

# HASC Center's Lev Tova Opens Doors For Avi

BY YAAKOV KORNREICH

This is the story of a bright, inquisitive five-year-old boy named Avi with an electric smile, a talent for figuring out and playing handheld electronic games—and autism. Avi's story is a hopeful one. Last year, his parents enrolled him in an excellent program designed for children with autism spectrum disorders hosted at a local yeshiva. Though Avi still has a long way to go, he has made tremendous progress at his program and things seemed to be looking bright for him and his family.

Then one day, Avi's father was hospitalized for what was intended to be a routine surgical procedure. However, unexpected complications set in, turning what was supposed to be an overnight stay into an extended recuperation. Avi's mother naturally wanted to be with her husband in the hospital over Shabbos but first had to find a safe place where Avi could stay. His grandparents volunteered to take care of the other two children but the responsibility to care for Avi was too much for them to take upon themselves.

In the past, Avi's parents would have been at a loss to find a solution. But today there is Lev Tova, New York's only *frum*, overnight respite home for children with special needs operated by HASC Center. Located in the heart of Flatbush, Lev Tova's unique mission is to provide respite care for children of families facing unexpected emergencies, like Avi's. Lev Tova makes it possible every day, for par-

ents who have dedicated their lives to care for their children with disabilities, to have time away from the constant and intense level of attention to recharge their emotional batteries, handle a crisis, or enjoy a family *simcha*.

Imagine the mother of a school-age girl in need of constant care who yearns to spend Shabbos with her husband at her sister's house for the first time since her daughter was born; or a woman who has not seen her family in Israel for almost 20

needs in New York State, HASC Center took the challenge to fill this need. Shmiel Kahn, the agency's executive director, asked Avi Sacks, associate executive director and Blima Druker, residential area coordinator, to head the committee that would design and create this one of a kind home from scratch. They spent months of research, visiting many other secular respite homes, and exploring the best suited furniture and toys that would meet the needs of these children.

look in the eyes of the father who came to pick up his child after having been able to spend the first normal *yom tov* and Shabbos with his family in many years. He didn't know how to adequately thank me and my staff. He was literally overcome with emotion and gratitude; and for a moment, I was overcome as well."

Lev Tova is the first respite home in New York State under *frum* auspices suitable for children from the greater Orthodox community. The urgent need for such a facility, although recognized by Jewish agencies for a long time, received its strongest articulation from Binuryni, HASC Center's parent support network for families of children needing special care. Almost all of the parents in the group spoke of encountering situations and emergencies, such as those described above, where no satisfactory solution was possible because there was no place available to leave their child safely, even for a short period of time. While such facilities exist for children needing special care who come from non-religious homes, until Lev Tova opened just before Pesach of this year, parents in the religious community facing this situation had nowhere to turn.

While opening and operating any new community residence serving people with special needs is always extremely challenging, running a short-term respite home with different children coming on a daily or weekly basis, presents another whole dimension of challenge and diffi-

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years because no one she could trust was available to take care of her disabled child while she would be away. More recently, imagine the frustration of the parents of a seven-year-old child with Angelman's syndrome needing constant care to deal with severe eating and behavioral problems, who desperately felt the need to give their other children a three-day *yom tov* focusing solely on them and their needs.

With no other home of its kind serving children from *frum* families with special

After the planning phase was completed, the daunting task of operating the home was transferred to Chumie Ausch, another HASC Center residential area coordinator, who has had considerable experience managing residential facilities for a full range of people with developmental disabilities. Chumie admits that it has been both the most challenging and the most rewarding assignment of her professional career. All the work became more than worth it, she says, "when I saw the

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culty for the sponsoring community organization and its staff.

Over the past 20 years, HASC Center has opened dozens of residential facilities, each one carefully designed to meet the needs of the intended residents with the living environment and the skill sets of the staff members. However, by its very nature, it is impossible to do this for a respite facility, where the needs of its resident population are constantly changing. A respite home requires a dedicated and professional staff capable of providing almost every kind of care, and a physical setting that is sufficiently flexible to address the needs of children who may be confronted with any of a broad range of physical, intellectual, and medical challenges.

Lev Tova was dedicated in memory of Tova Jaidel, *a'h*, by her family. Tova was a woman whose love for special children and adults was an integral part of her life. According to Shmiel Kahn, Lev Tova is the missing piece in the network of community facilities serving these families. "It provides them with the flexibility they need to deal with unexpected developments, and to take advantage of special occasions and opportunities to enrich their lives and make them better caregivers and parents."

The respite home has the capacity to care for up to eight children at one time. Among its many amenities, it offers a special multi-sensory "Snoezelen room" to help young people relax and enhance their stay. With a large complement of staff selected from among the very best of HASC Center's counselors and caregivers, there is enough staff on hand to meet each child's every need, to ensure each

one's comfort and, equally important, to give parents the peace of mind to attend to other responsibilities.

Dr. Chaim Wakslak, clinical director, HASC Center, lauded the dedication of the staff and their enthusiasm as they take on new challenges each time a child comes for a visit; for a day, a Shabbos, or even a week's stay. It is quite clear that the counselors are in constant motion, taking care of each child's every need. Indeed, this constant attention keeps the children from becoming bored, lonely, or homesick.

The second time young Avi came to spend a Shabbos at Lev Tova it was under much happier circumstances. His parents had been invited to attend a family *bar mitzvah* in Chicago. They contacted HASC Center several weeks in advance to make a reservation for Avi to spend that Shabbos at the home.

Before leaving for Chicago, Avi's mother had packed some of Avi's favorite things to take with him. Along with his clothes, she provided an assortment of Avi's favorite Shabbos snacks, a detailed list of instructions, including the little rituals Avi goes through at bedtime, and even a crock pot full of *chulent*, just the way he likes it. Upon leaving Avi's house, his grandfather called Chumie to tell her that he and Avi were on their way. A few minutes later, as they pulled up in front of the house, they were met by every counselor and child in the house, standing on the sidewalk waving, singing, and surrounding the grandfather's car, to help bring Avi inside. As a counselor gently led Avi away from the car, Avi started to cry for a moment. Then Avi remembered that he had been there before. He stopped cry-

ing, smiled, and walked quickly through the front door.

Appropriately trained and certified members of the staff are available on short notice to deal with almost every specific need a child entering Lev Tova may need. The staff is fully aware of each child's needs and preferences. Their information comes from a comprehensive packet of information completed by parents covering every aspect of the child's daily life, including the foods they like to eat, how they like to eat them, medications and allergies, bedtime habits, and their favorite games and toys.

Everything about Lev Tova and its staff is special. The special meals created by the *heimeshe* cook meet the needs of any diet. The special staff is qualified to administer any kind of medication. The special windows are made of shatter-proof Plexiglas. Even the special doors leading to the outside are specially designed to prevent children from gaining access to the outdoors. But in the case of a triggered fire alarm, the doors automatically open.

The 'open door' is a great metaphor for the respite home concept itself. Until now, in our community, when an emergency arose in a family with a child who needs special care, doors were closed to them. Now, thanks to Lev Tova, the doors open wide to children and families in need, providing them with new options in their times of need.

For more information on Lev Tova, as well as the many other programs provided by HASC Center throughout the year, contact the intake department at 718-535-1953, or visit [www.hasccenter.com](http://www.hasccenter.com). ♦

## Brooklyn Fire

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son of Rav Miller.

Among the many speakers delivering *hespedim* at the funeral was Rav Mechal Rosenbaum, who along with his wife and 13 children lived on the first floor of the house that they shared with the Krasnys. He is the son of Rav Yosef Rosenbaum (the Kalischer Rebbe), who is the *rav* of Khal Ginzei Yosef on Avenue R in Flatbush. As a result of the extensive fire damage, the Rosenbaums have had to find other temporary lodgings for their large family.

"Today, we have lost a *tzaddik*," said Rabbi Lazer Ginsberg, fighting back tears, as he spoke from the *bimah* of the shul during the *levayah*. He lauded the Krasnys as people who are "truly *moser nefesh* for the *k'lal*, for Hashem, Torah, and *mitzvos*" and asked that "all of us do difficult soul-searching to find a way to do *tikkun* [repair] of our souls and to become closer to Hashem through acts that foster *achdus* in the community."

Throughout Flatbush, Boro Park, and other *frum* communities, appeals for the grieving families have been made by prominent *rabbanim*, including Rav Osher Kalmanowitz, *rosh yeshiva* of the Mir Yeshiva. The financial situation of both families is dire, and immediate funds are desperately needed.

Those wishing to participate in helping both the Krasny and Rosenbaum families may make checks out to Keren Hatzlolos Nefashos c/o Rabbi E. Brudny, 1752 East 18th Street, Brooklyn, NY 11229. ♦

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