

ARE YOU SURE IT'S A KRIAH PROBLEM?

Rabbi Yaakov Aichenbaum

I regularly receive calls about children and adolescents who have difficulty with *kriah*. After I evaluate the child, I often discover that *kriah* is not the main issue of concern. Don't get me wrong, *kriah* is an issue for some people, but there is another fundamental (and perhaps more significant) issue that is often overlooked.

What could be more fundamental than *kriah*? The answer is the development of *lashon hakodesh* (Hebrew language) vocabulary and textual skills. I have researched the development of *lashon hakodesh* skills at dozens of schools across the spectrum of Orthodox schools. I have observed that **basic *lashon hakodesh* skills plateau at around the third grade.** Children continue to learn new skills in subsequent grades, but the basic core skills of *lashon hakodesh* don't usually improve significantly after the third grade.

A child with satisfactory compensatory skills can often make it through elementary school reasonably well even though his core *lashon hakodesh* skills are lacking. However, a child who has learning disabilities, ADHD, slow processing, weak memory, and other issues will often struggle with the demands of learning Torah in a language that they do not understand. The mind can only exert so much effort at a time. When a child is focused on translating or understanding a text, *kriah* is often the component that is compromised. The child might also have weak *kriah* skills, but poor *kriah* could be masking a more significant problem. If core language skills weaknesses are not addressed, they will likely persist through eighth grade and beyond.

When a child is struggling with *kriah*, Chumash, or Gemara, emphasis is typically put on *kriah* remediation and/or helping the child to understand the text that they are learning in class. The weak language skills are usually glossed over and the child is not taught the core language skills that they need to really succeed. The child might even be able to un-

derstand his classroom work somewhat, but he never really learns how to function inside a text. I cringe when I hear about a child who is only taught the concepts of Chumash or Gemara outside the text without being provided with the skills to function inside the text. **This top-down approach is like building a ten-story building on a crumbling foundation. Eventually the building implodes.**

This is when I often get calls from panicking parents and teachers. After evaluating the child, I pinpoint where the weaknesses are in the student's textual skills and design an individualized program to build these skills. Core skills take time to be developed and years of lost time cannot be made up in a few hours. **However, the vast majority of children and young adults can be taught the basic *lashon hakodesh* skills that they need to be able to learn Chumash and Gemara independently if they're willing to invest the time and effort.** Please reread the last sentence and internalize it. No Jewish child needs to be relegated to textual illiteracy.

I am privileged to have been trained and mentored by one of the pioneers in Jewish special education, Rabbi Shaul Klein, *shlita*. Rabbi Klein has established

resource rooms in over 50 Torah schools and his eclectic methods have significantly helped over 10,000 children. Rabbi Klein's methodology does not cater to the classroom curriculum. Rather, **it builds language and learning skills from the bottom up to the point that they are automatized and the child can function in the classroom.**

I have successfully implemented Rabbi Klein's techniques with students ranging from young children who are struggling with *kriah* to *beis medrash bochrim* who are challenged by basic Gemara. Rabbi Klein's programs are not quick fixes. However, **parents with long-term vision realize that the time that is invested in laying a solid foundation will ultimately result in a beautiful edifice.** ♦

Rabbi Yaakov Aichenbaum teaches kriah, Chumash, and Gemara to individuals with learning difficulties in Baltimore and online to students around the world. He also presents professional development programs for mechanchim. Rabbi Aichenbaum welcomes your feedback and can be reached at yaakov@ybm.edu or (443) 475-0385.

When your child is struggling in school, you can't afford to waste precious time with amateurs!



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