



The Phone Call that is Changing Chinuch

By Rabbi Yaakov Aichenbaum

One night a year and a half ago, my phone rang. The caller identified himself as Rabbi Berger¹, the *Menahel* of Mesivta Ploni. He got right to the point. He regularly administers entrance exams to his Yeshiva and he is dismayed by the difficulty that many teenagers have in translating a *passuk* in Chumash accurately. He went on to explain that he has conferred with many other *menahelim* who concur with his assessment. Rabbi Berger then revealed the reason for his call: "Rabbi Aichenbaum, you have to do something about this situation!"

After I recovered from my astonishment, I told Rabbi Berger that while I agreed with his assessment, I think he must have me confused with somebody else. Rabbi Berger asserted that there was no mistake. He explained that he attended my Chumash workshop a few years back and that my approach to Chumash instruction was the answer to Chumash illiteracy. I again agreed with him that the methodology that Rabbi Dovid Freeman (my partner) and I developed could significantly improve the situation². It is for this reason that we posted a video of our Chumash workshop on chinuch.org³. However, I did not know what else we could do other than to continue to present workshops on the subject. The

conversation ended with Rabbi Berger's reiteration of his position that I must do something.

My original apprehension to accept Rabbi Berger's charge slowly began to change. At the time of his phone call, I was working on two projects. One project was a master list of all the frequent words in Chumash. The second project was a reference manual that teachers who attended my workshop could refer back to as they implemented the techniques that they learned in my presentation. These two projects began to merge into one book that is entitled THE LIST⁴.

Due to Rabbi Berger, THE LIST grew into much more than a reference manual for teachers who had already attended my workshop. Every teacher, classroom, and school is unique. By definition, there cannot be one model of instruction for all situations. The distinctive personality of each *mechanech* needs to be expressed in the classroom in a way that he is most comfortable. With this in mind, THE LIST was designed to be a springboard to help guide the unique professional growth and development of each teacher. THE LIST is a full-fledged teacher-training manual that explains

¹ The name has been changed.

² See *Hamechanech* magazine Volume 3 Issue 1 for an overview of our program.

³ http://chinuch.org/av_library.php?id=423

⁴ THE LIST was featured in Volume 5 Issue 1 of *Hamechanech*

why students find it difficult to translate *passukim* and outlines a system that will help you to address these issues in your own unique manner. THE LIST will empower you to develop a Chumash program that will significantly improve your Chumash instruction both qualitatively and quantitatively.

In order for THE LIST to have the maximum impact on the world of chinuch, Rabbi Freeman and I decided to supplement THE LIST with a DVD that contains 20 classroom videos of our program in action, frequent word flashcard templates, worksheet ideas and more. In addition, we translated our frequent word list into Yiddish and English in order to make it accessible to as many people as possible. THE LIST will enable us, *b'ezras Hashem*, to reach many more teachers than we could train through our workshops.

As we began to receive feedback about THE LIST from teachers, it became clear that Rabbi Berger would want us to do even more. Teachers told us that they need professionally prepared workbooks to supplement THE LIST. We listened. *Hamaftach l'Chumash* workbook series will make its debut at the 2013 Torah Umesorah convention, *b'ezras Hashem*, with workbook #1 on *parshas Noach*. Workbooks #2 & 3 will be ready, *b'ezras Hashem*, in time for the new school year. The workbook can be used to supplement instruction while learning the parsha or as an independent vocabulary and language skill program (even for older grades). The first workbook contains 269 frequent Chumash words that appear in that parsha as well as basic prefixes and suffixes. Each lesson builds upon previous lessons and constantly reviews the material. A unique aspect of the workbook is that it not only teaches vocabulary, but it also trains the student to recognize the words in the Chumash even though the nekudos might be different or some of the letters might be missing from the word.

The lessons are user-friendly and appeal to a wide range of students. A weak student will feel comfortable with the exercises and gifted students will still gain from them. In addition, many activities will challenge the gifted child without deflating the self-esteem of the weaker student. The workbook is designed in a way that will provide your students with a sense of empowerment. Subtle messages are placed throughout the workbook to enhance this feeling. For example, a picture of a boy is on the back cover. The caption by the picture says, "I learned 269 words, you can too!"

While THE LIST DVD contains flashcard templates, teachers told us that they wanted us to make professionally produced flashcards. We again could not refuse. Our flashcard set contains 746 frequent Chumash words and 39 prefixes/suffixes. These classroom size flashcards comprise the vast majority of all the frequent words in Chumash. The numbered flashcards correspond to the frequent words in THE LIST and are stored in a user-friendly file box. The words are divided into *parshiyos* and are ordered according to the first time the word appears in Chumash.

Finally, the need for authentic assessment became clear to us. THE CHUMASH VOCABULARY TEST is a multiple-choice test of many of the common Chumash words that children learn in the primary grades. It is easy to administer and correct. The test provides feedback about individual, classroom, and school-wide vocabulary achievements. Several schools have already used the test as a springboard to launch a school-wide vocabulary enrichment program.

In spite of my initial reluctance, Rabbi Berger's phone call had an effect. We now have a full array of products that can help train

teachers in Chumash instruction as well as to provide them with the material they need to implement the program. To date, over forty schools have upgraded the quality of their Chumash program as a direct result of THE LIST (and Rabbi Berger's phone call). The schools span the full spectrum of Orthodox schools from modern-orthodox to *Chassidish chadorim*. Our system is in use across America and in Canada, Switzerland, England, Australia, and South Africa.

I hope that Rabbi Berger is pleased with the progress to date. However, *b'ezras Hashem*, this is just the beginning. THE LIST has demonstrated that significant strides can be made without radically changing any instructional *mesorah*. We still have a lot of publicizing to do in order to make more teachers aware of how much can actually be accomplished when effective instructional techniques are used. I can hardly wait for Rabbi Berger's next phone call!

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