

BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY

"The Entire Torah on One Foot"

Comparison of Two Methods for Memorizing the 613
Commandments by Heart in Religious Primary School

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Abstract

"Which takes precedence, Sinai or one who uproots mountains?" An ancient question from the Babylonian Talmud (Berachot 64a) is echoed to this day in the realm of research in the field of education. What is better? Which should receive a greater emphasize, the amount of data the student will accumulate in the learning process ("Sinai") or the development of learning skills to "work" correctly with data ("one who uproots mountains") even if the data is not found in the student's memory at all times. Despite the contemporary educational policy to invest more in the development of thinking and learning skills than in the memorization of data, the various religions and religious studies highly respect and emphasize memorization of religious knowledge. While Christianity today focuses mainly on memorizing the Ten Commandments, Islam has many institutions where young and old spend many years memorizing and reviewing the entire Quran. In Judaism, the Written Torah gives explicit instructions "and recall all the commandments of the Lord" (Bamidbar 15: 30). Throughout the generations, halachic authorities have given great weight to remembering the content of the Torah. The most concise list of the Torah commandments is the list of 613 commandments, the number of commandments (= "mitzvot" in Hebrew) that were traditionally given to Moses at Sinai. There were fierce battles between the commentators of the Talmud and halachah, about which *mitzvot* are included in this list, but Maimonides' list was more generally accepted.

In later generations, several halachic authorities promoted a requirement for Bible students to memorize Maimonides' list. Two methods were recently developed to help memorize the 613 *mitzvot* list. The two methods arranged the commandments in the

order in which they appeared in the Written Torah (and not according to topics or other possible arrangements). The first method (below: "Mitzvot Signs") is difficult and complex. Each *mitzva* receives a serial number in Hebrew letters (...ד...ט' ,?...ט) and the content of the *mitzva* is encoded with the initials of this serial number. The second method (below: "Mitzvot Song") composed a song in which each line summarizes the contents of one *mitzva* in the list. Several familiar tunes were attached to this long song, and the process of memorization (after understanding the contents of each commandment) is to sing the "Mitzvot Song".

The purpose of the study is to compare the two methods and find which method has a clear advantage in successful memorization and in the student's satisfaction and motivation in the learning process. The research hypotheses were that the achievements would be higher in the method of the "Mitzvot Signs", in which the encoding is specific and direct to each *mitzva* and is not dependent on the other codes as in the "Mitzvot Song", whereas the satisfaction and motivation will be higher in the "Mitzvot Song" method because it has no hard coding and is musical and light.

The study involved 106 boys from grades 3 to 7 in an ultra-Orthodox Israeli day-school. The students went through a two week workshop for each method. Each workshop had 10 sessions of 45 minutes. In each of the workshops, the students learned the content of 50 different *mitzvot* (did not repeat the same *mitzvot* in both workshops) and memorized them. After each workshop, all students were given three research questionnaires: a. a written test about what was learned, b. a questionnaire in which students rated their agreement or disagreement of statements about their satisfaction with the learning process in the workshop, c. a questionnaire in which they rated their motivation in the workshop according to four measures - concentration, purpose, pleasure and challenge. It should be noted that the methods have not been studied as

they are implemented in practice, because in the classroom teachers use various tools in addition to memorization itself, which will create many variables and be disruptive to our research method. In order to reduce variables, only the process of memorization was studied. Both workshops had identical tools and both were taught by the same teacher who was familiar with both memorization methods. In addition, in one half of the sample, one method was first taught and in the other half the second method was first taught, in order to rule out the variable of connecting strongly to the first method that the boys met.

The results confirmed the first hypothesis and refuted the second. It was found that the workshop in the "Mitzvot Signs" method yielded significantly higher memorization results in all ages, as estimated in the first study hypothesis, but also reported significantly higher satisfaction and challenge values, not as estimated in the second study hypothesis. It could be that it is precisely the difficult challenge of the creativity required by the coding method of the "Mitzvot Signs" which increases motivation in the learning process and leads to greater satisfaction with it.

Another interesting finding in the study was a comparison of age (grade level) to the research measures. It was found that the higher the grade, the more students reported a lower level of concentration and challenge in the "Mitzvot Signs" workshop. It could be that the process of memorization is more appropriate for the lower ages and as age increases, the student's interest in it decreases. According to Piaget, at the age of 11, the method of thinking begins to turn into abstract thinking, and therefore the interest and challenge of memorizing data lose their value as age increases.

The findings of the study are: The method of "Mitzvot Signs" was found to be more effective both in the achievement index and in the satisfaction and motivation indices in the learning process. In addition, the efficiency of memorization is higher at lower

ages than in older ages, and therefore is recommended for implementation in the lower grades 3-5. The results of the study enable elementary schools interested in incorporating memorization of the 613 *mitzvot*, to choose the method of "Mitzvot Signs" – the method which enables higher levels of achievement, satisfaction and enjoyment.

For the sake of proper disclosure it should be noted that the "Mitzvot Song" method now uses more sophisticated tools than the second method, since it is taught network of privately paid after-school courses in small groups, that has developed creative tools for learning and memorization. It is therefore possible that in this situation it is appropriate to recommend to the individual student to register specifically for the "Mitzvot Song" sessions. But this research did not study the "Mitzvot song" method as taught in this network of "Mitzvot song" courses, but only with the "Mitzvot song" method as taught in a school classroom situation.