A	B	A
פן	ויקח	ויגד	אתו
אחרי	ויצו	עמו	עתה
ושאלך	לפני	נא	ויאמר
ויתן	אולי		

e. *Classifying* words

In each row circle the word which does not belong			
ויען	ויאמר	מדבר	וידבר
מקנה	מנחה	מהר	מתן
אלא	או	רק	אך

f. Noticing and becoming aware of *parts of speech*: Verbs, nouns, adjectives, etc.

ויאמר אלקים יהי אור ויהי אור

WHICH WORD IN THIS פסוק TELLS US THAT HASHEM *DID* SOMETHING? UNDERLINE THAT WORD.

LOOK IN YOUR חומש AND FIND 3 OTHER WORDS WHICH TELL US THINGS WHICH HASHEM *DID* ON THE FIRST DAY. WRITE OUT THE WORDS BELOW.

7. Give students practice exercises which will help them remember the *important phrases* in the text.

נא לסדר את המלים ולמצא משפטים מן הפסוקים שלמדנו

1. נא מיד מיד אחי עשיו הצילני

הפכי את המספרים לאותיות כדי למצא משפט מן הפסוקים שלמדנו

6.10.300.70 4.10.40 10.8.1 4.10.40 1.50 10.50.30.10.90.5

8. Give students exercises which will help them better *organize and remember the content* of the text (story and/or Halachik facts).
9. Give students exercises which will help them focus on all the areas of Textual Comprehension outlined above.
- a. Getting the facts

CIRCLE THE WORD WHICH IS *NOT* THE NAME OF A KING.

ברע

בלע

אמרפל

כדרלעמר

תרעל

DRAW A LINE FROM THE WORD IN THE BOX TO THE NAMES IT IS TALKING ABOUT.

ה. ובארבע עשרה שנה בא כדרלעמר והמלכים אשר אתו

אריוד

שנאב

ברע

שמאבר

ברשע

תרעל

אמרפל

b. Finding the quote

In Posuk ט which words in the posuk did the Maloch say? Underline them.

ט ויאמרו אליו איה שרה אשתך ויאמר הנה באהל

בפסוק הזה כתוב (צייני / אם זה נכון או x אם זה לא נכון)

וישלח יעקב מלאכים אל עשיו אחיו ארצה שעיר שדה אדום

שיעקב הלך אל עשו ☐

שיעקב שלח את מישוהו אל עשיו ☐

שיעקב שלח מתנות לעשיו ☐

כמה מלאכים יעקב שלח ☐

לאיזה מקום יעקב שלח את המלאכים ☐

In Posuk י below,

- Underline all the words Yakov said.
- In a second color, underline the words which the Malochim were to repeat to Eisav.
- In a third color, underline only those words which were the actual MESSAGE that Yakov sent to Eisav.

ה ויצו אתם לאמר כה תאמרון לאדני לעשו כה אמר עבדך יעקב עם לבן גרתי ואחר עד עתה

כא וישמע ראובן ויצלחו מידם ויאמר לא נכנו נפש. כב ויאמר אלהם ראובן אל
תשפכו דם השליכו אתו אל הבור הזה אשר במדבר ויד אל תשלחו בו למען הציל
אתו מידם להשיבו אל אביו

- Underline the words that ראובן actually said to his brothers.

c. Sequencing

ויבאו שני המלאכים סדמה בערב ולוט יושב בשער סדום וירא לוט ויקם לקראתם
וישתחו אפים ארצה

Number the following events. Which happened 1st, 2nd, 3rd?

- _____ The 2 מלאכים came to סדום
- _____ לוט was sitting at the gates of סדום
- _____ לוט noticed the מלאכים and got up to greet them

d. Getting the Main idea

<p>The MAIN IDEA of Psukim א-ד in Chapter' בראשית is</p> <p>a. That Yakov Ovinu made Yosef a special shirt</p> <p>b. That the שבטים hated Yosef</p> <p>c. That Yosef liked the בני השפחות</p>	<p>The MAIN IDEA of פסוקים א-ט in פרשת אמור is</p> <p>a. נומאת מת</p> <p>b. נשואי כהנים</p> <p>c. קדושת הכהונה</p>
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I refer to the popularly so-called פרקים the Torah is commonly divided into as Chapters. This was suggested by Reb Yakov Kaminetzky זצ"ל to remind us that these "פרקים" were not given from בני, but rather were the creation of Catholic prelates.

e. Noticing anomalies and deviations in the text

ויולד נח שלשה בנים את שם את חם ואת יפת

Which word(s) in this Posuk could have been deleted without any loss of information?

ויקח אברם את שרי אשתו ואת לוט בן אחיו ואת כל רכושם אשר רכשו ואת הנפש אשר עשו בחרן ויצאו ללכת ארצה כנען ויבאו ארצה כנען

ויעל אברם ממצרים הוא ואשתו וכל אשר לו ולוט עמו הנגבה

Compare how לוט is listed in these two Psukim. How is it different from the first to the second Posuk?

Sometimes students have difficulties noticing anomalies (colloquially referred to as "problems") in a Posuk. This is usually due to one of two problems; i.e.,

1. The student is not yet comfortable enough with the Language of the Chumash to notice any problems.

Or,

2. The student is not yet sensitive to nuances and/or grammatical rules even in his own language, and thus wouldn't be bothered by the problem in the Posuk even were he to come across it in an English sentence.

When a student is having such problems it is helpful to first expose him to a sentence in his native language which parallels the syntax of the Posuk and contains a problem similar to the one we want him to notice in the Posuk. Once the student has seen such parallel syntax in his native language, he is "primed" to see it, and will thus be more likely to notice it in the Posuk.