

“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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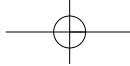
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teachers cooperate, welcoming the outside support.

“For example,” she elucidates, “when working with a teacher, we’ll ask that a child be held accountable for a limited amount of material and that he be tested only on that which he was able to master. We’ll request that a youngster be assigned a study partner to help with note-taking, and that he not be called upon when he is unprepared

to respond to a question, or that he be provided with oral tests to follow written tests. This is only a sampling; there are many systems that can be established to aid youngsters in the regular classroom situation.

“At times, teachers will complain that it’s not fair to other children who must take the full test or not be given these considerations. But fair is ‘*chanoch lanaar al pi darko...*”

“How do you get teachers to become more sensitive to the situation?” I ask.

“I think it’s the interaction and coordination among the outside professionals, the parents, and the school,” Dr. Ribowsky replies. “When you provide the children and teachers with practical solutions, there’s greater awareness and sensitivity, as well as cooperation — and, of course, success. It is definitely becoming much easier. Today, parents actively seek help for their children and are willing to obtain available services. One parent recently stated to me, ‘When I was a kid, it was all hush-hush if someone had a learning problem. Now my friends and I all talk about our kids’ tutors.’ I feel we’re advancing astoundingly.”

I ask Dr. Ribowsky about the effects of technology.

“Technology,” she says, “is a boon and a bane. It’s a wonderful teaching tool and communication system, and it provides you with a world of knowledge at your fingertips. On the other hand, youngsters are involved with mindless games that increase focusing and concentration problems. As a result, children want everything to be fun and dramatic, and to provide instant gratification. But success in learning does not come with instant gratification. It’s a process. I’ve worked with youngsters who have admitted that if they can’t get an answer immediately, they give up.

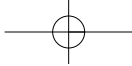
“A good part of remediation is building confidence, along with old-fashioned grit and stamina. It’s important to strike a balance between giving children encouragement — sometimes even over-celebrating their successes — while at the same time demanding that they produce. Children become successful by showing resilience and perseverance, by learning how to cope, and by being responsible.

“My students have become *rebbeim*, doctors, lawyers, OTs, nurses, teachers, business owners — with many donating their services to the community on various levels. Obviously, not every single case is as successful as others, but *baruch Hashem*, from the feedback I’ve received, many are leading wonderfully

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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

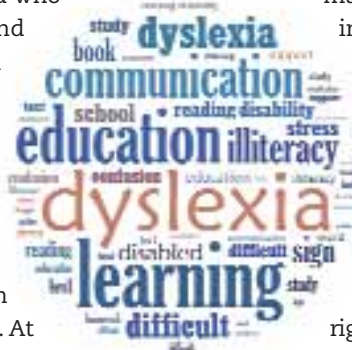
needs named systems to aid him in overcoming his difficulties. He must understand the entire process of literacy and be able to apply systems to all aspects of reading. If we fail to provide this, then our work is superficial and is not portable. When it's portable — it's transferable.

"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

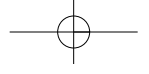


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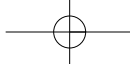
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the method she had often emphasized to us when she was our consultant at the Pearl Blau Learning Center.

"I was trained to perform task analyses at the master's level. We were taught to break everything down to measurable activities," she responds, "and I used that until I realized that there was no synthesis."

"Meaning?"

"There was no coming together of the entirety. The work that I did at the doctoral level literally changed my entire view of how to reach children. Today, I focus on holistic instruction. This means focusing on the full picture. An example of holistic instruction is showing youngsters that they don't need to read every word. Skip a difficult word, move on, get the gist of what the sentence is talking about..."

"That youngster who tested in the 99th percentile in language won't be helped by a program consisting exclusively of phonics. In fact, if he'll be given a diet of only phonetic elements, he'll become rapidly disillusioned because he has failed dismally at all previous attempts to teach him phonics without a contextual framework. On the other hand, if he reads: *The man jumped on his house and rode away*, he will be taught to ask himself, what word besides *house* makes better sense in this sentence?"

"He is told: 'It's excellent that you read the sentence, using an initial consonant clue, but what would make more sense here?' He would be reminded to use the picture clues as well. So a holistic and strategic approach means that a child is encouraged to understand the entirety of a literacy event. No, I'm not ignoring the phonics, but I like to think of it as phonics *b'to*, phonics in the right time. I use an intense program of phonics instruction that I've developed — but it's only a *part* of the literacy picture.

"When I start remediation with an emergent reader, I begin with stories, but *very small stories*, that are basically mistake-proof." Dr. Ribowsky shows me a small book, its pages containing few words and colorful illustrations. She emphasizes the confidence and joy that fills a child when he successfully reads a complete book. She points to the small cards taped to the pages, with the words of the text written on them, explaining how once the child masters reading the little book, he is asked to match the words on the cards to those in the book. Later on, the child is introduced to another one of Dr. Ribowsky's strategies: this one is called DDs, which stands for *distinctive differences*. "We'll request that the child find

similarities between two words and then we'll ask him if he sees any DDs.

"Children become involved, pointing out differences and similarities, gaining control of visual-perceptual activities, and understanding that the print will look different because it says something different. They develop extraordinary insights. It's called 'top-down processing,' working from the story, and then proceeding to work on the details of print.

"I often think of it as '*naaseh v'nishma*.' Meaning, let's get involved in the process, then we're going to view all the things we have to do."

Parents, too, become involved, usually sitting in during Dr. Ribowsky's sessions along with their children, learning the methods and the nuances. "It's critical for there to be a partnership between parents, the remediator, and the school," she notes.

"Do the children feel self-conscious or pressured with the parents observing?" I wonder.

"There are times when it doesn't work out, but that's rare. Parents are often surprised that I permit it, but not only do I permit it, I insist on it. Parental participation enables us to become a team devoted to literacy. When the parent and child return home, they practice what they have learned in session. We have constant communication to make sure that all aspects

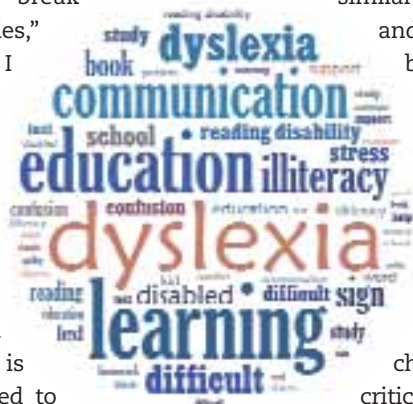
of the program are understood. Many parents, after seeing how it helped their own children, have gone into the field because they want to help others."

I mention that I've heard that the field is flooded and ask Dr. Ribowsky if she'd recommend special ed as a career choice for today's Bais Yaakov graduates.

"Yes," she replies. "There's always room for dedicated teachers and those who strive for excellence. Special ed is now an established field with ancillary services, and it is therefore more open.

Also, many girls are going into other fields today such as nursing, speech, OT, and PT. But," Dr. Ribowsky continues, "there are certain characteristics that need to be in place, if one wants to do special ed the 'right way' and be *matzliach*.

"There are two important factors, besides being passionate



"When I start remediation with an emergent reader, I begin with stories, but very small stories, that are basically mistake-proof."





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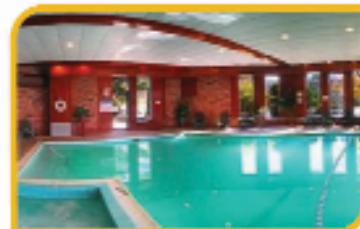
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