

# Education Innovation

## *Facilitating literacy and learning*

Thirty years ago, the field of *frum* special education didn't exist. Today, every large yeshivah has resources available to assist students with learning disabilities, and the field is burgeoning, thanks in large part to the pioneering work of Dr. Helene Ribowsky, whose career in educational remediation has transformed the educational options in the *frum* community.

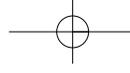
**S**omewhat bewildered, I returned the receiver to its base. *Resource room? Learning disabilities?*

Newly wed and anxiously seeking a permanent teaching position, I received a telephone call with a unique job offer. The Lakewood Cheder, with its principal, Rabbi Moshe Rosenberg,

z"l, at the helm, was launching a program to help challenged students navigate their way toward academic success.

The year: 1980; the program: a "resource room" — something practically unheard of in the *frum* world in those days. Two paraprofessional teachers, under the daily guidance of our "lead"





“Rabbi Rosenberg was a visionary. He told me, ‘There’s a boy in the school who wants to learn, but he can’t. This is going to break your heart, Mrs. Ribowsky, but there’s one *passuk* in *Chumash* that he says on a consistent basis, which we save for him so he can participate...’

“Which *passuk*?

“*Vayomer Hashem el Moshe...*”

“I remember being moved to tears. Rabbi Rosenberg was right. I couldn’t turn him down.”

We pause, both of us lost in our memories. Today, that child is a successful family man, one of the more fortunate who made it down that rough road.

“Did learning disabilities always exist?” I ask. “And is the label necessary and helpful?”

“Learning problems always existed,” Dr. Ribowsky responds. “Years ago, if the child did not have a sensitive teacher, he was thought of as lazy or unmotivated. It was a long time before it

was recognized that many children with learning problems have normal abilities and even above-average potential, and that they really can be helped — frequently, while remaining in the school setting.

“It is important to bear in mind that the regular yeshivos often lack the funds and professional staff needed to deal with learning interferences. Labeling a child is necessary in order to secure governmental funding. The flip side, however, is that labeling can also encourage yeshivos to send students with academic difficulties to special-education programs that they claim are more equipped to handle scholastic problems. Indeed, that is definitely warranted in certain situations, but we aim to keep children in the mainstream. We do have many schools now that are extraordinarily cooperative. For example, a principal of one of the girls’ schools gave me a lot of *chizuk* — even years ago — when she said to me, ‘Tell everyone it’s doable!’”

I ask Dr. Ribowsky to elaborate, and she explains that it is often difficult for one teacher to reach one child in a large classroom when that youngster has specific educational needs and possibly social and emotional issues. However, with guidance from professionals who create school intervention plans and delineate specific considerations for the child, most

“There’s a boy in the school who wants to learn, but he can’t.

This is going to break your heart.”

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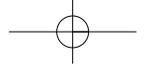
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"I tend to think of the difficulties that a youngster encounters in the areas of literacy — reading, writing, listening, and speaking — as a hump. The task is to aid the child in getting over that hump. You're not dealing with a road block that's impassable." Dr. Ribowsky pauses. "But I don't want to minimize the seriousness of this challenge and how the obstruction of a literacy deficit can become overwhelming.

"I've heard parents say that no one did anything for them, yet they managed to overcome their difficulties. But they suffered and struggled, and they developed low self-esteem. For example, there are grown men who will not *daven* at the *amud*, even though they now know how to read. It's hard to eradicate years of frustration.

"It's possible that the child will overcome the 'hump' on his own. But there's an emotional cost factor," Dr. Ribowsky emphasizes. "Judgments made about children are often external and have nothing to do with the reality of a child's potential.

"I was just speaking to a principal today concerning a child whose reading ability tested at below first-grade level. However, when I read the material to him, he answered each question, testing in the 99th percentile. He couldn't read, but he clearly possesses a high level of intelligence."

"Would you say that it's like a child who can't see without glasses and stumbles," I suggest, "yet when given the glasses, he has no problem making his way?"

"That's a powerful analogy," Dr. Ribowsky responds. "Sometimes, I use a different analogy. I often tell parents that it's as if a child needs braces on his teeth, and when straightened, the braces are removed. At times, it's that minimal. If we extended your

You must love the children with every cell in your body, and you must believe that what you're doing in each session is going to make a difference in their lives.

analogy to blindness, you're dealing with a dramatic issue — and this can be true of a youngster with a severe reading disorder. But for some children... it's just braces."

I ask Dr. Ribowsky to share some of her methods and strategies.

"My focus is on literacy because I find that when you remediate reading there's a transfer to all other learning areas. I feel strongly that remediation must

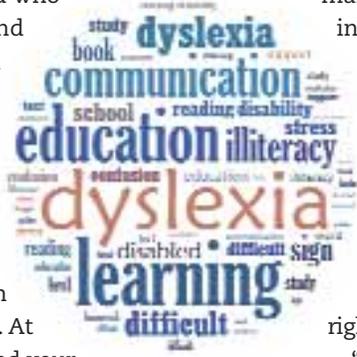
teach strategies; a child desperately needs named systems to aid him in overcoming his difficulties. He must understand the entire process of literacy and be able to apply systems to all aspects of reading. If we fail to provide this, then our work is superficial and is not portable. When it's portable — it's transferable.

"For example, I've developed something called 'chocolate reading.' I tell my students, 'Just as we would not try to eat an entire chocolate bar at one time, we can't read a huge word at one time.' Instead, I explain that the same way the manufacturer of chocolate bars provides lines to break the bar into small squares, we have rules we can use to break up words. Basically, we're talking about syllables. But it sounds a lot more exciting when you say 'chocolate reading.' This system can be used for English, for *limudei kodesh*, and even for word problems in mathematics... it's portable and gives the child an understanding of how to process."

I say, "And it could be used by a mother preparing for Pesach."

Dr. Ribowsky grins, "I can tell what you have on your mind right now."

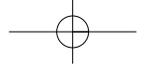
"Isn't this similar to task analysis?" I ask, reminding her of



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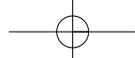
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