

Differentiation: The Key to Unlocking the Joy of Torah Study for All Students

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In January, the third grader's struggles with Chumash became almost unmanageable. He alternated between resting his head on his closed book, doodling in it and making jokes that disrupted his class at [Beit Rabban Day School](#) in New York City. When a teacher worked with him one-on-one and asked him to read a pasuk aloud, he responded, "I can't. I hate Chumash." Indeed, when he eventually opened his Chumash and started to read, he mispronounced many words. The only time he engaged productively was when he enthusiastically argued his point during discussions about ethical questions in the text.

Fast forward to early June. The aforementioned third grader (we'll call him Shai) and two of his classmates are working on an activity to reinforce possessive endings. They choose a card from a pile and complete a chart that asks them to copy the word, separate it into the noun and the possessive ending and translate the word. Shai helps his classmates when they have trouble figuring out some of the endings. When asked to reflect on second half of his year in Chumash, Shai says, "I grew a lot! I can read better now, and I can translate better. Next year I want to get better at translating. I used to not like Chumash, but now I do."

What changed between January and June? Differentiation.

Beit Rabban's vision in Chumash is that all students will effectively engage with the text in its original language, such that they can understand the text, construct their own interpretation of it, connect emotionally to it and develop a love of Torah study. In January, many students were not achieving this vision. So in the latter part of the year, the Chumash teachers at Beit Rabban Day School participated in [The Jewish Education Project's Tiny School](#) initiative, in which schools test out a future educational vision on a small scale. The project was based, with permission, on [4.0 Schools' Tiny Fellowship](#). Only when teachers began to differentiate instruction in Chumash classes, which they learned through the Tiny School initiative, did Beit Rabban begin to achieve its goals in Chumash.

The Program of Professional Development

Allison Cook and Orit Kent posit that changes to text-based instruction, and other educational change work, emerge from progress in three domains: stance (attitudes and beliefs), pedagogical structures and core practices ("Havruta Inspired Pedagogy: Fostering An Ecology of Learning for Closely Studying Texts with Others"). In the context of our initiative, stance was the teachers' attitudes and beliefs about differentiation. For the professional development to succeed, teachers needed to believe that students would be more successful if Chumash was taught in a differentiated way. Teachers also had to learn the pedagogical structures—how to organize the time and space in the classroom—that allow for differentiation. Finally, teachers needed to be familiar with the core competencies and skills that Chumash learners use and the techniques that help them become increasingly adept.

The second through fifth grade Chumash teachers at Beit Rabban met for three full-day sessions and two half-day sessions over a period of five months. During the first session, teachers identified goals for teaching Chumash. Prior to the Tiny School initiative, Beit Rabban and [Mechon Hadar](#) had partnered to create [Standards for Fluency in Jewish Text and Practice](#). Teachers used these benchmarks to determine differentiated goals for classes and students based on where Chumash classes were meeting expectations and where they were not. Teachers chose to focus on the goals of building students' abilities to engage in close reading, while also maintaining a commitment to engaging with large sections of content.

The content of the professional development sessions focused primarily on the domain of structure, followed by core competencies. Structure was particularly important because Chumash classes at Beit Rabban had previously been conducted primarily in whole-class discussion format, in service of a vision of Torah study as a communal enterprise. We found that this structure often encouraged the participation of a few enthusiastic students rather than the engagement of everyone. Professional development sessions therefore featured modeling of different pedagogical structures (described below) and core practices as well as discussion and co-planning. We chose to weave discussions related to stance throughout the learning for teachers. In between sessions, teachers experimented with the new structures and core practices and were observed at least twice. Sessions also included time for teachers to reflect on their experiments, share successes and problem-solve around challenges.

The design of this professional development initiative also took into account the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education's directives for the design of effective learning—defined as that which results in changes in teacher practice and gains in student outcomes. By incorporating these recommendations that professional development be ongoing, connected, specific, concrete, collaborative, active and reflective, we ensured that not only were teachers learning, but that they were applying their learning and experimenting with new techniques in their classrooms, resulting in real changes in student learning.

What Did The Changed Classrooms Look Like?

We began with a station rotation, which is employed in blended learning. In this model, three or four groups engage in simultaneous activities and rotate after a specific period of time. While not ideal for differentiation because this model does not allow for differences in pacing and limits student choice, station rotation can feel like a more manageable first step. Next, we moved to an adaptation of Montessori work time in which students receive a list of tasks they must accomplish. In this system, students choose their preferred sequence of activities and level of challenge, work at a pace that is right for them, engage actively with material, and receive more individualized attention from the teacher.

The teachers at Beit Rabban experimented with a series of variations on these structures. Some teachers opened every Chumash class with a whole group meeting that included a brief discussion or activity relevant to everyone and/or a review of the day's activities, to support greater independence later. Other teachers chose to have students move directly into the day's activities, but begin working with a small group of students who might require more direction or support. Over a 40-minute Chumash period, students were typically asked to engage in three or four activities. One of those activities was a small group lesson with a teacher every day or every other day and/or a one-on-one student conference.

To ensure that the multiple skills students need to acquire for text proficiency were accounted for, we identified categories of Chumash learning. Teachers planned activities such that all of these categories would be represented over the course of a week. The categories included vocabulary, grammatical/textual features, translation, reading fluency, comprehension of content, critical thinking/interpretation and personal meaning-making.

In one example, the activities in a third grade Chumash class included a vocabulary game, a listening center where students practiced the Torah trope and translation of five pesukim using iPads, and a worksheet where students wrote summaries of the five pesukim. Students with stronger reading fluency and translation skills were asked to write the summaries before going to the listening center; students who needed more support did the opposite. The vocabulary game included a self-correcting component so that students could play at their individual levels. The fourth activity was a small-group lesson with a teacher, in which students worked on comprehension of content and critical thinking. However, in one group students spent time chunking words, while in another students explored phrases in the same pesukim that also appear elsewhere in Tanakh.

The more teachers structured their classes along these models, the more students' text skills improved. Their attitudes towards learning Chumash improved as well. In the differentiated Chumash classroom, students went from feeling bored, either because the class felt too difficult or too easy, to feeling engaged and successful.

Differentiation: The Key to Unlocking the Torah

In January, desperate to save Shai's relationship with Torah study, we were about to give up on the possibility of him working with the text in its original language. We seriously considered giving him the text in English so that he could continue to participate in the discussions about the ethical questions in the text without having to struggle through the reading and translating tasks that challenged him. We thought that this choice would help improve his attitude towards Chumash. In reality, this choice would have consigned him to a relationship with the Torah that would always be dependent on and mediated by others' translations and interpretations. Instead, thanks to the successful implementation of differentiated instruction, he and his schoolmates have the ability, confidence and desire to engage with the text directly, to construct their own understanding and interpretation of it and relate to Torah as a source of wisdom for their own lives.

We did not change the text that we put in front of students. Students continued to learn the text in its original language. We changed what we asked students to do, and this improved their skills, and built their motivation, excitement and joy in text study.

This change wasn't quick or easy, and it is still very much in process. It required releasing teachers from the classroom and investing in their learning; it required teachers to spend extra time planning and developing new materials; it required teachers to take risks with new approaches that sometimes fail and to be willing to share these failures with colleagues so that everyone could learn; it required students to adjust to new classroom structures and to take more responsibility for their learning. But as we learned through the partnership between Beit Rabban and The Jewish Education Project, differentiation can happen and must happen in Jewish text classes. In fact, it is likely the only way to ensure that every student can truly claim their birthright of Torah.