

## Science of Reading Chumash: Principles

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## Principle 1: Reclaiming “Teitchwort” (Word-by-Word) Translation

**Theory:** We rely in this curriculum on “teitchwort” (word-by-word) translations. That is, we want students to maintain the word order of the Biblical Hebrew and not convert the biblical Hebrew back into English. For this reason, our translation sheets don’t include a space under the word-for-word translation for a more “elegant” English translation.

At the heart of Principle 1 is the idea that in the Hebrew Bible meaning is found in **form** as much as in **content**. In the Hebrew Bible, meaning takes place in the text- not only through or from the text, but with the text. In this way of approaching biblical Hebrew, word order, subjects and objects, sentence structure, verb forms, and repetitions all matter and all play a role in the experience of text study and the process of meaning making.

### Examples:

An example, Genesis 16:1:

אִשָּׁת אַבְרָם לֹא יָלְדָה לּוֹ וְלֵהָ שָׂפָתָהּ מִצְרַיִת וּשְׁמָהּ הָגָר וְיִשְׂרָיִ

The Sefaria translation of this verse is:

*Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children. She had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar.*

This elegant translation inhibits students from exploring many rich components of this verse. A “teitchwort” (word-by-word) translation that preserves the rhythm of the biblical Hebrew might look closer to:

*And Sarai, the wife of Avram, had not borne [children] to him. And to her [was] an Egyptian maidservant. And to her [was] a name, Hagar.*

This “teitchwort” (word-by-word) translation opens up the following textual noticings that then become fodder for student interpretation, close reading, and meaning making:

וְיִשְׂרָיִ אִשָּׁת אַבְרָם	Sarai opens the verse but is defined in relation to her husband Abraham.
לֹא יָלְדָה לּוֹ	Sarai’s infertility is described not as her own but as what she has failed to give Abraham לּוֹ יָלְדָה “bore children to/for him.”

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וְלֵהָ שָׂרָי מִצְרַיִת	While Sarai is defined in relation to Abraham in the first half of the verse, the focus switches to what belongs to her לָהּ in the second half of the verse. What belongs to her is an Egyptian maidservant.
וַשְׂמָה הַגֵּר	After being introduced as just a possession of Sarai, in a surprising turn, Hagar is named- וַשְׂמָה הַגֵּר. Hagar belonged to Sarai, she was Sarai's possession and yet Hagar's name belonged to Hagar. Her name was her own.
וְשָׂרַי... הַגֵּר	Sarai opens the verse and Hagar closes it. This foreshadows, through form (not content), that these women will conflict with one another and be intertwined in one another's stories.

## Principle 2: Importance of Beginnings

**Theory:** Throughout the Hebrew Bible, one cannot read more than a few words without stumbling upon a preposition, definite article or conjunctive וּ. These always show up at the beginning of a word and so we call them “beginnings”. Prepositions, definite articles and conjunctive וּ are key to translating and understanding biblical Hebrew and yet they can be very tricky. They can elide (get swallowed up) into each other (e.g., “in the” = ב). Prepositions can show up as their own word with their own suffixes (to him, from her, like them = כהם = ב). Or they can subtly attach to the beginning of a word, becoming easily mistaken for part of a שורש, a root, (“in a house” = בבית). Identifying “beginnings” is the first step towards knowing if a particular biblical Hebrew word is a noun or verb. Only nouns can have prepositions or definite articles.

For this reason, in our curriculum, we want students to focus on noticing and identifying “beginnings”. To help with this we have made all prepositions, the conjunctive וּ and the definite article **green** in our translation sheets. This is true whether they appear on their own with a suffix or at the beginning of a noun.

### Examples:

Back to our example, Genesis 16:1:

וְשָׂרַי אֵשֶׁת אַבְרָם לֹא יָלְדָה לּוֹ וְגַלְתָּה מִצְרַיִת וְשֵׁמָּה הָגָר

Notice the **green**. This clues students in that לּוֹ וְגַלְתָּה are prepositional phrases and not nouns or verbs. It helps students know to look for a שורש, a root, when looking at these two words.

Again, the Sefaria translation of this verse is:

*Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar.*

Our “teitchwort” (word-by-word) translation of this verse is:

*And Sarai, the wife of Avram, had not borne [children] to him. And to her [was] an Egyptian maidservant. And to her [was] a name, Hagar.*

The preposition ל appears twice in this verse, with a suffix in both instances: “to him” and “to her.” Both of these prepositions are essential for basic comprehension of the verse. They also provide fodder for interpretation. For example, they are an interesting and perhaps meaningful alliteration contrast. Sarah’s womb belongs **to** Abraham. In the exact same way, Hagar belongs **to** Sarah.

Similarly, the conjunctive וַי appears twice with different vocalization/vowels in each instance. This can be tricky for students and is why we identify the conjunctive וַי along with the prepositions.

We propose the following formal translations for these common prepositions as the first step in teaching prepositions:

Definitions	Beginnings
In/With	ב
That	ש
Like	כ
From	מ
To/For	ל
And	ו
The	ה
Special: A word that marks a direct object or sometimes means “with”!	את
To/Towards	אל
On	על

When learning the function of prepositions in the Hebrew Bible it’s important that students understand that although the given definitions are often correct, they should be on the lookout for alternative definitions as well. In fact, prepositions can take multiple translations, and often, which one we choose changes the meaning of the verse significantly. Perhaps the biggest takeaway that we hope students will gain from this principle is that a preposition may formally mean one thing, but in context it might require an alternative translation. This makes prepositions a fun textual space for interpretive “play.” For example:

Numbers 12:1:

וַתִּדְבֹר מִרְגָּם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמִשְׁחָה עַל־אֲדֹת הָאִשָּׁה הַכַּשִּׁית אֲשֶׁר לָקַח כִּי־אִשָּׁה כָּשִׁית לָקַח:

Here is the Sefaria translation:

*Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he had married: “He married a Cushite woman!”*

Our “teitchwort” (word-by-word) utilizing Sefaria’s translation of the preposition is as follows:

She spoke, Miriam **and** Aaron, **against** Moses **on** the matter of the Cushite woman which he took. Because a Cushite he took!

In this verse, the preposition כ is translated on Sefaria as “**against**”, in line with the Midrashic tradition and various commentators who translate this pivotal preposition as “**against** (Moses)”, as opposed to “**in/about** (Moses)”. The difference in translation of the preposition gives the sentence an entirely different meaning. It leads the reader to potentially diverging conclusions about Miriam and Aaron’s conversation regarding Moses. If one were to translate the כ as “**in/about**”, it is not apparent that Miriam and Aaron’s conversation would qualify as לשון הרע, ill-intended gossip. If their conversation was more innocent, a reader might question why God would punish Miriam? However, if one follows the opinions of the commentators and reads the preposition כ as “**against**” Moses, it becomes evident that Miriam and Aaron were speaking negatively about Moses and his decision to marry a Cushite woman. This might make a reader more sympathetic to the idea that their conversation warrants punishment.

The more students practice recognizing prepositions on their own and considering which definition fits best, the more likely it is that they will succeed in independently choosing when to employ a traditional translation versus when to employ an alternative translation that aligns with the content and context of the verse they are studying.

## Principle 3: Know Your Endings

**Theory:** Just as beginnings of words in biblical Hebrew can be confusing, so can endings! Our curriculum focuses on a particular set of endings that show up on biblical Hebrew nouns and prepositions, that is, pronominal suffixes. Pronominal suffixes indicate to whom the noun belongs (e.g., “his tent”) or to whom a preposition is directed (e.g., “to you”). While nouns and prepositions aren’t intuitively connected in English, in biblical Hebrew they share the same set of endings (though one indicates possession and the other direction). Identifying suffixes on nouns and prepositions is key to translating a verse. It can also become fodder for interpretation when a pronominal suffix can fit various characters. The better the students know their suffixes, the better prepared they will be to explore and interpret the texts as independent and curious learners.

### Example:

Back to our example, Genesis 16:1:

וְשָׂרַי אִשְׁתּוֹ אָבְרָם לֹא יָלְדָה לּוֹ  
וְגַהַר שִׁפְחָתָהּ מִצְרַיִת וְשִׁמְהָ הָגָר

Again, the Sefaria translation of this verse is:

*Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children. She had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar.*

Our “teitchwort” (word-by-word) translation of this verse is:

*And Sarai, the wife of Avram, had not borne [children] to him. And to her [was] an Egyptian maidservant. And to her [was] a name, Hagar.*

For the purposes of this example, the suffixes are enlarged (they are **red** in the curriculum’s translation sheets). In this verse, the pronominal suffix “וֹ” attached to the preposition “לְ” indicates that it was to Avram that Sarai borne no children. The “הָ” attached to the word שִׁמְ, name, and tells us that the name Hagar *belongs* to the Egyptian maidservant. This is significant. It is *her* name, *her* possession.

These two examples display two different ways that pronominal suffixes might show up. Again, for the student who speaks and reads English it may be confusing to see a shared set of suffixes

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placed on prepositions and nouns, especially since they have very different meanings. It is exactly for this reason, the non-intuitive sharing of these endings, that we make a point to teach them explicitly in our curriculum.



## Principle 4: The Basics of Verbs

**Theory:** There is a lot to know about verbs in Biblical Hebrew. It is not realistic or developmentally appropriate to teach everything about Biblical Hebrew verbs to young students. For example, many “verbal aspects” (Brettler, 2002) and בנינים (derived conjugations) may be too complicated for elementary school children. For this reason, when a verb בנין appears that changes the meaning of the verb (e.g., נפעל) or an usual aspect shows up (e.g., imperative), we provide that information for the students in the translation sheets. However, knowing how to identify a verb in a sentence and identifying the subject of a verb (through its conjugation) is a do-able and important first step. Our approach to teaching verbs is threefold:

1. In the translation sheets we always provide the שורש, the root, for every verb so that the students can see which letters belong to the שורש, the root, and which letters indicate the verbal aspect and/or subject of the verb.
2. We have students practice identifying the subject (prefixes and suffixes) for קל verbs.
3. We emphasize noticing whether or not that subject is explicitly named in the verb (“she had not born” versus “Sarai, Abraham’s wife, she had not born”).

### Examples:

Back to our example, Genesis 16:1:

וְשָׂרַי אִשְׁתּוֹ אָבְרָם לֹא יָלְדָה לּוֹ  
וְהָיָה שָׂפְתָהּ מִצְרַיִת וְשֵׁמֶהָ הָגָר

Again, the Sefaria translation of this verse is:

*Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children. She had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar.*

Our “teitchwort” (word-by-word) of this verse is:

*And Sarai, the wife of Avram, had not borne [children] to him. And to her [was] an Egyptian maidservant. And to her [was] a name, Hagar*

This verse only has one verb: יִלְדָה (to bear children) which could easily be mistaken for a noun. In our translation sheets we provide the שורש, the root, (י-ל-ד) to help students first know that this is a verb, and second, to see that they have to look for the verbal suffix ה (perfect, 3<sup>rd</sup> person, female). The translation sheets also help students notice that the subject *is* explicitly named: שָׂרַי אִשְׁתֵּי אַבְרָם (Sarai the wife of Avram)

The focus in our curriculum for verbs is to identify the subject and object of every verb. We believe this is key to comprehending biblical Hebrew prose. Students should become comfortable with the following differences between biblical Hebrew and English:

1. Subjects and objects are not always independently named and therefore can be ambiguous in biblical Hebrew.
2. Other times subjects and objects are named with multiple names.
3. A few times the object of a verb is appended onto of the verb, which can be confused with a verbal subject or a letter from the שורש, the root, (when this happens, we show the verbal object suffixes in **blue**).
4. And, finally, sometimes the conjugated subject does not match the listed subject. This is a particularly exciting place for interpretation (e.g., וַתְּדַבֵּר מְרִיָּם וְאַהֲרֹן).

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Subject	Perfect	Imperfect
<b>I</b>	שמרתי	אשמר
<b>You (singular male)</b>	שמרת	תשמר
<b>You (singular female)</b>	שמרת	תשמרי
<b>He</b>	שמר	ישמר
<b>She</b>	שמרה	תשמר
<b>We</b>	שמרנו	נשמר
<b>You (plural male)</b>	שמרתם	תשמרו
<b>You (plural female)</b>	שמרתן	תשמרנה
<b>They (male)</b>	שמרכם	ישמרו
<b>They (female)</b>	שמרכן	תשמרנה

## Principle 5: Making Textual Thinking Visible

**Theory:** All of the work we ask students to do in biblical Hebrew is in service of facilitating students' textual thinking and interpretation. For thousands of years, Jews have engaged in a set of literacy practices when engaging with the Hebrew Bible. Many Jews relate to the text religiously as the word of God revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai. Many other Jews relate to the text as a human artifact that has become a cultural treasure of Jewish thought and ideas. Nevertheless, perhaps surprisingly and even paradoxically, they have both treated the Hebrew Bible as requiring human interpretation. As a result, an interpretive tradition has been developed that plumbs the depths of textual meaning, engaging in close and careful reading and recognizing the Hebrew Bible as an elastic text with flexible meaning.

Our hope is through this curriculum with the guiding lesson plans, students will have the opportunity to engage in a Jewish interpretive practice.

Making interpretive thinking visible becomes possible with basic mastery of biblical Hebrew. But, of course, space for the actual interpretive thinking must be cultivated intentionally all along the way. This means at the end of every single text translated and studied ample class time should be set aside for authentic, open-ended, student-led interpretive discussions.