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**Introduction**

The following is intended as a summary of some efforts to promote literacy in classical Hebrew, which were undertaken in 2008-9 at the Yeshiva University Wilf Campus (the undergraduate men’s campus in New York). These efforts have primarily affected Yeshiva College and the Isaac Breuer College of Hebrew Studies (henceforth “IBC”). The summary is intended to present my own experience for the benefit of educators who are seeking to achieve similar goals, and to solicit advice from others. In the words of romance novelist Julia Quinn, “A smart person learns from his own mistakes; a truly smart person learns from the mistakes of others.” And, I might add, from their successes.

Throughout the summary, footnotes indicate links to the documents discussed.

The following paragraph will be useful to those unfamiliar with Yeshiva University’s unique dual curriculum program. Undergraduate men at Yeshiva University enroll in one of four “morning” programs, and in one of two “afternoon” programs. Broadly speaking, the morning programs consist of Torah studies, and the afternoon programs consist of college studies, often including an academic Jewish studies component. Details are as follows. Morning programs options include:

1) the Mazer Yeshiva Program, a traditional yeshiva operating from 9am to 3pm, and again—on a voluntary basis--from 8pm to 10pm;

2) the Stone Bet Midrash Program, in which students study a modified yeshiva curriculum with closer guidance from rabbis from 9am to 1pm;

3) Isaac Breuer College (IBC), in which students take courses in a variety of Jewish studies disciplines extending over some of the hours of 9am to 1pm, four days a week;

4) the Mechina program, which is designed for students with little or no previous formal Jewish education.

The options for afternoon programs are:

1) Yeshiva College, a liberal arts college;

2) Sy Syms School of Business.

With the exception of Mechina students, all undergraduate men have four required courses in Hebrew Bible, two in Jewish History, and two in Hebrew. These are known as “academic Jewish studies.” Students in IBC take these in the morning; students in the Mazer Yeshiva Program or the Stone Bet Midrash Program take these in the afternoon.
Background

In the fall of 2007, faculty in Bible and Jewish history from the “Jewish Studies Cluster” at Yeshiva College (a group of academic departments that runs academic Jewish Studies at Yeshiva University’s Wilf Campus) began teaching in IBC. Almost immediately, the Bible faculty were struck by the low level of literacy among the students, and discussions began about ways to remediate this. For purposes of this discussion, literacy was defined as the ability to correctly read, understand, and translate a passage of simple Biblical narrative, along with accompanying Rashi commentary.

In the spring of 2007, the Jewish Studies Cluster and the IBC administration approved a pilot program wherein incoming students would be tested on their Hebrew literacy, and students who did not possess the requisite literacy would be required to take a remedial class before proceeding to the regular curriculum.

Testing for Remediation

In the fall of 2008, a “skills evaluation” was administered to incoming students in the IBC program. Nearly all of these students had gone through elementary and high school in Jewish day schools and had spent a year in Israel in one of the schools that are part of YU’s S. Daniel Abraham Israel Program. The evaluation consisted of three sections: one which tested reading comprehension in a simple passage from Genesis 37; a second which tested reading comprehension in a Rashi on this passage; and a third which tested familiarity with Biblical Hebrew grammar and vocabulary. Of the incoming 54 students, 29 were deemed to have succeeded in the test, because they answered most of the questions correctly in at least two of the three sections of the test. The remaining 25 (approximately 47%) were placed in the remedial classes.

These classes began in fall 2008. The goals of these remedial classes were to allow students to develop the basic skills needed to independently read, understand, and translate a passage of Biblical narrative. (Understanding Rashi was demoted to a secondary goal.)

Class format consisted of two weekly sessions of 75 minutes each per week for one semester. Teaching assistants were also available to students three nights a week. Classes were taught in two parallel sections, one by Aaron J. Koller and one by Shawn Zelig Aster. The instructors are junior faculty members of the Bible Department in Yeshiva College, who volunteered to teach these classes as part of their teaching responsibilities. Both hold doctoral degrees in Hebrew Bible and Semitic Languages, and are trained as college teachers. Neither has formal training in pedagogy or in educational psychology, beyond that typically imparted to Ph.D. candidates in research universities.

Motivational and Readiness Challenges

The first challenge instructors faced was motivational: many of the students questioned whether literacy was a desirable goal. In the words of one student: “I came to YU to be in a Jewish environment; I never thought they would want me to learn Chumash in Hebrew.” Many students claimed to be perfectly happy using the

1 First Skills Test, Sept 08.
Artscroll translations, and noted that reading Chumash in Hebrew was “old-fashioned”; in the “Brave New World” which they inhabited, the standard text of Chumash was located in the English column of the Artscroll edition. In my section, I countered this claim with the following arguments:

a. Learning Chumash in Hebrew is empowering, since it allows a student to perceive the multiple layers of meaning in each word and in each verse. A powerpoint presentation showing the difference between studying in translation and studying in Hebrew was presented.2

b. Learning Chumash in Hebrew allows direct contact with its eternal words and binds the student to an everlasting Jewish textual tradition. The English text would eventually go the way of the Greek versions and the Arabic tafsir, while the Hebrew text would last eternally.

c. Chumash in Hebrew is the birthright of every student, and the midrash of Rav Yannai from Vayikra Rabba illustrates this.3

The second challenge related to study skills. Many of the students came to the program after years of educational frustration. Unbeknownst to the instructors, there was a high rate of both diagnosed and undiagnosed learning disabilities among the students. Moreover, such habits as coming to class on time, bringing text books and note books, or doing homework were foreign to many students. Consultation with learning specialists began late in the semester; such consultations early in the semester would have been greatly beneficial.

**Pedagogic Methods**

The pedagogic methods used involved the frontal teaching of both vocabulary and grammar. The textbooks used were Moshe Greenberg’s *Introduction to Hebrew*, and Chumash Bereshit without English, supplemented by handouts. Powerpoint presentations and overhead projection was used extensively, since students were extremely averse to studying out of a book. Students were given weekly vocabulary lists, including approximately 30-35 words each, and had weekly vocabulary tests. The twelve lists (together with some shorter lists found in Greenberg, pp. 28-35) comprised the 400 most common words in Biblical Hebrew, each of which appears in the Tanakh at least 135 times.4 The vocabulary tests were one of the most challenging but productive elements of the class. Students were repeatedly exhorted to prepare flash-cards and memorize the words, but few did so. The reliability of a weekly quiz both overwhelmed and motivated students, and in the end, most students got reasonably high grades on the vocabulary component, since actually memorizing the vocabulary led to direct and immediate pay-off.

We learned that students need more help and support in memorizing vocabulary. While teaching assistants were available for this purpose, few students went to the teaching assistants for help with vocabulary-memorizing. Making computer-based

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2 Powerpoint presentation on “why learn Hebrew?”
3 Story of R. Yannai.
4 Lists are attached in pdf. Frequency calculations are based on the tables in Larry A. Mitchel, *A Student's Vocabulary for Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic* (Zondervan, 1984). Mitchel is a Christian clergyman who has computed the frequency of each word in Tanakh.
programs available and actually drilling the vocabulary in class might have been valuable.

On the other hand, grammar was taught frontally. We first taught “How to break down a pasuk,” using the mafsikim among te’ame ha-mikra. After this introduction, the first month was devoted to the topic of “the nominal sentence,” beginning with the definition of a noun, the idea that nouns can have gender, number, and definiteness, and the ways that each of these influence the meaning of a sentence. We taught the difference between yeled tov and ha-yeled tov grammatically by showing that when the noun is definite and the adjective indefinite, a nominal sentence results. We taught the concept of semikhut (construct) and then taught possessive suffixes, naming them “special semikhut,” since they share many features with semikhut. We showed that ‘et marks the direct object, but can sometimes mean “with.” The following powerpoint presentations are appended: Teaching Subject-Verb-Object; Teaching Gender-Number-Definiteness; Teaching Nominal Sentences; Teaching Semikhut; Teaching Possessive Suffixes on Nouns. Concepts were taught, and were followed by drills with examples, mostly taken from Tanakh. We also required that students do the exercises in Greenberg as homework. At the end of the first month, we gave an in-class exam on these concepts, in which students were asked to translate phrases from Tanakh.

Some students benefitted from this type of teaching. These were generally the students who were bright, but had been taught Hebrew poorly in high school. These were about 20% of the students in our class.

I was continually surprised at the low rate of retention on the part of our other students. I realized that for most students, the gap between grammatical rules and practical text reading was simply too great to bridge. Students complained that “there are too many rules,” and I realized that many were honestly not capable of memorizing this material, certainly not in the time allotted. The students who consistently did the homework from Greenberg generally succeeded in internalizing at least some of the rules. Often, the students who were weakest did not do the homework (partly due to poor study skills), thus perpetuating the cycle of “I can’t learn-I don’t learn-I can’t learn.”

In our second and third months of the semester, we moved on to teach verbs and regular sentences. We had expected to work through a standard “Introduction to Hebrew” syllabus, beginning with the sound verbs (shelemim) in the G-stem (binyan qal), and moving on to the derived stems (i.e. the other binyanim) and the weak verbs, as well as teaching the accusative suffixes on verbs (e.g. shelachtikha). The syllabus we planned to use is appended. I realized that students needed more practical drills and less teaching of rules, so I gradually used Greenberg less and less. Instead, I used powerpoints to teach these structures; attached is an example of a powerpoint used to teach the middle weak verbs

5 First PowerPoint
6 Second PowerPoint
7 Third PowerPoint
8 Moving Toward Semikhut PowerPoint
9 Pronominal Suffixes PowerPoint
10 Syllabus
11 Vav Ha-Hippuch
Increasingly, we gave assignments drawn from actual *pesukim*, in which we expected students to apply the concepts. Examples of assignments drawn from Chumash are appended; these include assignments based on Shema and those based on Parashat Ha-Shavua. By assigning *pesukim* from familiar texts, we gradually tried to show students that what we were teaching was within their grasp, and that it was relevant to their lives. After all, it is exceedingly difficult to argue that a Jew doesn’t need to understand Shema.

These steps were helpful to those students who were motivated to learn. By this time, this group comprised over 60% of our classes. But there remained a “hard-core” of students who could not overcome their lack of motivation or their lack of readiness to learn. Some of these students had psychological disorders, which we were not qualified to address. Others had learning disabilities, which I was also not able to address.

As a final assignment, I gave students a passage of about 5 *pesukim*, which they were to break down, using *te’amim*, to analyze the verbs and nouns, and to provide a translation. The instructions are appended. Students protested at the work involved, but those who did the assignment found it useful preparation for the final exam.

Our academic mandate was to “get the students to pass the skills evaluation.” Our final exam followed the format of the skills evaluation used at the beginning of the year, while integrating material taught during the semester. Students knew that they needed to pass the exam, and were motivated to study. They knew that they needed to memorize the vocabulary, but students who had not invested effort in the final assignment had trouble figuring out how to study. We realized that our students needed to learn by intuition, not by memorizing rules.

We were very gratified that 75% of our students passed the final exam. However, some of these students had low grades in the course, because of persistent absenteeism or failure to turn in homework. The low grades generated anger. Showing these students how and why they had failed to earn points did not assuage their anger. (The grading formula was indicated on the syllabus.) Their anger seems to reflect the perception that they will consistently receive “mercy-grades” which are not directly correlated to their performance in class or to mathematical computation of their grades. I understand this, but I believe that in higher education, students need to achieve knowledge.

**Drawing General Conclusions**

I am more convinced than ever that this issue is important. It is unconscionable, unacceptable, and unethical for students to graduate after 13 or 18 years of Jewish education without the ability to read and understand a simple Biblical Hebrew text. Certainly, if a public school graduated students with a comparable level of reading knowledge in English, government intervention would be forthcoming. I fully sympathize with high school teachers who find this to be a challenging task, if not an

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12 Middle Weak Verbs Assignment
13 Shema Assignment
14 Chaye Sara Assignment
15 Rubric for Final Assignment
16 Final Exam
The issue of teaching Hebrew literacy in Jewish elementary and high school deserves separate consideration, beyond the framework of this article. Basic Hebrew literacy ought to be taught long before students reach Yeshiva University. But nevertheless, as Jews who have been given the privilege of transmitting Torah, and as faculty members at Yeshiva University, I do not feel that we have the right to ignore this issue.

I do recognize that the issue is much more complex than initially thought. It includes motivational and psycho-social components as well as academic ones. We need to convince students that they can learn, not only to teach material. We need to effectively address learning disabilities and other non-academic issues.

There is a limit to what we as teachers can do in the classroom. If our students are to be convinced that they need to learn to read, that message must come from rabbis, especially rashe yeshiva, from parents, and from the community as a whole. More Jewish schools must encourage this type of remediation, especially in high school and in year-in-Israel programs.

Our students were extremely frustrated that similar remediation was not required of their peers in the other morning programs at Yeshiva University, and steps are being taken to address this issue. A survey administered to other students at Yeshiva University’s Wilf Campus in the spring semester of 2009, in the context of the afternoon Bible classes, suggests that a substantial minority of these students require similar remediation.

Faculty who specialize in remedial teaching of Hebrew, and who follow the pedagogic research in special education, language acquisition, and related areas, would certainly do a better job of teaching these classes than I. My own expertise in this area was acquired “on the job,” and our students would certainly benefit from faculty who know in advance what I learned along the way. Furthermore, our appointments at Yeshiva University are as research faculty, and Yeshiva College’s stated policy is that “good teaching alone does not justify tenure.” Thus, there are real constraints on the amount of time we can devote to this valuable remedial project if we are to publish in Biblical and Semitic studies and remain faculty members.

Further Pilots

For the 2009-10 school year, IBC is planning to run a further pilot, based on our experience in 2008-09. We have designed a new “skills evaluation,” which consists of four elements:

1. Mechanical Reading. We found that a substantial minority of our students did not know how to read neqdot, and did not know the difference between bet and vet or pe and fe.

2. Basic Biblical Vocabulary. Students will be tested on fragments from pesukim which use the vocabulary which appears on our lists. Examples of such phrases include ma melakhtekha, va-yimtsahu and anshei ha’ir.

3. Reading Comprehension. A short narrative passage from Genesis or Exodus will be used, along with questions to clarify whether the students understand what they read.
4. Rashi. The evaluation determines whether students can read Rashi script and whether they can understand a short comment by Rashi and its correlation to the verse.

5. Mishna. A short passage from Mishna will be used to determine whether the claim that students are weak in Bible but strong in Talmud has any validity.

We are assigning students who can pass level 1, but cannot pass levels 2 and 3, to a remedial class which will meet four days a week, for 75 minutes each day. The classes will be small, with about 15 students per class. One section will be taught by the same instructors (Aaron J. Koller and I), and one section will be taught by a faculty member from the Hebrew Department. For the first semester, we are de-emphasizing the frontal teaching of grammar and vocabulary, in favor of intensive textual work. In the first semester, we plan to teach five chapters of Biblical narrative, Genesis 12-17.

The section that Aaron and I will co-teach is planned as follows:

1. Each class will begin with students reading a short passage of two to four pesukim out loud, using ta’ame ha mikra.

2. We will proceed with word-by-word translation, using sheets prepared by Rabbi Moshe Yasgur for this purpose.

3. Each class, we will conduct a mini-lesson of about 15 minutes, emphasizing a grammatical concept that recurs in the text being studied. As an example, when we study Genesis 12:1, we will teach the 2nd person masculine singular possessive suffix. We will teach vocabulary through the text, and try to accomplish our grammatical goals by teaching grammar as it appears in the text.

4. We will conclude each class by reviewing the pesukim and translation studied that day.

5. At the end of each week, there will be short test in which students are expected to be able to read and translate the pesukim studied that week, to know the vocabulary, and to apply the grammatical concepts to other pesukim.

Our goal is for students to be able to understand and translate the pesukim we study, not by rote memorizing of the English, but by understanding the words in Hebrew.

In planning our curriculum for 2009-10, we have benefited from the advice of Prof. Barry Eichler (now Dean of Yeshiva College), who recommended using an inductive method to teach this class, from the recommendations of Carolyn Rubin and Abigail Kelsen, who are learning specialists on staff at Yeshiva University, and from the pedagogic consulting of Rabbi Moshe Jordan Yasgur of the faculty of the Ramaz School. We are grateful to each of them for their advice, and to the administration of IBC for providing this support. Further comments and suggestions are welcome.