

The Danger in Remediating Hebrew Reading Using Phonics

Phonics - e.g. Orton or the newer PhonoGraphix/McGuinness - might be useful for dealing with the 'meshugassim' of English spelling and to help a Hebrew reader to get 'up-and-read' quickly. However, when used for Hebrew reading, it can be severely detrimental to building the ability to understand what is being read and to relate to dikduk.

English spelling is fundamentally different to Hebrew.

English letters and vowels represent distinct sounds which are displayed sequentially and linearly on the line.

Hebrew is a three-tier system in which the letter represents a sound produced inside the mouth, which is then modified by the vowel and then modulated by the niggun (ta'am) to collectively produce a single sound. Therefore the whole concept of sub-syllable phonemes does not apply to Hebrew to the extent that it does in English. You cannot consider 'kometz-aleph' as being an aleph-sound followed by a kometz-sound. Really, the aleph sound is modified by the kometz mouth-configuration to become a single 'oh' sound

The mode of reading a Hebrew word is also different to that of reading an English word.

The reader of Hebrew always has to both analyze the letters of the word and also relate to the word as a complete unit. This is necessary to enable the reader to chose a suitable 'shoresh' and vowel assignment (if the word is consonant-only) which will fit in with the context.

The Hebrew reader also needs to build a 'word-bank' of analyzed words to help him read consonant-only texts - such as Rashi, Gemora etc.

Hebrew is not a phonetic language but the reader has to identify each letter by its shape as well as by its sound - a word spelt with a 'tes' is different to one spelt with a 'tof'. etc..

Therefore, if it is necessary to remediate a reader using phonics, it is essential to follow-up with first teaching the identity of each letter and vowel (like when teaching according to the traditional methods) and then teaching the reader to combine the syllables into whole words.