

# 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

