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June 2003

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MIFGASHIM

June 15 2003
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Moderator: Solly Kaplinski
The Lookstein Center for Jewish Education
Bar Ilan University

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1. Resource of the Week

Esther Feldman: Director, Information and Technology Services
The Lookstein Center

This week's resource of the week was recommended by Barnea Lev Selavan, Co Director of Foundation Stone.

The NY Times partners with the Bank Street College to offer weekly lesson plans for use in the classroom. These activities make use of articles found in their archives. This week's lesson is on Anne Frank and is based on an article on the new DC Holocaust Museum exhibit. The article discusses Anne Frank's legacy to history, her wide range of talents and the work she invested in her writing.

To see this week's resource, go to

http://www.lookstein.org/resource_week.htm and click on June 2003
or go directly to

http://www.lookstein.org/resource_week/june2003.htm

2. Focus on Current Events and Parashat Hashavuah

Chana German, Co-ordinator, Virtual Resource Center
The Lookstein Center

Each week the Lookstein Center offers educators discussion points to focus on in the classroom for both the weekly Torah portion and current events in Israel. These resources can be accessed at

http://www.lookstein.org/edu_focus_on.htm

This week: Focus On Current Events examines the rights of individuals when they come head-to-head with the security and political needs of a country.

Focus on Parashat HaShavuah (Shelah) explores a number of questions relating to the transmission of information. Is it possible to be fully objective? Is it always desirable? What is the line between education and indoctrination?

"And they told him and said, 'we came to the land where you sent us, and indeed it flows with milk and honey, and this is the fruit of it. But the people are strong that dwell in the land, and the cities are fortified and very great...'"

Bemidbar 13: 27-28

3. How does one cultivate ownership over Jewish holidays?

Benita Banks, Australia

The Jewish calendar life cycle is an integral part of our formal and informal curriculum. And yes, our school devotes time, energy and commitment to make the holidays come alive and be meaningful for our students and parents. The reality however is that Jewish holidays come and go in our school. Yes, we have good curricula; there are posters on the walls of the classrooms and in the school; we sing appropriate songs in classes, and organize fantastic holiday assemblies...but I still feel that the holidays are almost entirely meaningless to our students.

Most of the students in our school come from non-observant homes, so without school, and given that we are a minority in a society around us where there are no external and visible symbols to even hint that the holidays are different from the normal calendar, they wouldn't even be aware of the Jewish calendar. They are more excited about Halloween than they are Purim, Christmas more than Chanukah.

Does anyone have a program designed to make students feel ownership over the Jewish holidays?

4. Frequent Words' Lists and the Effective Teaching of Hebrew as a Second Language

Rahel Halabe, Vancouver, Canada

In a previous message sent to MIFGASHIM, I suggested that Teaching Hebrew through Hebrew Children Literature can be not only enjoyable and lively, but at the same time, a very effective way for transmitting a natural idiomatic language to our students. Here I would like to raise Hebrew teachers' awareness to the potential of another important tool: the Frequent Words List. At first glance this tool might not look as rich and as exiting as stories and songs, but it actually has the potential of enabling the students to engage in a meaningful Hebrew conversation and to approach more interesting and age appropriate texts earlier on.

The purpose of the Frequent Words' List is not to be memorized by the students. Words on these lists should always be on the teacher's mind. He/she should try and incorporate them creatively into lessons, games, posters and into the everyday Hebrew conversation in the class and in the schoolyard. A conscious use of these words by the teacher will expose the students regularly to the most common daily vocabulary. It will help them internalize it and eventually use it both passively while listening and reading and actively in talking and writing.

Frequent Words Lists (FWL) are used regularly in the teaching of English as a first language. Remedial teachers use them to drill their students in the spelling of the most common vocabulary they are likely to need in their writing. This is not the suggested use of FWL in our case, the Teaching of Hebrew as a second Language. Here their role is much wider and more important.

Old Hebrew (Biblical or Modern) textbooks for adults used to teach the language gradually - from the grammatically easy to the more difficult i.e. from the 3 consonants Simple Verbs to the Weak Verbs, starting from the Qal pattern and proceeding slowly to the rest of the Binyanim. This approach might have a sound linguistic rationale, but has not proven satisfactory when the objective is an active daily use of the language. The reason for this if we continue with the above verbs' example, is the fact that many of the common verbs are not Simple Verbs and some are not necessarily Qal verbs.

The approach today in both the introduction to Biblical Hebrew and in Israeli ulpanim regarding teaching Modern Hebrew is much more pragmatic. Lessons are planned based on frequency rather than on difficulty. The very frequent verbs, nouns, syntactic structures etc. are introduced earlier on, even if grammatically more difficult to grasp. An ulpan student is in a short time exposed to a relatively wide realistic picture of the language and is expected to apply it right away.

This pragmatic approach is supported by the fact that in Hebrew as in all other languages, a relatively small group of frequent words accounts for a surprisingly high percentage of the total word count, the words in actual use. As statistics for Hebrew are hard to find, and assuming they do not differ much, allow me to quote numbers describing the Canadian Elementary School WFL:

The first 100 most frequent words account for about 59% of the total word count.

The first 500 most frequent words account for about 80% of the total word count.

The first 1000 most frequent words account for about 87% of the total word count.

The picture described is quite striking. It means that the number of times each of these very frequent words is used is many folds greater than other less frequent words which are used significantly fewer times or rarely. A child is more likely to use or encounter words such as: 'want', 'say' or 'play' many times a day, but only seldom come across a word like 'maneuver'.

Prof. Shlomo Haramati in his book 'Havanat haNikra baSiddur uvaMikra' (Jewish Agency, Department for Religious Education and Culture in the Diaspora 1983) presents 4 Frequency lists: Biblical, Genesis, Siddur and Modern Hebrew. His analysis and comparison of these lists are invaluable for the Hebrew school teacher. He found that there is a great overlap between Biblical and the Modern Hebrew lists:

88% of the Biblical FWL are among the Modern FWL.

This means that by laying a good foundation to any of these two parts of the Hebrew school curriculum, we are simultaneously helping in doing the same for the other. Basic roots dealing with eating, drinking, walking, listening etc. are of the first on both Biblical and Modern FWL. They are most important in understanding a Biblical story as in conducting a simple

everyday conversation. As teachers we should therefore study these lists and be diligent in including words listed on them (verbs, nouns, adjectives, prepositions etc.) in our interaction with the students. If we are alert and ready to use our creativity, we will find that the opportunities to use this vocabulary are abundant. Heard again and again on a daily basis these words will turn to be very familiar. First they will be familiar enough for the student to recognize them while reading and listening. Eventually the student will also find them available for active speech and later for writing as well.

Prof. Haramati suggests: 1172 words for the Biblical list, 279 words for the Genesis list, 556 words for the Siddur list and 1072 for the general Modern Hebrew reading list.

Considering the great overlap his suggested overall list consists of only 1736 words.

Teaching this number of words is a goal that can certainly be achieved in the first grades of elementary school, leaving the later grades for expansion and enrichment of students' vocabulary and for its actual use in more advanced and complex subjects.

Prof. Haramati's lists still have great potential as teaching aids, but a more updated tool reflecting current use is needed as well. The Modern Hebrew FWL offered in Haramati's book is already 20 years old and based only on texts used in elementary Hebrew schools in the Diaspora. It is not a list of frequent words in a modern child's world. Haramati's list is therefore lacking the Hebrew words for: ball, computer, car, airplane, space, movie, exam.... just to mention a few. I am not aware of a Hebrew FWL based on the vocabulary encountered by Hebrew speaking Israeli children in their day-to-day conversations, readings, interaction and interests in general.

I would greatly appreciate it if any of MIFGASHIM readers could direct me to any such lists if they do exist.

Hebrew schools teachers in the Diaspora need the FWL in order to help them focus and work more effectively towards their objectives in transmitting the language to their students. It allows them to carefully choose and emphasize the vocabulary they want to present, offer it in reasonable order, prioritize and apply it in every possible way to facilitate students' maximum exposure. In the meantime, until such lists are found or produced through scholarly and statistically valid work, I would like to encourage teachers to create their own class or their own school FWL. You can start from Prof. Haramati's lists or from glossaries in modern Hebrew Ulpan books for adults (i.e. Ivrit min haHathala). You can even use your students' first language FWL (English, Spanish...) and translate it. Such lists will serve as a base to be sifted through, added to and adapted as needed.

Teachers should also be aware of frequent syntactic structures and other grammatical patterns, and try to transmit them early on together with the frequent words. This subject may deserve a separate discussion.

Students' mastery of the basics is the most important step for their future

progress in language acquisition. Hebrew is a key not only to their spiritual and cultural tradition but also to understanding Israel connecting with Israelis. Hebrew Frequent Words Lists can help ensure students' solid foundation of Hebrew and their continuing interest and enthusiasm in full Hebrew usage.

The Mifgashim List is a project of
The Rabbi Joseph H. Lookstein Center for Jewish Education in the Diaspora
The School of Education, Bar Ilan University

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