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"WATCH YOUR WORDS"

HOW TO AVOID A COMMON PITFALL IN VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

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Mechanchim have developed many wonderful vocabulary building programs and lists of words that are frequent in Chumash. However, even the best vocabulary system can be undermined by an often-overlooked pitfall. In this brief article, we will describe how to avoid this pitfall and maximize your vocabulary program.

THE VOCABULARY CHALLENGE
Give your class the following two activities to do:

1. Give your students the following list of words to translate. What percentage of your students gave the <u>incorrect</u> answers that are listed below? Why do you think they made these mistakes?

HATE	חֹנֵם
LEARN	מִשְׁמָר
OFFICER	מַשְׁקֶה
RED	פָּרָה
GOOD	מְאֹד
GOOD	בֹּקֶר
TREATY/AGREEMENT	זֹאת
FRUIT	עֵץ
GOOD MORNING	מוֹדֶה
FINISH/END	חָזָק

2. Choose the *shorashim* of common words in four *passukim* that you taught around two weeks ago and put them in a random order. First, ask the students to translate the *passukim*. Then, ask them to translate the list of words. For example, the first four *passukim* in בראשית would look like this:

וַיַּרְא	בֹּקֶר	עַל	מַיִם	אֵת	בֵּין
חֹשֶׁךְ	אָמַר	קָרָא	בָּרָא	כִּי	טוֹב
וַיַּבְדֵּל	אוֹר	פְּנֵי	עֶרֶב	רוּחַ	יְהִי
הָיְתָה	שָׁמַיִם	אֶחָד	אֶרֶץ	יוֹם	לַיְלָה

Can your students identify individual words that are out of context and not part of a larger phrase? You will probably discover that many students have some difficulty translating individual words even if they can translate them correctly in context. In addition, students often confuse words with similar sounding words

or with other words in a familiar phrase. The next section will explain why students make such mistakes.

THE PROBLEM WITH TRANSLATING BY PHRASES

Many teachers translate *passukim* in small phrases by rote. This is especially true in the younger grades in which rote learning by phrases is the predominant form of instruction in many schools. While it is important to teach the students how words are connected in order to construct proper meaning and to teach comprehension, there is nevertheless an inherent shortcoming in translating words <u>only</u> in phrases.

When Chumash is taught only by phrases, the meaning of individual words is often not mastered and individual words are often confused with other words in the phrase. Another problem is that the rote style learning that is prevalent in the younger grades can often conceal the actual weaknesses of a child. A child with a good memory can rapidly repeat back the phrases that he learned by rote. The parents and teachers are content that the child knows the material that he has learned. However, when the rote learning stops in around the third or fourth grade, the child suddenly starts to have trouble in Chumash.

This phenomenon is potentially even more of a concern in schools that *tiche* in Yiddish to children whose native language is not Yiddish. Unless the children are taught the meaning of the Yiddish words as well, they are likely to misunderstand the meaning of the Yiddish words. It is therefore imperative to isolate the meaning of each individual word in a way that the child will comprehend and process the word in a language that he understands.

SUMMARY
While translating by phrases is an important part of the instructional process, ultimate success requires focusing on the meaning of individual words as well.