

ALL ABOUT TORAH & PRAYERBOOK
BIOLOGICAL VIRTUAL REALITY:
A Method for Learning
to Read Chumash & Siddur

In order to study the words of the Torah one must cultivate in oneself the [habit of the] ox for bearing a yoke and of the ass for carrying burdens.

—Avodah Zerah 5b

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Dear Prospective Student,

In his book *Halakhic Man*, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik describes the kind of internal lens by which the halakhicist measures the world. Having internalized the Torah, one can then measure and judge by its lens the events of the world, and interact accordingly. This succinct image of actualizing Torah was very appealing to me. What became immediately apparent, however, was that in order to actualize the Torah, one had first to *internalize* it.

My question was, how does one do that? How does one even learn how to read Hebrew, let alone “internalize the Torah”?! I was concerned, because my experiences in the study of languages were mixed in terms of success and failure. I had studied French for six years, from the 7th through the 12th grades. I got pretty good grades and even learned a little French. But if you had set me down in provincial France, I know I wouldn’t have been able to converse. Then, in college, I studied Greek—it was one of the languages that fulfilled the foreign language requirement for English majors. I was not a good student and I dreaded going to class. In one particularly degrading incident, the professor humiliated me in front of the other students. He apologized afterward, but it took me years to get over that experience. I think it was the only “F” I ever got.

Many years later I took Spanish. I guess you could say it was kind of a challenge. I wanted to see if I could succeed at another language. Also, I needed to show proficiency in another language for a course of study I was planning to begin.

This time, I was a very good student. I was catching on to the pedagogy, which of course, I should have been. My experiences of success in languages may have been mixed, but my experiences of pedagogy were not! French and Greek and Spanish were surprisingly alike in that regard. We always used a textbook, which contained rules of grammar, lists of vocabulary that had to be memorized, exercises in conjugating verbs, sentences to translate at the end of the chapter, etc.

I noticed, too, that it always seemed to take a long time in this pedagogy before we actually got to read anything besides sentences. And many times the sentences were

not very interesting or exciting, such as “My aunt’s pen is on the table.” I believe it was also about this time that I saw the results of a study on vocabulary acquisition showing that the greatest retention of new words came from reading. Notwithstanding, I made loads of flashcards and practiced them all the time. I was such a good student that I quickly became a tutor. I then began teaching a small class. Within a short time I received a scholarship, as an out-of-state student from a university of which one of my professors was an alumnus. The scholarship was for a course of study in Mexico. I don’t say this to brag, as you’ll soon see.

When I got to the city in Mexico where I was to study, I needed to give directions to the cab driver, but I became so tongue-tied that I wound up just handing him the address on a slip of paper.

On the other hand, in the classroom in Mexico, in grammar and phonetics, I did quite well. My phonetics professor told me that I could pass for a native speaker. Cuban! he pronounced. And I took a class in Mexican folksong—singing was a regular part of the class. I hoped that it would help me to overcome my intimidation. I was becoming an expert at the pedagogy.

So why was I so afraid?

I think it was because I was depending on my intellect, literally my memorization of material. *I had memorized large tracts of material.* And I guess I was afraid my “memory-banks” would crash. As absurd as it might seem, I think that I had learned the language intellectually, but without having much encountered it through my senses. I believe the proof of it was that I tended to do well in the classroom where things tend to be experienced intellectually and poorly in the street, where things tend to be experienced through the senses—and where a previous intellectual experience of the language is not of much help. I was (probably) justified in my fear that my “memory-banks” would fail me. They weren’t based on any real experience of the language!

Learning sensually, or “through the senses,” is of course what one does when one is “immersed” in a culture. An incident that happened while I was in Mexico will serve as a good example of learning through the senses.

For part of the time that I was in Mexico, I lived with a Mexican family, the Gonzalez’. One night, at about midnight, I came out of a dead sleep to a picture that I could not make sense of. My roommate was sitting up in her bed. She was staring at the doorway where Mrs. Gonzalez had appeared in her bathrobe. Strangely, Mrs. Gonzalez seemed to be dancing and the door was swinging on its hinges of its own accord! She was yelling something at us: “¡Temblor! ¡Temblor!” In reaction to her yelling, I stood up.

Suddenly, I realized the floor was moving under me. I was feeling the earthquake through my feet!

I was experiencing the word through my senses—through my eyes and through my feet, at the same time that I was hearing Mrs. Gonzalez yelling the word at me.

I don't think I will ever forget the word "temblor."

Of course, one can't always arrange for an earthquake in order to learn a new word! But was there a way, I wondered, in which one could experience words, without *actually* experiencing them? This was the question I asked in coming to the study of Hebrew, for I was determined to do things differently this time.

As an adult, I reasoned, I would have in my "memory-banks" many experiences of things. If I could but call upon those experiences, that is, to re-experience them in my imagination, perhaps I could link them to the new sounds of Hebrew words.

That is what this method is about.

We (Rabbi Moshe and I have developed this method together) use the image of virtual reality, a kind of 3-D movie, in which the participant wears special glasses (and sometimes gloves), which make one feel that he or she is actually inside the movie. Head-turning and finger pressure take you wherever you want to go in the picture.

Similarly, our object is to create within the imagination such a vision of Torah—a kind of 3-D reality that one will have access to at any time of the day or night. And, it's completely organic! This is how we understand internalizing the Torah.

We call the process: Torah Biological Virtual Reality (or Prayerbook Biological Virtual Reality when used for Siddur). There are no machines involved, just your imagination. (A cautionary note: We are not teachers of Hebrew, but rather of a method for learning to read Hebrew.)

To Enter Our Reality

STEP ONE

You will need two books to start: First, the Schottenstein edition *Interlinear Chumash*, which provides word-for-word Hebrew to English translation of the text. This includes the Torah, Haftarot, the Five Megillot, and commentary anthologized from rabbinic writings, available in a five-volume set for about \$160 (which can also be purchased as an extremely heavy single volume for about \$70). When starting out it may make more sense to acquire only the first volume, Genesis/Bereshit for about \$30. Second, you will need a comprehensive commentary. We recommend the seven-volume commentary of Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch, *The Pentateuch*, published by Judaica Press

(1999). Having an in-depth commentary, which Hirsch provides on almost every word of the Torah, is especially important in creating an alternate reality.

STEP TWO

Leave behind you, for now, all your preconceived notions about how language is learned.

We're serious. We've discovered in ourselves how easy it is to hang on to your old pedagogy, even when it isn't working for you. So . . . for now, forget the vocabulary lists, the dictionaries (except on rare occasions), the rules of grammar, and all that. You can always come back to them later. The main thing is, in the reality we're entering, those things won't help you to "get real."

STEP THREE

In order to "get real," you must focus on one skill. This is the skill of experiencing the language, in your imagination, through your senses. The first question to ask yourself is: Do I have a memorable experience of the word I'm trying to learn? If I do have such an experience:

- What did it look like?
- What did it sound like?
- What did it feel like?
- What did it smell like?
- What did it taste like?

As each of these questions is answered, the Hebrew word is pronounced. By connecting a personal experience with the new sounds of a Hebrew word, you will create a bridge from what is familiar in your own experience to what is unfamiliar.

One student's experience with our method will serve to explain. The word he was studying was "*vayeired*" (וַיֵּרֵד—"and he came down"). I asked the student, "Do you have a memorable experience of the words, 'and he came down'?" He thought for a moment and then said, "Yes! I grew up in San Francisco, not far from the waterfront on the west side of the city. There was, at that time, an amusement park there on the boardwalk, with a huge slide, with dips in it—you know the kind I mean?" "Yes," I said, "*Vayeired*?" "Yeah," he said. "My friends and I would climb up, our hearts in the pit of our stomach, and try to be first to slide down on the burlap bags." "*Vayeired*," I said again. "I still remember that feeling," he said. "No matter how many times you did it, you always felt your stomach go out from under you in those first seconds—*vayeired*," he said. We talked about it some more. Each time he described another aspect of the experience, we

pronounced the Hebrew word: *vayeired*. Later he told me that he thought he would never forget that word.

Another student described her memorable experience of the word “*toldot*” (generations). Her mother was very ill and lay dying. The student and her daughter came to visit. At a certain point in the visit, she suddenly became aware of the generations, *toldot*, present in the room.

You get the picture. In this manner, an unfamiliar Hebrew word can be connected with a familiar and memorable personal experience, serving to take the sting out of the learning.

Supposing you don’t have a memorable experience of the word? Then, use whatever experience you do have, or try to imagine what that experience would be like.

For example, with the syllables separated to ease pronunciation, in learning the word *kha-tzotz-rote* (תֹּצֹצֹת רוֹת—Hebrew for trumpets) we asked and answered (as you can) the following questions: Do you have a memorable experience of “trumpets”?

- *What did they look like in your experience?*
They’re silver—*kha-tzotz-rote*. Rashi says: “From a block (of silver) you shall make (them) by beating with a hammer.” (Numbers 10:2) I once had an elderly friend, a life-long player of the trumpet, who played the symphonium (something like a trumpet, made of silver).
- *What did they feel like in your experience?*
Cool to the touch and smooth—*kha-tzotz-rote*. Imagine you are the person blowing it. What does that feel like?—*kha-tzotz-rote*.
- *What did they sound like in your experience?*
My friend would greet my arrival in his home by playing the symphonium. The sound was sweeter than I imagined it would be. In the scripture they are described as being loud enough to be heard from one camp to another. Imagine you’re standing next to it while they’re being blown—*kha-tzotz-rote*. According to Rashi (commentary on Numbers 10:5), “The signal for the journeying of the camps (was) a plain note, a tremolo, and a plain note”—*kha-tzotz-rote*. Imagine that you are in the next camp, and you and others around you hear the alarm and call out to each other—*kha-tzotz-rote*.
- *What did it taste like in your experience?*
I assume, if you’re blowing on it, it tastes like metal. Ugh!—*kha-tzotz-rote*.

MAZEL TOV! YOU HAVE ENTERED TORAH BIOLOGICAL VIRTUAL REALITY!

Make the picture as real as possible. If you've been doing that along with us, you'll probably never forget that *kha-tzotz-rote* are trumpets!

THE MORE VIVID THE MEMORY, THE MORE LIKELY YOU WILL REMEMBER THE MEANING OF THE WORD.

It's worth taking a little time to think of a good experience to connect the word to:

- Try to relive the experience with as many of your senses as possible.
- Try to see it in as much detail as possible.
- When the meaning of the word isn't clear, look at Rashi's commentary.
- It may also help to see a thing by comparison to its opposite, i.e., Rashi says that "*sheretz*" (שֵׂרֵץ) implies a creature that is not high from the ground, such as a beetle. Try seeing a beetle under a camel.
- Imagining verbs for the first time in the negative may be tricky. What does "he didn't run" look like? Try imagining it first in the positive (he did run). Now imagine the negative and compare the two pictures.
- The better you get at answering these questions, the more refined your ability to create images will become.

At the outset, cultivating and using your imagination in this way may seem complicated and demanding, something you haven't done before. But the techniques can be learned quickly and, before you know it, you'll be using them automatically.

A Few Words About Speed

The oxen and the ass are not renowned for their speed! Since our goals here are to learn a method and to develop the habit of reading Chumash in Hebrew, then the only speed you should be worrying about right now is the speed at which you learn the method. Put aside any considerations of how quickly you are reading the Torah. Whether you read a page a day or a page a week is irrelevant. The question is rather, how quickly are you learning to experience the language? The speed in reading will then come naturally.

Also, if you're like us, don't expect to learn the word the first time. Our recognition often seems to come a little at a time until after the second or third time that we have encountered and visualized the word.

A Few Final Words

We begin on day one with the first word in Bereshit (Genesis), and proceed from there. We will make no attempt to keep up with the *parsha* (the Scriptural portion that is read every week in the synagogue) in the beginning, since this would be demoralizing. But we expect that within one year, you should be able to do so.

A final word . . . well, a story. There are people who teach very small children (two years old and younger) to swim, which we believe is a wonderful thing to do. One of the things that these instructors discovered along the way in their teaching was that if the youngster started to learn to swim in water that was warm and comfortable, he or she was far more likely to learn to swim.

If your previous experience with languages has been a cold splash, then we hope this will be more like a warm bath.

Kol tuv (“all the best” wishes to you),

Magidah Khulda Bat Sarah
Rabbi Moshe ben Asher

BVR LEARNING RULES

SEE IT!

FEEL IT!

HEAR IT!

TASTE IT!

SMELL IT!