



Estie Florans

# As Soon as You Are Ready

*Binah speaks with Mrs. Zeldy Walden, director of Reishis Chochmah Montessori Preschool*

At a recent family simchah in Toronto, we were graciously hosted by the Waldens, neighbors and close friends of the baalei simchah. We were about to leave to the wedding hall when I discovered that our hostess, Mrs. Zeldy Walden, is the director of a preschool based on the Montessori method, and is one of the first educators to have brought this method into the frum educational system.

I was fascinated.

I stood in the Waldens' hallway, wanting to hear more. But the clock was ticking, the family was waiting, and there was a wedding to attend. Fortunately, Mrs. Walden agreed to share it all with us after the simchah.

“C

hanoch lanaar al pi darko, gam ki yazkin lo yasur mimenu — educate a child in accordance with his way; when he matures, he will not deviate from it...” (Mishlei 22:6). Mrs. Walden quotes Shlomo Hamelech’s wise words, and in a passion-filled voice expounds, “Every child should be given the chance to maximize his own distinct potential, not in competition with others, but only in competition with himself, so that he can develop from who he was yesterday into who he can become tomorrow.”

And indeed, through the last thirteen years of her directorship at Reishis Chochma Montessori Preschool, Mrs. Walden has been helping children build skills and develop behaviors that empower them to develop to their fullest potential.

“At Reishis Chochma, we incorporate the elements of the Montessori methodology that are compatible with Torah values,” explains Mrs. Walden. “We call this synthesized method the Al Pi Darko method.”

“The entire Al Pi Darko methodology is built on the premise of respect: *kvod habriyos*. When I taught in a traditional preschool, we started off by presenting the necessary rules, whether there were three, five, or 10 rules. As time passed, the

rules grew according to the necessities of the classroom.

“At Reishis Chochma, we have one large rule and one small rule. The large rule is that we must have respect for others. This includes the teacher, one another, and the materials. Really, if you think about it — *everything* falls into the category of respect. If you have *kvod habriyos* and respect everything Hashem has blessed us with, then you truly don’t need any other rules.”

When I ask Mrs. Walden how respect is developed and maintained, she begins by describing the classroom set-up at Reishis Chochma and how its unique structure facilitates the development of respect. “In our preschool classrooms, the children are between the ages of three and six,” she says.

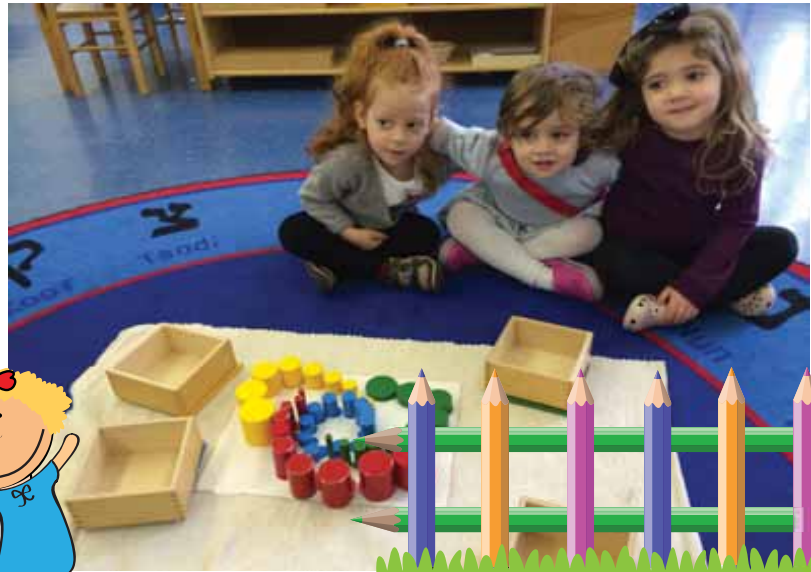
“Three-year-olds to six-year-olds in one classroom?” I interject, unsure if I am hearing correctly.

“Yes. This helps the program run successfully,” she replies. “Since *kvod habriyos* means that each child is an individual, respected for who he is at that given moment, having a varied age span in one classroom, with its attendant range of abilities and skills, encourages the development of respect

and tolerance for different people and their strengths.”

“But aren’t there vast differences between the skills of three-year-olds and six-year-olds?” I ask.

“This merging of ages enables both the older and younger children to grow in ways that are limited when grouped separately, as in the traditional classroom setting. In our classrooms, the older children serve as role models for the younger children,” Mrs. Walden explains, “and as a result, the younger children learn to reach beyond age-constrained boundaries. Additionally, we find that children learn best from each other, rather than from an adult.”



The second (smaller) rule that the children in an Al Pi Darko classroom are expected to follow is that a child is only allowed to participate in an activity once a teacher has taught the child how to do the activity.

“In an Al Pi Darko preschool classroom, there are 650 activities laid out, covering five different areas of development: sensorial, practical life, language arts, mathematics, and cultural studies,” says Mrs. Walden. “This classroom setting is called the ‘Prepared Environment.’”

“650 activities?” I am taken aback, especially noting that in the Al Pi Darko classroom, the children are the ones who choose their activities.

“Each activity is laid out sequentially; from concrete moving toward the abstract, from simple moving toward the complex.”

Mrs. Walden illustrates the way this works. “Since each child is viewed as a classroom within himself, the teacher knows which activity the child is ready to take on. The child understands that when she sees three shelves of beautiful activities, she can’t just grab something appealing if she hasn’t yet learned how to do it. She needs to wait for the teacher to explain it to her, either individually or in small groups of two to four students.

“The teacher’s function is to enable the child to become as independent as he can. Teachers are there to help the children help themselves. They are guides and consultants rather than fountains of all knowledge. In a traditional



classroom there is a lot of ‘exterior’ teaching where the teacher tells the students, ‘Now we’re going to do this, now we’ll learn that...’

“At Reishis Chochma, we give the child the ability to solve problems. We believe that when left to their own devices, children will educate themselves. By engaging in activities that the teacher prepares beforehand, children will self-

## Branches

“I also provide parent and preschool consulting and maintain an open-door policy with other schools and seminaries, so teachers can observe and bring our ideas to their traditional classrooms.

“In addition, with the help of Rabbi Jonathan Rietti, who founded Taryag Teachers Training Center in Monsey, New York, I opened a branch on my school’s premises in Toronto to train teachers in the Al Pi Darko method.

“Our yearly certified course is given to all teachers, mainstream or special ed, who would like to integrate this method. It is also for mothers or seminary graduates who want to understand the child’s brain and the intricacies of how the young mind works. Our graduates have already opened Al Pi Darko schools and classrooms in Flatbush, Lakewood, Brooklyn, and Eretz Yisrael. This gives me special nachas. This wonderful technique of helping children is spreading all over the world.”

educate.

“Built into each of the activities is a ‘control of error,’ a way to see whether the activity is being performed correctly. For example, in the ‘cylinder block’ activity belonging to the sensorial area of development, the child removes and then replaces cylinder blocks of a range of dimensions. The ‘control of error’ in this exercise is that the blocks will only fit in the slot built to their size. The teacher does not correct the child’s work; the child sees for himself whether or not he is on the right track,” Mrs. Walden explains.

“In Reishis Chochma, the environment is designed to ensure what we call an ‘inner growth,’ where the children learn the essential life skills of being self-disciplined self-learners and self-starters.”

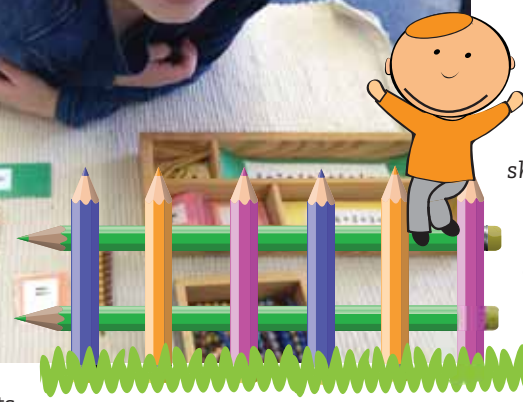
“But don’t all preschool teachers prepare children for skills to succeed in life?” I ask.

“Yes,” Mrs. Walden responds. “But all our activities are called ‘purposeful play’ and build a specific skill that the child will need later on in life, whether it be social, emotional, or academic. The unique environment of the Reishis Chochma classroom encourages independence, problem-solving, concentration, orderliness, and organizational skills. And because the students learn at their own pace, they develop a joy of learning.

“Our method brings *limudei kodesh* to life and helps children retain, relate, and discriminate concepts and information. Almost every topic that we discuss during circle time becomes an activity on the shelf. For example, whether it’s the *shivas haminim*, the time-line of Moshe Rabbeinu’s life, the *degalim* of the *Shevatim*, or 200 *shoroshim* from *Sefer Bereishis*, the children prosper in a hands-on environment.

“On a typical Erev Shabbos you will see children polishing shoes or candlesticks, brushing Tatty’s hat, cutting flowers, or peeling potatoes for a *kugel*. When a child works with materials, he is able to retain the information for a longer period. This is based on the philosophy, ‘the hand is the instrument of the brain.’

“Here’s an example. During a *parashah* class, the teacher was describing Moshe Rabbeinu’s basket covered with tar. The *morah* asked, ‘Where else in the Torah do we find a vessel



“Just as we have activities geared to teaching *parashas hashavua*, science, math etc. we have lessons in *kvod habriyos*,” Mrs. Walden says. “It’s called grace and courtesy. *Middos*. The teacher will take a few students and role-play how to answer a telephone; how to ask to join a group — we don’t just barge in; how to respond when a request is answered; how to accept disappointments.

“The impact of lecture-style teaching wears off eventually.

covered with tar?’ “In a flash, the children drew the parallel to Noach’s *teivah*,” Mrs. Walden enthuses.

“The children also develop exceptional work habits. They learn how to take care of their own environment. Parents relate that their two- and three-year-olds remind their older siblings to hang up their coats and put their school bags away when entering the house at the end of the day.

“Yes, we give the children freedom so they can work on becoming the people they could become, growing to be who they could be. But there are limits, and the children understand this.

“Our goal is that the children are disciplined internally as opposed to externally. A three-year-old understands that there is an adult, and that a child must obey the adult. As the children mature, they are ready to proceed to the next level, self-discipline and understanding the difference between what is right and wrong. They internalize the message of not wanting to be the *shaliach* of hurt. Not because the teacher is forcing correct behavior, or because an adult said so, but because it’s the right choice. That’s our ultimate goal.”

But teaching the child how to be self-disciplined, teaching him to problem-solve — that is lasting.”

“What happens if a child won’t cooperate and won’t follow the rules?” I ask. “For example, if a child resorts to bullying?”

“If a child is bullying, the teacher will guide the child by asking questions. *How do you think this child feels when you hurt her? What do you think you should do next? How can you make sure that this won’t happen again?* We are never satisfied with a simple, ‘I’m sorry.’ At the age of four or five, the children are ready for a lesson about *teshuvah*. Yes, you have to have *charatah*, regret, but how will you assure your friend that this won’t happen again? The child must come up with a creative answer. He learns about taking responsibility for the choices he makes.”

“Is there such a thing as a child who can’t be helped?”

“The only time we feel that we can’t help a child is if the parents

are not our partners,” replies Mrs. Walden. “We have an open house, and we give the parents opportunities to come into the classroom during the year and observe; not only their child, but the entire environment their child is experiencing. Their friends, the joy of learning, the respect...”

“We tell them right away when they register their child that they are the experts on their child, not us. We need them to be our partners, and then with *siyatta diShmaya*, we do the best we can. Correspondingly, when we see the beginning of an issue we invite the parents to a meeting where we tell them, ‘This is what we’re seeing, and we need your help.’ In most cases, parents cooperate. Whether the child just needs to see some consistency between school and home, or needs a specialist — whatever the situation is, we encourage parents to be on the same page as us.”

“Often, a child will come to the teacher with a general problem,” Mrs. Walden says. “For example, one of the child’s shoes is missing.

“Where do you think it might be?” the teacher will ask the child.

“‘I don’t know,’ the child might say.

“The teacher will instruct the child, ‘Can you find someone who might know the answer?’ The child is responsible to find someone in the school who has the answer to the problem.”

Mrs. Walden explains, “The child ‘owns’ the problem and takes responsibility. He could return to the teacher and say, ‘I need help looking for it.’ That’s also a solution. The teacher will then direct the child to someone who could help her solve the problem.

“Of course if the child is very young and needs an adult’s assistance, the teacher will help the child. But if the child is in a situation where he is unable of finding the solution, he is constantly returning to the teacher, it is the teacher’s job to encourage independence.

Mrs. Walden describes a common scenario involving “owning a problem” with regard to conflict resolution. “Both children approach the ‘shalom’ table to discuss and negotiate their argument. After giving each other the opportunity to

This is amazing to me because the classrooms are not small. There are two teachers per twenty students in the three-year-old to six-year-old group!

But then again, it really shouldn’t be so surprising. Mrs. Walden’s love for the children is so deep and her commitment to this method of education so impassioned, it’s no wonder that her devotion infuses the entire atmosphere in the school with positivity and dedication.

“I couldn’t do what I do without *siyatta diShmaya* and without the help of each member of my special staff,” she makes sure to say. “The staff and I are one big family.

“There is a unique, well-oiled system in place, which took years to develop and enables the program to run orderly and methodically,” Mrs. Walden elucidates. “Each staff member has specific tasks, inside and outside the classroom.”

When I ask Mrs. Walden what qualifications besides certification are necessary in order to join her staff, she responds, “Love of children. And someone who is ready to give and give, and then to give some more...”

She then adds, “When seminary students attend our open house to observe our methodology, I reiterate that the goal of true *chinuch* is to help a

child maximize his potential, emphasizing that there are many different paths to get there.

“This is but one road.”

*Many paths... same goals. We are ready.*

*Estie Florans, a writer of fiction and nonfiction, is the author of Conquer the Darkness, Set Me Free, and Lift Me Higher, a true-to-life, contemporary novel for women and girls of all ages.*



express their upset, the teacher helps them understand each other and negotiate peacefully. *Do you think this is the right way to solve your problem? Is it working? Can you see what went wrong?* And finally, after all is resolved, ‘When you feel ready, we would love to have you join the class...’

“And then we repeat our favorite saying: ‘As soon as you are ready...’

“The next time there is a conflict, the children are likely to solve it on their own... they know what to do.

“The teacher is aware all of the child’s progress in all five areas of development. There is a careful and precise ‘Recording System’ where the teacher records what concepts and activities the child was introduced to that day, including difficulties encountered.”