

Remembering Vocabulary

Perhaps the most common question posed to me as a teacher of Biblical Hebrew is, "How can you help me remember the vocabulary?" Ultimately, the answer must be that I can't, because I am not in the position of the Most High.

In spite of my mortal status, I would still like to share with you some of the tips that I have learned along the way that have assisted me in learning numerous languages over the past ten years.

- **Mind games.** Do not let your mind play tricks on you. When you first see a long list of words to learn, your first impression is that you will simply never be able to remember them all. This is invariably not true. The human mind is an extremely powerful machine that has a very capably memory. In 1999 I spent the summer here in Israel learning a new language for the first time in twenty years. When I was first told that I had to remember approximately 100 words a week, my first thought was that it was impossible. Once I stopped crying, cancelled therapy, and got past that feeling of helplessness (and after my wife slapped me across the face and told me to get a grip of myself) I found that the task was not as daunting as it looked
- **Effort.** For some reason, people think that after attending a lesson and being introduced to fifteen new words that they should, miraculously, know all of these words, and that if they do not, they have poor memories or are not very good at languages. What they fail realize is that only about 1% of society can learn this quickly. The rest of us have to invest some kind of time and effort into learning the vocabulary. The next big problem is how you can utilize your time and efforts to get the best results. The following points may or may not be of assistance.
- **Recite.** Always recite *aloud* the new words in your vocabulary rather than saying them to yourself. That way you have two of you senses (speech and sound) working together to help you remember. Do not worry too much about the precise pronunciation. With the Hebrew consonants and the vowels you should all be able to pronounce the words relatively consistently. This should be enough (of course this does not mean you are allowed to pronounce a *tsere* as an "a", etc.)! One warning for your recitation, do not use transliterated characters (Hebrew written in English)! Though it may seem easy and helpful in the initial stages, it will soon become a millstone around your neck, and a fetters on your feet. Ultimately, the only outcome is that you will learn the letters much slower than you would ordinarily.
- **Association.** The challenge of remembering vocabulary is creating a link between the Hebrew word on a piece of paper and an image in our minds that recalls the meaning of the word. I have found that this is best achieved via association. How does this work? If I were given a Hebrew word such as Be'ER to remember, I would look at the word and as ask "what does it remind me of? For me the answer is the word "Bear". I now have a concrete image that I need to link to the meaning of the word Be'ER, which means "well (a hole with water in)". This, with my imagination, I would do by picturing a huge grizzly stuck in well. Now, when looking at the

word Be'ER, the meaning is recalled together with the image. Another example would be from the word 'AMA'H, which means "maid". For this word, my closest association was the English word "Armour" (I know, I know, it's not exactly the same, but it works for me!). The image I now conjure up in my mind is that of a maid (not that I have one of course) clanking up and down my staircase in armour whilst she is cleaning the house. I have found that the more crazy the picture the more easily it sticks in my mind. You may also find that if you add smell and sound to the images you create they may also help you.

- **Long/Short Term Memory.** Be aware of long- and short-term memory. Throwing words into short term memory can be easily accomplished, e.g., looking over a list of words immediately before a test. Though this will probably help you to get through the test, in the long run it is detrimental to your continued success in learning Hebrew. Soon after the test, you will inevitably find that the majority of those words are lost, and you will experience nothing but frustration when attempting to read a biblical text (this is your objective, remember). Placing words into long-term memory, highly recommended, usually involves association (such as the technique mentioned above) or some kind of practice that includes repetition and recollection.
- **Stickies.** In certain instances you may find that it is not possible to create a suitable image. In these situations, it is wise to write the word down on a post-it note with the translation on the back, and stick to your fridge or a door or some other object you frequently walk past. First this will help you refresh your memory with the meaning of the word (if you try to remember it every time you pass it). Second, you may soon be able to associate the image that you stuck the note to with the meaning of the word in question.
- **Flash cards.** An alternative, or supplement, to the above, is that of flash cards. I found that creating my own flash cards (Hebrew word on one side and its meaning on the other) and flicking through them was especially helpful when traveling on the bus every day to university. Flash cards should be used as an alternative to lists of vocabulary. When you try to memorize words in a list, you usually remember them within a set context, and when the word is later seen outside the context, it becomes difficult to recognize.
- **Substitution.** Some of you may also find it useful to play with sentences, by writing English sentences down and substituting Hebrew equivalents whenever possible. Thus you could end up with something like, "ANI said to my BANIM not to climb the ETZIM in the GAN" (such phrases can also be spoken in real life situations as well).

I can only hope that some of what I have shared above might be useful to some of you at some stage. Further information can be gleaned from a man named Tony Buzan, who has written on the topic of memory and memorization in an easily readable form (search for his name on Amazon). Alternatively, try the website: http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTIM_00.htm

I hope this helps a little