



Ever since she was a child, Avigail Bakaleynik was drawn to languages. By the time she graduated high school, she had studied and could communicate in Hebrew, Spanish and French. At Bryn Mawr, a women's college in Philadelphia, she majored in Russian—one of the most complex languages on the scale of the Foreign Service Institute. Instead of focusing on literature or history, the usual path for that degree, she carved out a concentration in linguistics and second language acquisition, curious about how people learn and acquire language.

While in college, Avigail began meeting community members whose *shomer Shabbos* lifestyle seemed beautiful and satisfying. She wanted a home that would put family and Hashem at its center, and she knew that some sacrifices would be necessary to achieve that. When she was invited to present her undergraduate thesis at a respected symposium for second language teaching and acquisition at the University of Chicago, a rare honor, there was a conflict with Shabbos. She chose to decline. She didn't regret it for a minute, though it seemed to close off part of the path to a career as a linguist.

Thousands of miles away, Dvora Kaplan (née Zilbershtrom) was growing up in a Chabad family in Yerushalayim. Her parents were both well-respected

educators, and Dvora was raised with the mindset that *chinuch* was her family's *shlichus*. A student who thrived in an academic setting, Dvora's favorite school experiences were when she was given the opportunity to teach. Her teachers used to call her "*morah mileidah*," a natural-born teacher.

After graduating from seminary, Dvora married and moved to Montevideo, Uruguay, where her husband led a *smichah* program. Dvora was hired to teach at the Chabad day school in the community.

"My first day in school in Montevideo was on 11 Marcheshvan [*yahrtzeit* of Rochel Imeinu]," Dvora recalls. "I went into class without the ability to say a single word in Spanish. And the students in that class were not advanced in their Hebrew. Still, I was eager to teach them about Rochel Imeinu and all that we can learn from her. I intuitively used different strategies, such as body language, pictures on the board, and words that they might know from Chumash, in order to relay the concepts that I needed them to understand. Somehow, it worked. By the end of the lesson, my students and I were singing the words to '*Kol B'ramah*' together. There were tears in their eyes as they absorbed the beauty of the message."

From early on in their lives, both Avigail and Dvora were fascinated by language and meaning, and by what language proficiency can do not only for people's minds, but also for their hearts.

Gateway to Learning

It was the time of Glasnost. Toward the end of her college years, Avigail participated in an intensive summer language program in the newly opening Soviet Union. She searched for ways to ensure her *kasbrus* and Shabbos observance while in Moscow, and to her great surprise, she found that by Divine Providence there was a vibrant community of *frum* refuseniks directly across the street from her language institute. "What's more, my ideas about the primacy of language proficiency to a full-learning experience were vindicated," says Avigail. "There was no ArtScroll for them. Every one of the Moscow *baalei teshuvah* made it a point to learn Hebrew as soon as possible in order to learn Torah in the original and to communicate with the *rabbanim* and visitors who came from many countries to teach them. If I hadn't known Russian, I would still have been able to communicate. *Lashon kodesh* has always been our lingua franca."

She then spent a summer in Bais Chana in Minnesota and a year in Breuer's seminary, catching up on more formal Jewish education. "Because I had the Hebrew foundation (and some gifted teachers), I was able to keep up with *Chumash* and Rashi, a new type of study for me."

Avigail and her husband, whom she met through her Russian refusenik connections, eventually settled in Chicago, where they frequently helped local *shluchim*, teaching and hosting Russian-speaking immigrants. Avigail has taught several grades and subjects in Chicago over the years, in addition to writing resumes and business documents. She and her husband sent their children to the local schools.

"As early *baalei teshuvah*, my husband and I were both fortunate enough to get a full *yeshivah*- and seminary-level education," says Avigail. "But we went to these *mosdos* as young adults. We did not go through the *frum* day school system as elementary or high school students, and we were not aware of the strong emphasis on rote learning and *teitchen*. Our children, like us, thrive on explicit instruction using relevant, authentic materials. The read-and-translate method with some layers of *dikduk* exercises didn't work for them. It was painful to see them and other capable kids lose interest in uncovering the depth and beauty of the Torah for which we had both sacrificed so much.

"For us, the gateway to Torah learning has been understanding the texts in the original, looking for the ideas—not just the translations—and being able to write and express ourselves in an active manner. So despite the excellent level of *abavas Yisrael* and the strong identity that our children's schools provided, we were still frustrated and confused when our children weren't gaining the skills that we think of as essential to being a literate Torah Jew.

"I knew, based on my academic training and my own second language experience, that there was a different way. I also knew that previous generations have had a richer approach. How else do we have the *mefarshim*, the *poskim*, the *maamarim* and other writings, written so eloquently in *lashon kodesh*?"

Two years before the pandemic, Avigail was asked to fill a slot in the seventh-grade schedule in her local day school. She agreed, on the condition that she would be allowed to teach them Hebrew. She developed her lessons based on the way that she had learned Russian. She used authentic materials such as Zamba packages, poems, songs, kosher video clips and excerpts from the *Siddur*. Instead of asking her students to memorize words and *shorashim* or lists of grammar rules, she helped them recognize sequences and patterns so they could internalize the rules on their own. She showed them how not to be intimidated, and how to build from the simple to the complex.

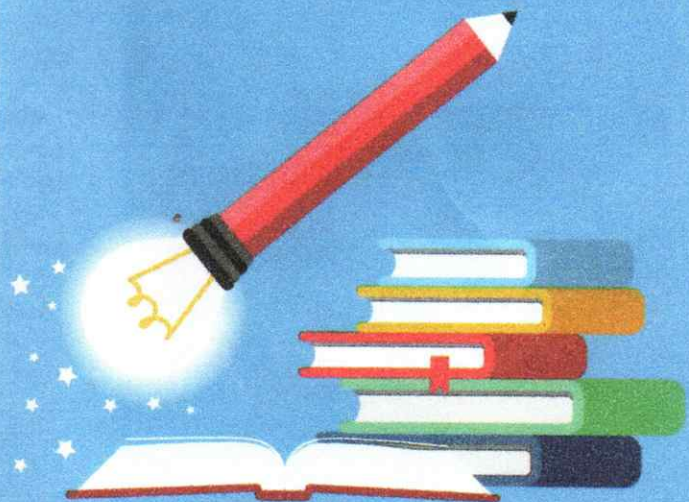
"Teaching *frum* students can be easier than starting from

be part of the Yaldeinu Team

Yaldeinu School is seeking instructors
for the upcoming school year

- Great pay
- Great environment
- Accrue LBA/BCBA hours
- Get trained by professionals

Please send resume to
info@yaldeinu.net
718.851.0123



scratch, since the students work with Hebrew from preschool,” she says. “The goal is to activate that latent knowledge. But we have to go beyond words. Sentences, phrases and paragraphs are what carry meaning.

Avigail had her seventh graders for just two hours a week. It wasn’t ideal for language learning, but the feedback from parents, students and the principal was still positive. “Language is like an ocean,” says Avigail. “You can’t teach the whole ocean. But once the person is able to swim in a small pool, then with more practice and exposure, they can eventually swim anywhere on their own.”

She felt she should do more than teach one class of students at a time. Yet how? She knew her way of teaching was working, but she also knew that it couldn’t spread effectively unless the teachers using it had training in language acquisition.

One day, Avigail’s principal told her about a woman in Michigan who was also working on Hebrew teaching. “You should give her a call,” the principal said.

“As a teacher, I found myself at a loss so many times, with nowhere to turn for direction. I was isolated and wanted to do better but I didn’t know how.”

“She’s always speaking about the same things that you do.” That day, Avigail dialed Dvora Kaplan’s number.

Lost in Translation

“The call from Avigail felt like a *malach mishamayim*,” says Dvora.

After the Kaplans’ time in Uruguay, they had moved to the United States and settled in Detroit. Dvora noticed a big difference in the Hebrew proficiency level of American students, and in their proficiency in *Tanach* and *limudei kodesh*.

In South America, she observed, the Jewish community overall had an impressive grasp of Hebrew. They were also very passionate about Eretz Yisrael, so they considered speaking Hebrew a priority. But it was not so in the States. And this had a repercussion on Torah learning. “I was dismayed,” says Dvora. “After my experience in Israel, where the education is held to an extremely high standard, and then in South America, where the students were absolutely determined to learn Hebrew, America was a

major culture shock.

“Sometimes, American students’ lack of comfort with Hebrew seems to make them resist the subject as much as they can,” she says. “But my goal in teaching *Tanach* is to connect them to the *pesukim*, to love learning Torah and to experience the beauty and deep meaning of its *lashon* on a personal, emotional level. I felt more and more that their proficiency level in Hebrew must not be viewed as a barrier but as an opportunity to improve. Learning *Tanach* more competently strengthens language proficiency, which can then grow and develop naturally as they learn those subjects properly.”

Over the next 22 years, Dvora taught in many different settings, including day school, high school and college. Each experience confirmed her initial diagnosis. “It’s very noticeable in the English-speaking world,” she says. “Most *Ivrit* and *Tanach* teachers, including me, were not professionally trained in how to teach a language. They are often Israeli, so they know Hebrew from birth, but they don’t necessarily know the skills of teaching it effectively to non-native learners.”

When Dvora was a young mother, one of her daughters came home from school excited to do her *Chumash* homework. The class had just started learning *Bereishis*, and the homework was to



THERE IS BEAUTY IN SIMPLICITY

translate the *pasuk*, word for word, into Yiddish (which Dvora also speaks).

Dvora turned to her daughter and asked in Hebrew, "What did Hashem create?" (Hebrew was the main language spoken in their home). Her daughter looked at her strangely and asked, "What does that have to do with it?" Then Dvora saw understanding dawn on her, as she realized that the *pasuk* had something to tell her about the familiar story of *Brias Ha'olam*. Even for a native Hebrew speaker, the soul of the text had gotten lost in all that translation.

"This was a problem that bothered me for years," says Dvora. "I saw kids struggling to master the translations word by word, while not enjoying the meaning of the *pesukim*. Chumash instruction should also teach kids how to think on different levels and how to ask questions, identify ideas in the *pesukim*, and find the answers. Then they get a sense of accomplishment and strive to learn more. That was the education I received, but I didn't see much of it happening with my own children. I dreamed of doing something about it, but with my family responsibilities and a tight work schedule, I didn't feel ready quite yet."

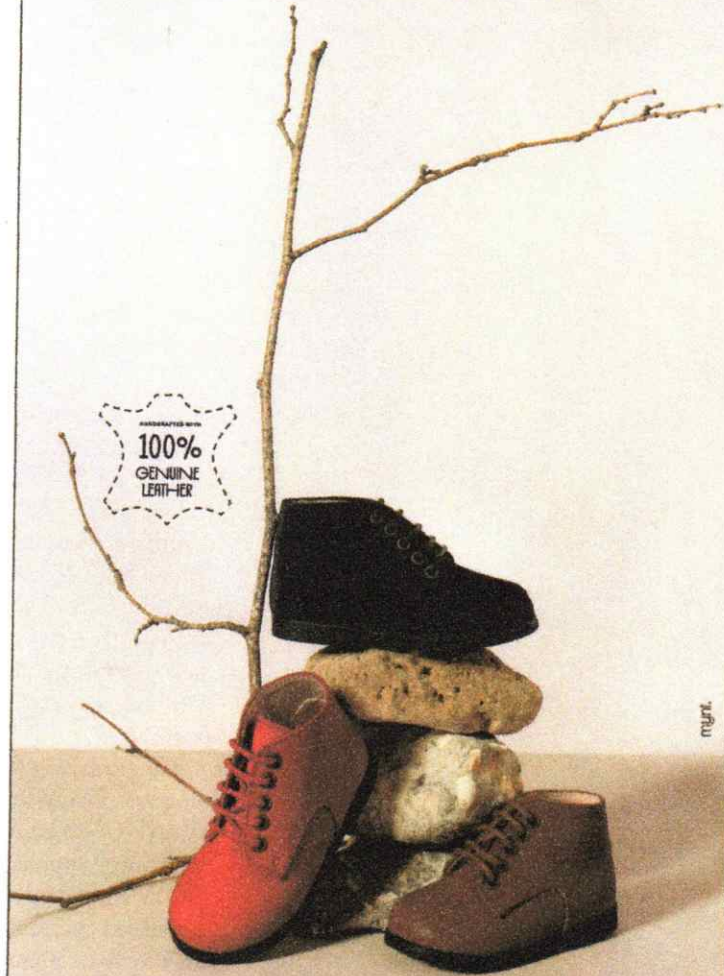
A Chance to Make a Difference

In the meantime, Dvora took online classes to earn her BA degree, handing in her final assignment the day before giving birth to her youngest child. One day, a friend told her about a new master's degree program that had recently launched in Vermont. Professor Vardit Ringwald, a Hebrew language expert who had helped develop the Hebrew proficiency guidelines and curriculum frameworks for the US Department of Education, had created a program to train Hebrew teachers using the functional proficiency approach, a radical paradigm shift from the default way of teaching languages. The program consisted of two summer semesters at Middlebury College and two years of online studies.

Dvora was fascinated by the idea but did not think it was practical for her. Then she received a phone call from Vardit herself, who called to personally invite Dvora to join the program.

Vardit had heard about Dvora's teaching talent. She wanted Dvora to join the program in order to bring professional Hebrew teaching skills to the *frum* world. After much deliberation, Dvora agreed. This was a chance to finally make the kind of changes she had dreamed about.

The next summer, Dvora flew to Vermont. "Vardit was respectful and accommodating of all my religious needs," says Dvora. "She



PERROQUET

Shop our winter collection

LAKELWOOD - 939 RIVER AVE #9

POP UP LOCATIONS: BROOKLYN - 4321 15TH AVE // WOODBOURNE - 437 NY-52
LINDEN - 54 MELROSE TERRACE // YERUSHALAYIM - RECHOV DOVER SHALOM 1
LONDON - TOTTENHAM ADATH HALL // MONTREAL - 5686 PARK AVE

VIEW OUR COLLECTION - PERROQUETSHOES.COM // ALL LOCATIONS - 732 846 8685



Administrators and parents are understandably wary of using outside resources, which can be filled with secular ideology and culture. Everything I teach is kosher, relatable and relevant to frum teachers and students.

allowed me to take the course over three years instead of two, to accommodate my family's needs. She also helped me with kosher food and Shabbos meals while I was there. Most importantly, she demonstrated through her words and actions that she was ready to support me in my mission to strengthen the way that Hebrew and *lashon kodesh* are taught in the *frum* world, with full respect for our values and principles."

After finishing the master's degree program, Dvora launched Hebrew Our Way (HOW) based on the functional proficiency approach she had learned. HOW started by offering a semester-long accredited course that takes teachers from the theory of language acquisition to practical lesson-plan making that is adaptable to the needs of any particular classroom. "I tried to condense the essential points gained over three years of learning into this one semester," says Dvora. "It gives our teachers a new perspective on how they can reach their students, and it provides them with the tools they need to move their students from level to level."

Dvora also ensured that the content and materials were appropriate for *frum* settings. "That's why we call it Hebrew Our Way," she says. "Administrators and

parents are understandably wary of using outside resources, which can be filled with secular ideology and culture. Everything I teach in HOW is kosher, relatable and relevant to *frum* teachers and students."

Dvora ran a pilot course in 2019, and its success proved that she was onto something. By that time, Avigail had reached out and was assisting with PR in English, gathering a collection of teacher-created materials, updating the website, and helping with research and strategy.

The Hebrew Our Way institute is now a center for training and support for professional Hebrew and *limudei kodesh* instruction. The program has educated five cohorts and follows up the main course of instruction with workshops and lesson plan guidance. HOW also established a relationship with Beit Chana Ukraine (an accredited institution) and Middlebury College, which allows HOW students to earn a bachelor's or master's degree using seminary credits and other previously earned credits and professional experience.

HOW collaborates with teachers, administrators and counselors for schools, after-school programs, camps, Hebrew schools, outreach programs, and many other types of institutions.

"We are doing our part to highlight the

677-799-8858 718-858-5801

 @lulukidsclothing

www.lulukidsclothing.com

satisfaction that a career in education and *chinuch* can bring,” says Dvora. “We want qualified people to become teachers, and we want them to have access to a level of theoretical and practical competence commensurate with the importance of this work. It affects all our future generations.”

Since launching the program, Avigail and Dvora have trained teachers from Los Angeles, Chicago, Oregon, Connecticut, Monsey, Montreal, Detroit, Pittsburgh, New York, Ukraine, and even an independent non-denominational Chicago school (with many Jewish students in it) for gifted children.

They have also launched a professional development group for *limudei kodesh* using the functional approach. “We use the same principles of good teaching: understanding your students, using clear ways of measuring their abilities, moving them from level to specific level, and planning the lessons using a format we teach that covers all the bases: knowledge, skill, inspiration, values and relevance. These things ‘translate’ from language teaching to Torah teaching very well.”

The emotional connection between colleagues is key, as well. “As a teacher, I found myself at a loss so many times, with nowhere to turn for direction,” says Dvora. “I was isolated and wanted to do better, but I didn’t know how. Today, I have a newfound clarity and a deeper understanding of the process of learning, teaching and strategizing, and I am so grateful for the opportunity to share it with teachers. So many of them tell me, ‘I wish I had known this earlier.’”

“Dvora is very personable,” says Avigail. “She really connects with the teachers during the training. She also connects them to one another. They keep in touch, meeting at the workshop sessions, sharing professional tips and materials, and developing friendships. The last cohort didn’t even want to stop. We are building a whole supportive professional community, based on the same understanding of the principles of language teaching. That’s incredibly empowering, and it will be the key to success.”

One dedicated teacher in Brooklyn who had taught for decades had been planning to quit because she felt she wasn’t making an impact. Now, after completing the HOW training, she says she is looking forward to each new day as a teacher. “Thank you for helping me feel like a first-time teacher again,” she told Dvora.

Hebrew Our Way has been touched by the war in Ukraine. Eva was a teacher in a Jewish day school in Ukraine when she joined HOW’s program. Three sessions before the end of the course, war broke out and Eva escaped to Warsaw, Poland. Like many refugees, Eva was grateful to be safe but heartbroken over all that she lost. She no longer had a home, community or job. Dvora remembered that a teacher in a previous cohort had lived in Warsaw before moving to Manhattan. She contacted the teacher, and she happily agreed to connect Eva with the Jewish school in Poland.

“One of the unexpected rewards of HOW is the community we

EASY TO DIGEST

NO PALM OLEIN OIL

BRAIN + EYE DEVELOPMENT

Similac On-the-go®

CHOLOV YISROEL



Similac On-the-go® Ready-to-Feed, is convenient, portable, and ready for you and your baby.



Perfect for travel and late-night feeding



Easy to use: No mixing or measuring



Simply attach nipple and feed

THE PERFECT BOTTLE® anywhere, anytime.



are forming,” says Dvora. “Hebrew teachers from across the world are now developing relationships, sharing their struggles, and helping each other succeed.”

Function Based Approach

Avigail says the kind of training that teachers receive at HOW could not be achieved in other formats, even in a published curriculum—which is why the institute has not pursued that.

“There is no one-size-fits-all solution,” she says. “We aim to give teachers and administrators the knowledge, tools and guidance so they can create a personalized syllabus and teach their students with the nuances that make it right for that community, that school, and that classroom. Teachers and principals are very involved with their own planning so that their teaching matches the *hashkafos* and standards of their community.”

Dvora adds that what makes HOW unique is its focus on developing a new way of thinking. “It’s a mental switch from focusing on what your students know to focusing on what your students can do,” she explains. “We have a function-based approach, meaning we want students to be able to use what they’re learning in real life.”

An example of this function-based approach relates to test-taking skills. “Think about a typical *Navi* test your

“Language is like an ocean. You can’t teach the whole ocean. But once the person is able to swim in a small pool, then with more practice and exposure, they can eventually swim anywhere on their own.”

child might take,” says Avigail. “The questions are usually written in Hebrew, and the students answer in English. Teachers might end up just translating those questions into English. We have to ask ourselves: Why are we doing it this way?”

“A functional objective would be to teach students how to understand the questions on the test, dedicating a few lessons to that. The next objective would be to teach students strategies for answering in Hebrew, no matter their proficiency level. For instance, novice students can answer ‘true’ or ‘false’ (*nachon/lo nachon*). Intermediate students can use more sophisticated sentences. The result is that students gain both skills and confidence.

“This can be in Torah language, not necessarily modern *Ivrit*. We can train them to think and respond in the

language of the *mefarshim*, in the language of the Torah itself. It’s within our reach.”

Dvora and Avigail are two women from entirely different backgrounds and corners of the earth, but they met on a bridge of shared passion. They want to make HOW a success—not for money or recognition, but to help reach and inspire a larger percentage of students, invigorate teachers, and provide *Yiddische nachas* to parents who want to see their children connect with their learning in a deeper, more intuitive way.

The women both feel a calling to do this work. “Hashem obviously gave us our abilities and backgrounds so we can do something with them,” says Dvora. “We both put certain things on hold while we were raising kids. But now we are ready to rumble.” ●

The APA & The Harris Poll
found alarming rates of
STRESS & ANXIETY
in the U.S.*

**30-DAY
ANXIETY
CHALLENGE**

* APA Stress in America Report 3/22

**TAKE THE
CHALLENGE**
by following
the calendar for
30 DAYS
WIN a
special prize!
(No cost. Supplies are limited.)



Need advice on
reducing stress and anxiety?
Call today to join!

Rifka Schönfeld
THE NAME THAT HAS HELPED THOUSANDS

ph 718.382.5437 • info@rifkaschonfeld.com
www.rifkaschonfeld.com

THE FUNCTIONAL PROFICIENCY APPROACH

Hebrew Our Way trains teachers to use the functional proficiency approach in order to effectively teach Hebrew as a second language.

Proficiency-oriented language instruction is a framework for organizing instruction, curriculum and assessment. Students practice the four modalities (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in order to communicate meaningfully, effectively and creatively for real-life purposes.

Proficiency-based instruction is student-centered and builds upon what students need, already know, and can do, while encouraging the development of a wide range of skills and learning strategies.

Rather than being linear and time-bound, this embedded acquisition approach anchors the learning within the communication needs of the learner—making the whole process holistic, always applicable, and therefore highly effective.

A key to understanding the functional proficiency approach is recognizing the difference between learning and acquisition. Learning a language is analyzing and exploring its details and rules until you know information about it. Acquiring a language is making it your own, having the ability to use it and eventually create with it as naturally as with your mother tongue.

The functional proficiency approach takes students from knowing to acquiring through a multi-step process, which includes input, intake, developing systems and output.