



LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR A LIFETIME OF LEARNING CHUMASH INDEPENDENTLY

by Rabbi Yaakov Aichenbaum

In the course of your lifetime there are a few things that you will read that will have a major impact on you. This article has the potential to affect your success as a *mechanech* significantly. If you are satisfied with your present level of success in the classroom, you can stop reading now. However, if you are searching for ways to upgrade yourself to be a top-notch *mechanech* and to ensure that every child in your classroom will acquire the skills that are necessary to learn *Chumash* independently, you should read the rest of this article.

Part One: *The Problem*

I started presenting workshops on the subject of providing children with the necessary skills to learn *Chumash* independently at the 2008 Torah U'mesorah convention. Since that time, I have received emails and phone calls from schools and *mechanchim* from across the spectrum of the Torah world from literally *arba kanfos haaretz*. The inability of many children to *tiche a passuk* independently seems to be a universal problem that affects boys and girls, *yeshivas* and day schools, chassidic *chedorim* and modern orthodox schools.

Each child reads on one of three reading comprehension levels. In a typical classroom, you will encounter students on all three levels. These levels are determined by the percentage of how many words the reader decodes accurately and understands:

- On the independent level, a person can read on his own without support from others. A student who can recognize and understands at least 90% of the words in a text is on this level.
- Students who are challenged by the reading and need some support are on the instructional level. A reader on this level understands 75-90% of the words in a text.
- A reader who understands less than 75% of the words in a text is on the frustration level. *On the frustration level, the material is too difficult for students to read even with assistance.*

I direct a *limudei kodesh* resource room. Most of my students are on the *frustration* level when I start learning with them. In the course of my work, I place an emphasis on *Chumash* vocabulary acquisition and skill development. Several years ago, I became curious about

how the vocabulary achievements of children with special needs compare to those children who are in the mainstream classroom. In particular, I wanted to know at which of the reading levels were most of our students functioning. During my investigation, I discovered that 231 words¹ (which are all found by the end of *Parashas Chayei Sarah*) comprise approximately 64% of all the words in *Chumash*.² An additional 313 words comprise another 16%. This means that only 544 words comprise approximately 80% of all the words in *Chumash*. Consequently, a student who has not mastered this core vocabulary is likely to be functioning at the frustration level of reading.

The staggering ramifications of this research prompted me to develop a vocabulary assessment test that I named The Chumash Vocabulary Test[®] (CVT). This test evaluates and compares individual, classroom, and school-wide vocabulary achievements on the aforementioned 231 words that comprise 64% of all the words in *Chumash*. I administered this test to classrooms in various Yeshivas and Day Schools. As I started to analyze and norm the results, a troubling pattern began to emerge. While classroom averages in many classes were respectable, a large percentage of children were nevertheless reading on the frustration level. The following graph of a Yeshiva's 5th grade class vividly illustrates these unsettling statistics³:

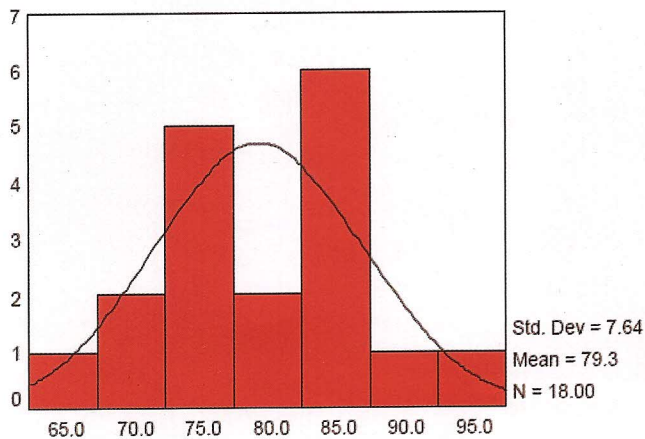
Continued on Page 8

¹These words are based on Rabbi Shaul Klein's Chumash Vocabulary System (CVS). Information about this system can be found on chinuch.org under the title 'My Image of the Ideal Resource Room'.

²Excluding proper nouns and the word *אם*.

³This graph plots the scores of a mainstream 5th grade Yeshiva Ketana with a well deserved excellent reputation on The Chumash Vocabulary Test[®].

Typical 5th Grade Class



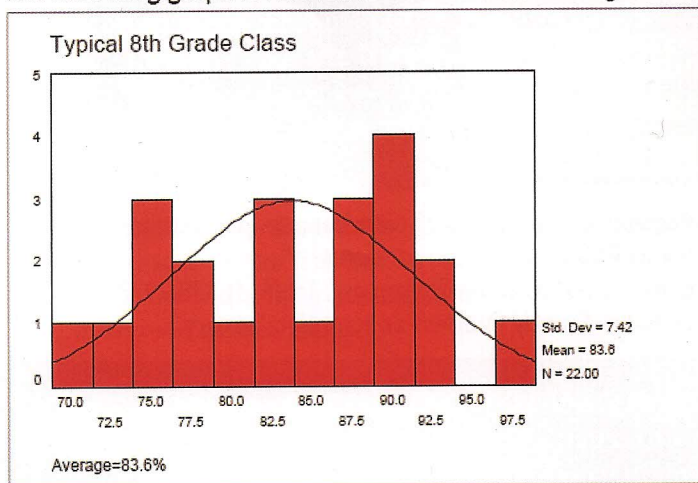
Average-79.3%

x-axis is percent correct on test

y-axis is the number of students with that score

When I showed this graph to a *menahel*, he commented that this is a standard bell curve distribution that you would expect to see in any classroom on any subject. In other words, it is right on target. I believe that this *menahel* overlooked the fact that this reflects a basic skill that can *chas v'shalom* have devastating future consequences if it is not acquired in the *girsas d'yankusa* years. While the average of this class was 79.3%, half of the class was below this average and was at or below the frustration level. Let me explain: we would not tolerate such a distribution of scores on a single digit addition test in a fifth grade math class. These words are the 2+2=4 of learning *Chumash*. It is unacceptable that so many *yiddishe neshamas* cannot translate words like *shamayim* and *eretz*.

Unfortunately, the problem does not stop here. The following graph is from the same Yeshiva's 8th grade:



While the class average was slightly higher than the 5th grade (83.6% vs. 79.6%), there is essentially no significant change from the 5th to the 8th grade! The distribution of scores and the percent of students who are on the frustration level are almost identical. If you contemplate the significance of these distressing results, it should not surprise you that anecdotal reports from *mechanchim* in day schools and *chaderim*, Bais Yaakov high schools, and *mesivtas* indicate that many students exhibit weak translation and reading skills. However, many *mechanchim* (especially in the upper grades when they are assumed as a 'given') are unaware of the following:

- That many of these students are weak in the most basic vocabulary words.
- The extent of how many students are lacking in their vocabulary skills.
- How little vocabulary growth often occurs in the upper elementary grades with these children.

There is no intrinsic reason why our *chinuch* system has to tolerate such results. The situation can be changed without sacrificing precious class time when appropriate methodologies are implemented. Furthermore, this can be accomplished without any radical innovations and without deviating from the traditional *mesorah* of teaching *Chumash*.

This is exactly what happened three years ago in my school's second grade. In a school that essentially starts learning *Chumash* in the second grade, the average score on the CVT at the end of the school year was 89%. This was the result of a vocabulary enrichment program that was implemented in the classroom. In addition, almost all of the students scored close to the average as opposed to the wide distribution of scores that we observed in the previous classes. Furthermore, not only did the students amass a large vocabulary, they also mastered one additional *parsha* more than the Rebbe had taught in previous years.

The *chinuch* concept of "*v'chol banayich limudei Hashem*" opposes the acceptance of 'bell curve' results and my school's second grade demonstrated that we could reach most students when the proper techniques are used. If you are astonished to discover what can be accomplished, then you will want to read part two of this article. Part two will address why many students do not acquire a sufficient *Chumash* vocabulary. It will also describe the key components of acquiring a strong and functional *Chumash* vocabulary. When you are familiar with these components, you will be able to implement a program in which most (if

not all) of your students can translate *pesukim* independently, learn faster, and comprehend *Chumash*, *Rashi* and *Gemara* better.

Part Two: The Solution

Part one of this article described the three stages of reading skills and how this applies to a child who is learning *Chumash*. It also explained that over 35% of students in many Yeshivas, Chadorim, and Day Schools are at the 'frustration' level of reading. On the 'frustration' level, the material is too difficult for students to read and comprehend even with assistance. This distressing pattern often persists throughout the elementary school years and beyond. Fortunately, this troubling situation can be changed without any radical innovations and without deviating from the traditional *mesorah* of teaching *Chumash*.

In order to implement a successful solution to this problem, it is necessary to understand why many students do not acquire a sufficient *limudei kodesh* vocabulary. There are three groups of students in the average classroom:

If you want to reach EVERY
child in your classroom, you
have to see the *Chumash*
through the eyes of your
students.

- Some students are linguistically talented. They quickly develop language skills and they even acquire some skills through osmosis without any formal instruction.
- The second group is comprised of students who have average language skills. They require more direct instruction and guided practice to develop language skills.

- The third group consists of students who have weak language skills. These students require considerable practice to master vocabulary and other language skills. These students are not necessarily clinically Learning Disabled (LD); rather, their brains are just not 'wired' to juggle so many languages, fonts, etc.

The majority of students in a class belong to the two lower groups. A prerequisite for language processing in any discipline (and *kal va'chomer* in the *Torah hakedoshah*) is the development of strong language skills. In order for this development to occur, a structured program that incorporates several features must be in place. In the absence of this type of program, vocabulary and language development, and ultimately *havanah*, suffer. Many of our students have not acquired an adequate vocabulary since such programs are not prevalent enough in our *chinuch* system and the *lashon ha'Torah* is not anywhere near being their native language. Even in *Eretz Yisroel*, the correlation between Biblical Hebrew and Modern Hebrew is around 65%. Therefore, even many children who do not have any learning disabilities will not know what *av va'eim* means.

A successful vocabulary enrichment program should contain the following key components:

- **Systematic & Explicit Instruction**
 - Taught directly and not through osmosis
 - Pre-planned
 - Organized & sequential manner
- **Automaticity⁴**
 - Translation should be automatic and without thought (like riding a bicycle)⁵
 - Automaticity is acquired through overlearning
- **Overlearning⁶**
 - Practice even after the word is mastered
 - Practice during many sessions
 - Practice over extended period of time
 - Interspersing⁷ known words with unknown words

4 ריש לקיש אמר אם ראית תלמיד שלמודו קשה עליו כבדול בשביל משנתו שאינה סדורה עליו (תענית דף י: ח.נ.)

⁵A lack of fluency uses up active working memory and decreases the room left for comprehension and higher level thinking. Therefore, even if a person will attempt to understand a *pasuk* in *Chumash*, he will have to exert so much mental energy on its translation that little energy is left for comprehension.

6 ואינו דומה שונה פרקו מאה פעמים לשונה פרקו מאה ואחד (חגיגה ט: ועיי' תענית ח.נ.)

- **Appeals to Different Modalities**⁸
 - Visual (sees the word, color coding)
 - Auditory (hears/says the word)
 - Kinesthetic/tactile (writes, draws picture of the word, mnemonic clue⁹)
- **Connects Words to Real-life Situations**¹⁰
 - Davening/Bentching
 - Yom Tov
 - Daily activities

While each of the aforementioned components plays a critical role in long-term vocabulary acquisition, overlearning is the most crucial factor. Unfortunately, *overlearning* is one of the most overlooked elements in our classrooms. It is often assumed that once a word has been translated and perhaps been put on a test, the students will remember it and be able to identify it in the *Chumash*. Experience demonstrates that this is **not true** for many students. In order for students to remember the meaning of words in the long-term, the words must minimally be reviewed dozens of times. This ensures both the retention of the word as well as automatic recall.¹¹ Given the time constraints that are present in most classrooms, this might sound like an exorbitant amount of review. In reality, however, it can be implemented in any classroom without a great expenditure of time.

For example, Rabbi Dovid Freeman (my colleague and the co-presenter of my workshops) implemented these key components into a flashcard vocabulary system three years ago in his second grade classroom in the Scranton Hebrew Day School. He made flashcards that consisted of the common new words in every *passuk*. He taught the words using the flashcards before he taught the *passuk*. By

the end of the year, his students were essentially able to translate the *passukim* by themselves. It takes him just a few minutes to review and overlearn dozens of words each day. The result is a system that is fun and that empowers the student to approach a new *passuk* with the confidence that he will be able to translate most (if not all) of the *passuk* by himself. Furthermore, precious class time was not used up by this explicit vocabulary instruction; rather, the enhanced vocabulary skills enabled the class to finish an **additional** *parsha* more than he had ever completed in previous school years. Over the last three years, he has expanded upon this program to include basic prefixes and suffixes as well as shresh identification techniques.¹²

It is mind-boggling to think what could be achieved if all schools would implement similar vocabulary programs. Moreover, imagine what would happen if such a program would incorporate a coordinated curriculum in which each grade would reinforce the vocabulary that was learned in previous grades and add onto it. How much more material could be learned and understood? How many fewer kids at risk would there be? You now have the knowledge to empower your students to learn *Chumash Rashi*, and *Gemara*. If enough *mechanchim* will follow your lead, our chinuch system will be radically improved and the lives of countless *talmidim* will be touched in a monumental way.



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⁷Mixing a few unknown words with many that are familiar, internalized and automatized, facilitates the acquisition of new words.

אם ערוכה ברמי"ח אברים שלך משתמרת ואם לאו אינה משתמרת (עירובין נד. ועי' מהרש"א שם).

⁸ ועי' שפת אמת על התורה במדבר דף 25 ד"ה וכל העם רואים את הקולות שמבאר שיש מעלה מיוחדת בראיה ובשמיעה.

⁹ אמר רב תסדא אין תורה נקנית אלא בסימנין שנאמר שימה בפייהם אל תקרי שימה אלא סימנה (עירובין נד. ועי' שבת קד).

¹⁰Familiar words should be pointed out to the students as they are encountered in different contexts.

¹¹Recall should be instantaneous. If it is not, mental energy must be used to recall the meaning of the word at the expense of comprehension and higher order thinking. Furthermore, the Rebbe might be finished with the *passuk* by the time the student processes the meaning of an earlier word.

¹² A comprehensive video of our workshop (Laying the Foundation for Learning Chumash Independently) which describes how to recreate Rabbi Freeman's system can be found in the video section of chinuch.org at the following link (http://chinuch.org/audio_category.php?id=3&type=Video).