

EDUCATION

Rethinking Our Approach to Kriah: Q & A with Kriah Specialist Rabbi Dr. Aharon Fried



Courtesy of Yeshiva University

By: Aharon Fried

Jewish Action: An educator who works with kids in an out-of-town day school wrote the following:

Oftentimes, I come across eighth graders who read Hebrew slowly, hesitantly, missing key consonants or vowels. When I am in shul, I look around and see ten and eleven-year-olds or even older boys distracted during davening; simply not davening. I don't think it's because they don't want to daven; I think it's because they can't. If reading Hebrew is a struggle, davening is a struggle, and eventually, a burden, a chore. Some, not all, of the kids who go off the

derech do so because of their inability to master kriah and hence, learning. Their school years become years of consistent failure.

How would you respond to the above?

Rabbi Dr. Aharon Fried: You identify the educator as one who teaches in an out-of-town day school. Let me begin by stating that the issues addressed are universal. They are true in town and out of town; in day schools, *cheders* and *yeshivos*, in the Chassidish, Yeshivish and Modern Orthodox worlds.

The educator's observations actually focus on three separate issues:

- 1) The failure of many students in our schools to master *kriah*
- 2) The quality of *davening*
- 3) The connection between *kriah* problems and “off-the-derech” children

I hope to address each issue separately.

JA: Do you have any statistics on the prevalence of day school kids with “*kriah* issues”?

RF: One of the problems in our communities is that we have no statistics. This allows anybody with an agenda to declare any problem to be “the biggest problem plaguing our community” and to claim to know the cause of that problem and to demand that everyone support the obvious solution. We would be much further along as a community if we had some data on the goings-on in our communities and schools.

While I do not have statistics, I do, however, have my experience. Having been involved in consulting in a number of schools in different cities and of different orientations, I have often tested entire classes on *kriah*. Invariably I find at least four to six children out of a class of twenty-five with some difficulty in accuracy or fluency.

JA: I've heard the claim that kids have difficulty with *kriah* because the schools rush kids along. Are our children learning to read Hebrew at too young an age?

RF: The failure of many students in our schools to master *kriah* can be attributed to a number of factors. Some point to timing as the major factor—i.e., children beginning to learn reading too early, too little time allotted daily to *kriah* and the pace of learning being too quick, not allowing for sufficient review for mastery to occur. Others have pointed to the methodology used in teaching *kriah*—not properly teaching children the phonological elements of Hebrew, the relationship between consonants and *nekudos* and the phonological rules of various *nekudos* and combinations of *nekudos* (e.g., the *patach genvah* and the “schwa” sounds). Still others have pointed to the lack of meaning in reading Hebrew, and the difficulty of learning to read a language without understanding it. Some have suggested and maintain that most children in the primary *kriah* class do master reading, but that there is a lack of follow-up in later grades. Starting with Chumash class and going through Mishnayos and Gemara classes, children are rarely asked to read anything that the *morah* or *rebbe* hasn't first read for them. And in many classes, there is little time allotted even for having children repeat what the *rebbe* has read (and translated). Teachers maintain that when they ask students to read aloud, they quickly lose the rest of the class.

In truth, each of the above critiques is correct; each is true in one school or another, for one child or another. In fact, various programs have been implemented in different places, with some success. The problem is that rarely have all of the above points been addressed in an integrated manner.

In a broader sense, there is a problem with the culture of our schools that prevents mastery of any subject. Our children do not only fail to master *kriah*, they fail to master anything—not

Chumash, not Rashi, not Mishnah, not Gemara. The culture of our schools is a hurried one. This mindset is actually pushed by the culture of our communities, i.e., our parent bodies. When a child knows how to read, more or less, he is pushed into learning Chumash; when he can more or less translate a few *pesukim*, he is quickly advanced to Rashi, and in this fashion, to Mishnah and then Gemara. In my experience, knowing something “more or less” is more “less” and less “more.” The traditional questions asked about children is, “*Vos lernt er shoin?* What is he learning already? *Kriah?* Chumash? Mishnah? Gemara?” We rarely ask, “What does he know?”

Gedolei Yisrael from the Maharal on[ward] have complained about this. The famous Yerushalmi *melamed* Reb Chaim Yidel Yakobson, z”l, writes that in all his forty years as a *melamed* at Etz Chaim Yeshiva in Yerushalayim, whenever he met a child who was not succeeding, he found that that child had never in his career in *cheder* been allowed the luxury of mastering anything; as a result, the child was confused and disoriented. The famous Chicago educational psychologist Dr. Benjamin Bloom, a strong proponent of mastery learning, claimed that the failure of schools to insist on mastery is the reason many children fail. In a hurried system there is little wonder that children fail to master *kriah*.

JA: How would you define “*kriah* difficulties”?

RF: In broad terms, difficulty with *kriah*, and I am referring here to decoding, i.e., sounding out words or recognizing them, as opposed to understanding them, can be identified at two levels: in accuracy and in fluency. There has been much work done in the area of improving accuracy in Hebrew reading. A number of educators have focused on improving the teaching of phonology; some have created programs of their own, while others have adapted proven methods (such as the Orton-Gillingham approach) for teaching English reading to teaching Hebrew *kriah*. However, little has been done to improve fluency. To be sure, this mirrors the advancements that have been made in teaching English reading. There, too, most of the research and classroom work has focused on accuracy, and little on fluency. The only solution offered to children to improve fluency has been practice, practice, practice. While this can be somewhat helpful, the efficacy of this approach is limited. Research has shown that fluency in a language is achieved when all the elements of reading are combined and integrated—i.e., phonology, morphology, meaning and sentence structure. There is a research-based program for improving English reading and fluency, known as RAVE-O, that combines these elements and more. Unfortunately, little of this nature has been done for Hebrew reading (at least outside Israel).

JA: You say that the practice method is somewhat helpful. What do you mean?

RF: Practicing text for fluency is most helpful if children practice the *same segment of text* over and over until they achieve fluency in that segment, and then move on to read and practice other segments. It is less helpful when children plod their way through the entire Tehillim without achieving fluency in any one *perek*. Moreover, children would do better if they practiced *kriah* using a Chumash rather than a Tehillim. Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky, z”l,

advocated this, saying that “*ben chamesh l’Mikra*” means a child should begin reading from a Chumash.

JA: At what age should intensive *kriah* begin?

RF: I’m not sure what you mean by “intensive” *kriah*. Actually, I am not sure the process should ever be “intensive”; the word carries a connotation of stress and hurry. According to the Darkhei Moshe (The Rema), in the *Shulchan Aruch*, the teaching of the Aleph Beis can begin at age three, and the child is given time to master *kriah* until age six or seven, depending on the child. This suggests a slow and deliberate process which allows time for learning of letter sounds, vowel sounds, their combination, words, phrases, et cetera.

In a broader sense, there is a problem with the culture of our schools that prevents mastery of any subject. Our children do not only fail to master *kriah*, they fail to master anything—not Chumash, not Rashi, not Mishnah, not Gemara.

Researchers in Israel have demonstrated that children who began to learn how to read later (at age six) learned more quickly, more easily and with less pain than children who began earlier (at age five-and-a-half), and were as proficient as the children who had started earlier. However, I read a study recently that found some advantages for children who had begun learning how to read earlier. I believe that it depends on the child, the method, and the approach of the teacher and the school. If the child is being taught age-appropriate

skills in an encouraging and even fun way, learning how to read earlier could have advantages. But it is important for teachers to recognize when they have gone beyond the child’s current ability level. We should never make a child feel like a failure on account of our trying to teach him something beyond his capabilities.

JA: What are the major contributing factors to a child having “*kriah* issues”?

RF: If we are talking about an individual child, rather than the system, the issues will lie in the language areas—not in areas of visual perception or eye movement. Children with problems in properly processing the sounds of a language (i.e., auditory processing problems), sometimes congenital and sometimes due to ear infections and fluid in the ears, will have difficulty with the phonology (sounds) and morphology (sounds that produce changes in the meaning of words, e.g., the “s” at the end of an English word) and with reading. Children with word-finding problems, children who have difficulty remembering color names or the names of other highly familiar objects (often saying “What’s it called? The whatchamacallit?”) are likely to also have trouble recalling and producing the sound made by a particular letter or *nekudah*. We need to be flexible and have different approaches for different children.

JA: Do Modern Orthodox day schools have better success teaching *kriah* than other kinds of schools?

RF: I don’t believe this question is answerable. There is no monolithic method that reigns in one type of school or another, and often, not even in all the classes of the same school. In

my experience, there is no significant difference between different schools. Of course, only research and data can truly answer this question. Having said that, my sense is that Chassidic *cheders* devote more time to practicing *kriah* up until fifth grade. To the extent that this is true, their students may be expected to decode text more accurately and more fluently than children in schools that devote less time to practicing *kriah*.

Regarding Chumash, each school essentially reaps what it plants. Schools that place a greater emphasis on “*teitch*” (rote translation) have students who translate with greater ease, but without much comprehension. Those that focus on *shorashim*, prefixes and suffixes will have students who know *shorashim*, prefixes and suffixes, but cannot necessarily answer comprehension questions. And those that focus on the content of the stories will have students who know the stories well and may even have thoughts about the meaning and implications. Unfortunately, few schools focus on the actual text, the meaning of words, making connections between words, the meaning of phrases and *pesukim* and their interconnections. Those that do are the ones that will have students who will be able to read a *pasuk* in Chumash, understand what in the text is troubling Rashi and how Rashi helps us understand the *pasuk*. Few do this because it cannot be done in a rush. Schools are, for the most part, afraid of not covering enough ground.

JA: How should schools teach to ensure that when a child graduates elementary school, he or she will be able to independently read and comprehend a *pasuk* in Chumash with Rashi?

RF: How do schools ensure that when a child graduates elementary school, he or she will be able to independently do the four basic mathematical operations? They focus on teaching the operations, practicing them and testing them ad infinitum. The same needs to be done for Chumash and Rashi. We need to teach children the language of the Chumash; we need to teach vocabulary, not just *shorashim*, prefixes and suffixes, though these are definitely important. We need to teach the meaning of words, sometimes the multiple meanings of words. We need to teach the difference between words that are nouns and words that are verbs. We need to teach children to break up *pesukim* into subject and predicate, to find facts within *pesukim*, to identify quotes, to be able to sequence the events in the text, to summarize a group of *pesukim* or a topic. And we need to familiarize children with the text to the point where they can “hear” and be troubled by an anomalous word or phrase, e.g., a *lashon zachar* when it should be a *lashon nekeivah*, or vice versa. Then they will often anticipate Rashi’s question, and truly appreciate what Rashi is saying. Children need to be given words and *pesukim* with focused questions to answer, questions that help them to focus on the text. And then children need to be regularly tested on these skills, and also need to be listened to as they read Chumash and Rashi out loud. Unfortunately, in many schools today, memorization passes for exercise, and testing consists mainly of questions about the content with little about the text (except for previously memorized “*mi amar el mi?*, who said to whom?” and “*al mi ne’emar?*, whom is this talking about?” questions). We need to teach, exercise and test for textual knowledge. Without all three components, we will not achieve our goals.

JA: Does the *lvrit b'lvrit* approach really work?

RF: It can be made to work better. Our goal should not be translation; our goal should be language. If schools deem it important for their students to speak Hebrew and to thereby be able to more easily access and comprehend Torah texts, I think they should begin a Hebrew immersion program in nursery and kindergarten. If they spoke to their three-, four- and five-year-olds in Hebrew about everything—colors, shapes, the seasons, sharing et cetera—those children, by the time they begin learning Chumash, would not need to translate. They would read the text and understand—sometimes with a little cuing from the teacher, but never needing to translate. This can be done. I actually saw this method implemented in a small school. It was phenomenal.

JA: How important is it to make sure that every word of *tefillah* is understood? Should day school/yeshivah *davening* be modified in terms of speed or comprehension in order to accommodate *kriah* proficiency and understanding? (Do you feel that there is a direct relationship with the manner in which *tefillah* is conducted at the school level and later problems with *davening*, or with going off the *derech*?)

RF: The educator whose letter you referred to at the start seemed to be blaming the lack of involvement and enthusiasm for *davening* on the children's difficulties with *kriah*. I am sure these difficulties serve as contributing factors to the problem, but I do not believe that is the whole story. Many children who do read well nevertheless fail to *daven* well. Training children to *daven* properly, to enjoy and to be uplifted by *davening* is a huge challenge. Children need to hear about the importance and the meaning of *davening*. They need to see their *rebbeim*, teachers and *menahalim* taking it seriously, and expecting proper decorum during *davening*, be it in the classroom, in the school *beis midrash* or in the community shul. How children *daven* in school will affect how they *daven* later.

Finally, allow me to say a few words about *kriah* and “children at risk” or “off the *derech*.”

There is a tendency for people to seek the cause for this painful phenomenon. We seek to find the cause so that we can “fix” it, and also to know whom or what is to blame for our children who go off the *derech*. This is a futile venture. There is not one cause or a few causes. For each purported cause we can point to, we can find many children exposed to the same “cause” who have not gone off the *derech*. This is usually because the child benefited from one or another protective factor that kept him or her within the fold—a loving family, a caring *rebbe* or teacher, a friend or even just the intelligence to be able to understand and appreciate some of the learning in his school despite a reading problem. The “causes” we point to are risk factors, factors in a child's life that put that child at risk for emotional hurt and upheaval and possibly for dysfunctional behaviors. Problems in *kriah* are certainly such a “risk factor” and we should try to eliminate them. But, at the same time, we should also try to build in as many protective factors into a child's life as possible. We need to take a holistic approach to the *chinuch* of our children. This must involve good education, but it must also involve the emotional, behavioral, social and spiritual growth of the child as well. Only such a holistic approach will succeed in helping children grow with less risk.

Rabbi Dr. Aharon Fried is the associate professor of psychology at Yeshiva University. He is involved in the development of teaching and evaluation methods in Jewish education and in teacher training. He also developed the Kriah Scan, which assesses Hebrew reading skills.

Listen to Rabbi Dr. Aharon Fried discuss new approaches in teaching kriah at www.ou.org/life/education/savitsky_aharon-fried/.

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