

HASC Center's "Special" Evening

By Ratzy Szymonowitz

The event was set for May 17 at 8 pm. As one of four panelists, I arrived punctually and watched as female family members of special needs individuals arrived eagerly to listen to *divrei chizuk* from other siblings and mothers who shared similar, but never quite identical, situations. This was to be one in a long chain of support evenings sponsored by the Binuryni Parent Support Network, a wonderful service provided by HASC Center.

And what an evening it was. I feel privileged to have been invited to sit on the panel, and heartened by the positive vibes that pulsed from the audience. The energy was nearly palpable. To quote one participant's exuberant observation: "I am beyond amazed at the level of acceptance and *simcha* these young mothers displayed."

The challenges faced by the participants were daunting and ran the gamut on the disability spectrum: autism, congenital birth defects, and severe physical and mental disabilities. The list was as varied as the faces that were turned toward the podium, where I sat feeling humbled and, at the same time, uplifted by the strength of character and hopeful determination that radiated from each and every one of the listeners. As my eyes scanned their smiling countenances, I felt a renewed pride in being part of a community where people facing life's greatest challenges could nevertheless overcome their personal pain and smile in the face of adversity.

In that short hour, we gathered a wealth of information. We heard about the eight-year-old child who has yet to be diagnosed, and who, at the age when her peers attend school and acquire lifelong friendships, languishes bedridden and as helpless as an infant. Yet, her family manages to maintain a steady equilibrium and a keen sense of all

that is wonderful in their otherwise rich lives.

We listened to a young woman who has been divorced and who, for most of her formative years, has had to care for a sibling who suffered from a severe form of acquired autism. This disorder was manifested, in part, by bizarre behaviors such as smearing feces on the walls of her home at the early hour of 3 a.m. and emptying the entire contents of her family's refrigerator onto her bed near midnight when her exhausted family members had fallen asleep. I'll always remember her concluding words: "Remember to hold on tight to Hashem and to tell Him, 'Dear Hashem, You and me are partners here, so please don't let go, 'cause I need You!'" She encouraged us to tackle life's curveballs that inevitably come our way, while gently chastising us to maintain our *simchas hachaim* at all times.

Perhaps the most exhilarating part of the event was the question-and-answer session. Mothers proudly proclaimed their pride and joy in raising special children. Young siblings wanted to know how they could best deflect the taunting and staring from neighbors and passersby. Their sweet, melodious voices filled with pain and their beautiful faces turned a crimson red as they recalled agonizing episodes when their special needs siblings were turned away from joining in neighborhood games.

We have come a long way in our attitudes toward our special family members. We've learned to embrace them and to welcome them as never before. But as many of the participants at the event attested, we still have a way to go. To that end, we need to continue to participate in various support groups and help brainstorm to come up with methods and means to achieve the ultimate lofty goal - that of completely eradicating all traces of prejudice expressed toward those who have in some way earned the title of "special."

Never Too Late - But Why Wait?

Yaakov and Shaindy* were ecstatic. After several years of waiting, they finally celebrated the birth of their bechor, Shmuel. Shmuel was a delightful, well-behaved child, adored by both family and friends. When Shmuel started preschool, his teachers were quick to agree that he was pleasant to have in the classroom, quickly picking up on all the concepts being taught and getting along well with his peers.

The years passed tranquilly and Shmuel continued to do well in school. However, he was extremely shy during class and never volunteered to act as the chazzan for davening or to read out loud the text being studied. Because Shmuel was extremely bright, it took quite a while for his rabbeim and parents to catch on that Shmuel was not shy. He simply could not read properly!

At that point, Yaakov and Shaindy were frantic. Shmuel was already close to mesivta age. If he did not learn basic kria skills after so many years, how could they help him now? Much research into the subject revealed that there were countless methods available to teach learning-disabled children to read, but they had no idea how to even begin choosing the method best suited for their son. Furthermore, just because all these methods worked well in teaching students to read English, who could say with any degree of certainty that it would work for teaching kria?

Thankfully, a friend introduced them to the Multi-Sensory Kria-Kesivah method, a research-based technique developed by Mrs. Rivky Katz of Monsey, NY, a frum special-education teacher who, using her twenty-plus years of experience in helping children with reading, writing and other challenges, combined the features of all the methods and techniques available to find the best way to help Jewish children succeed, from Alef-Bais through reading and writing Rashi letters. They contacted her and, in no time at all, Shmuel advanced in his reading skills until he was pleased to offer his services as chazzan.

Time passed, and Shmuel married Esty, a sweet and wonderful girl, and set up his own home. His parents looked back at the difficult time he had experienced learning to read and were very thankful. Strangely enough, when Shmuel's and Esty's children reached school age, Shmuel began to notice

that Esty seemed to be avoiding doing their kria homework with them. After discreetly watching her daven and seeing that she was actually saying the tefillos by heart, his suspicions intensified.

One night, when the children were in bed, Shmuel gently told Esty about the reading problems he had experienced as a young boy. Esty, seeing the caring look in Shmuel's eyes, broke down and admitted that she, too, had never been able to learn to read properly. Luckily for her, Shmuel knew just where to direct her, and their story has a happy ending.

The Multi-Sensory Kria-Kesivah method is not just for children with learning challenges, but students of all ages and developmental stages. Mainstream teachers and rabbeim will wish that they had learned this method when they first entered chinuch, as they find teaching kria an entirely different experience when they use this technique, either in whole or in part, so that all of their students can become truly fluent readers. Kollel yungeleit and tutors can acquire the tools for a rewarding vocation while opening the doors to the world of reading for all of our precious neshamos, helping them reach their full potential as productive members of Klal Yisroel.

Now in its tenth year, the highly popular Multi-Sensory Kria-Kesiva Course, presented for women by Mrs. Katz herself, is open for registration. At the urging of rabbonim and mechanchim, a men's course has been offered for the past several years and will once again be given by Rabbi Tzvi Fisher, rosh kollel and noted mechanech in Portland, Oregon. Participants will learn a comprehensive technique with all specialized supplies and materials included. No previous training is necessary.

The men's course will be given from July 10th thru July 18th in Monsey. The women's course will be given from July 10th thru July 18th in Monsey and from June 27th thru July 5th in Boro Park.

The men's course will be held during the afternoon/evening hours to accommodate rabbeim and kollel yungeleit.

For more information, contact Mrs. Ahuva Hammer at 845.426.0241 or e-mail MultiSensory@KosherNet.com.

*All names and identifying details have been changed

Rabbi Boruch Leff Inspires in Highland Park, NJ

Congregation Ohav Emeth in Highland Park was recently treated to a very special Shabbos. Yated columnist, Rabbi Boruch Leff, was a scholar-in-residence, speaking four times over Shabbos. "Too often we perform *mitzvos* by rote," Rabbi Leff pointed out, "and Shabbos is no different. We need to inject true meaning and growth into our Shabbos observance."

Indeed, this is the theme of Rabbi Leff's Shabbos weekly column.

The theme of the Shabbos was to turn Shabbos into *Shabbos Kodesh*, and hundreds of people from all over the Highland Park/Edison area attended Rabbi Leff's four *shiurim* and *drashos*. The speeches covered such topics as: 'Creating the Shabbos Mindset in Five Minutes or Less'; 'Why Bar Yochai is Called Shabbos' (it was the Shabbos before Lag B'Omer); 'How to Eat Holy on Shabbos'; 'Shalosh Seudos as a True Connection to HaKadosh Baruch Hu.'

Rabbi Leff's Shabbos morning *drasha* inspired everyone to grow at all stages of life, no matter how many times a person fails. Rabbi Akiva was able to re-build even after the devastating blow of losing 24,000 of his best students. Rabbi Akiva salvaged what he could in transmitting the Torah to

five students, Bar Yochai being one of them.

Rabbi Leff mentioned a poignant lesson in applying this concept to our personal lives. A *chassid* once came to his *Rebbe* crying uncontrollably. "Rebbe, I committed such a terrible sin, I don't know how I will ever be able to repent. I can never do *teshuvah*!" The *Rebbe* said, "There's no such thing! As long as you are alive you can repent. We have a tradition. The word for transgression is *aveira*—the root of which is the word *avar*, meaning past tense. Once a person performs *teshuvah* for his *aveira*, he is not to dwell on it; he has to look at it as past tense. The main thing now is to focus on the future. Forget the past."

Rabbi Leff concluded, "Shabbos gives us a chance to re-build our spiritual lives. We often veer off the path of ideal spiritual goals as we get lost in worldly pursuits throughout the week. On Shabbos, we can recalibrate and head toward our spiritual goals."

Given the great success of the Shabbos, the Rav of Ohav Emeth, Rabbi Eliyahu Kaufman, concluded the event inviting Rabbi Leff to return for another Shabbos at a later date.

To contact Rabbi Leff, email: sbleff@gmail.com.

The Inspiring Masmid

Just before *Purim*, Kalman Lyukis, a Sinai Academy alumnus learning in Yeshiva Derech Chaim, made a *siyum* on *Shisha Sidrei Mishnah V'zecher nishmas* his father and grandfather.

What is truly remarkable about this *siyum* is that Kalman came to Sinai from Montauk Junior High just a few years ago with absolutely no knowledge of *Yiddishkeit*. He was immediately embraced by the *rabbeim* at Sinai who saw in him a yearning for Torah and *Yiddishkeit*. While he was at Sinai, his *rabbeim* sent him to the Masmidim program in Camp Agudah, where he forged a relationship with Rabbi Yisroel Belsky, which he enjoys to this day. Rabbi Mendel Silberberg, a *rebbe* at Sinai, sent Kalman to Eretz Yisroel, where he learned for

a year, and he then returned and joined Yeshiva Derech Chaim, where he learns today in the *rosh yeshiva's shiur*.

One of Kalman's *chaveirim* at the *yeshiva*, Sholom Sadykov, is also an alumnus of Sinai. Sholom is *shteiging* and doing exceptionally well in his learning.

At the *siyum*, a *bochur* told Rabbi Moshe Silber, principal of Sinai Academy, that "when I see Kalman's *hasmadah*, I am immediately inspired."

Rabbi Yitzchok Yarmish and Rabbi Moshe Pirelli of Yeshiva Derech Chaim were also at the *siyum*.

"As we are approaching the end of the *zeman*," remarked Rabbi Pirelli, "we need to be *mechazeik* our *hasmadah*. Kalman's *hasmadah* definitely serves as an inspiration to all of us."