

Teaching to Their Hearts



How the Shaar Lev Program at HALB Brings Yiddishkeit to Children of All Abilities

By Susan Schwamm

3,331 years ago, the Jewish nation stood at Har Sinai. Amidst thunder and lightning, smoke and stillness, we received the Torah.

The Torah was given to all Jews – regardless of background or origin or ability. It’s for everyone, a gift and a treasure – our heritage to pass down to generations.

If you head into HALB on a random weekday afternoon, you’ll hear the sweet words of Torah. Although the hallways are quiet and school is done for the day, there are three class-

rooms that are filled with the melodious sounds of the Aleph-Bais and *brachos*. There, fifteen children with special needs are learning about their heritage.

These children attend public school during the day. Their disabilities prevent them from attending yeshiva but their holy *neshamos* yearn to connect to their *mesorah*.

A year ago, a father in the community approached Mr. Richard Altabe, principal at HALB. He had a son with special needs who was in the public school system and

then had transitioned to HALB for first grade. Because he had the financial means, the father was able to provide his child with tutors who helped him acquire *kriah* skills while he was in public school. As such, when he came to HALB, the boy was able to slide straight into learning on the same level as his peers.

“I’m really happy that my child is able to make the transition from public school to yeshiva so effortlessly,” the man told Mr. Altabe. “But back in the public school system, there are another dozen or so kids just like my child who don’t have the same resources that I

have and don’t have tutors to help them learn about Judaism. They’re not getting any *limudei kodesh*; they’re not getting any *kriah* skills; they’re not learning anything about the *chagim*; they’re not learning anything about Shabbos – they don’t know anything.”

His heart ached for these children, who would sit around the table on Shabbos and listen blankly to their siblings talk about the *parsha* without having anything to contribute. He felt for these children, born without the abilities of other children but just as deserving of knowing about their heritage. When he approached Mr. Altabe,

he offered to support a program geared towards helping teach these children about Yiddishkeit and give them the skills they need to build a *frum* foundation.

A man of action, Mr. Altabe immediately grasped the need for a program like this in the community. After all, he realized, there must be other Jewish children who are in need of an initiative of this kind – other children who are in the public school system because their educational needs are better served there but who are more than capable and deserving of learning the fundamentals of Yiddishkeit.

Mr. Altabe connected with Dr. Ann Pedersen, superintendent of Lawrence Public Schools. Dr. Pedersen, with a background in special education, has a special spot in her heart for the special needs students of the district.

One day last year, when New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio called for a snow day and no snow fell, schools were closed. Sitting in his office, with the classrooms empty, Mr. Altabe picked up the phone. “Today is a day off for the children in our schools,” he told Dr. Pedersen, “but for you and me, it’s the perfect time for us to discuss many items that need our mutual attention.”

They agreed to meet. The two discussed many issues that day. One of those issues – perhaps, the most important one – was about the Shaar Lev program.

Dr. Pedersen was excited about the prospect of a program for these children.

“For years, I sat in on CSE meetings and watched parents struggling with making a decision about what would be right for their child,” Dr. Pedersen says. “Sending these children to the public school system is not an easy decision for families but they do it because they know their child needs it to develop. Early intervention is key, and it’s so important that a child’s needs are addressed.”

“At the public school, we are remediating their language deficits or whatever we identify needs to be addressed with these children. But when a child isn’t part of the yeshiva program, there’s a whole other curriculum that’s missing – their religious, cultural heritage. The Shaar Lev program fills the gaps for these children.”

Mr. Altabe notes that without Dr.



Pedersen’s, the district’s, and Jeremy Feder’s help, Shaar Lev would not have gotten off the ground.

He adds, “Dr. Pedersen was enthusiastic about the program from the start. When I told her about the idea, she said to me, ‘What do I think about it? I think it’s amazing! We’ve been thinking about a program like this for two years – we just needed someone to help us bring it to the fore.’”

He adds that the district has been so helpful in other ways as well.

“The busing – that was one of the most important things,” Mr. Altabe acknowledges. “These children need structure – they need a certain routine, a certain set-up. If they would have come in carpools from public school each day, it would have been chaotic. There would have been no structure to the program. Now, they come off the bus all at the same time, and it runs so smoothly.”

Every afternoon, around 3:30 p.m., a small yellow school bus pulls up to HALB. Mr. Altabe and Rabbi Dovid Libman, in rebbe in the program, wait at the curb. As the children jump off the bus enthusiastically, they greet Mr. Altabe and Rabbi Libman with high-fives, handshakes,

and hugs.

“When I went for the first time to see the program and saw Mr. Altabe saying to the kids as they got off the buses, ‘Welcome to HALB,’ it was remarkable,” Dr. Pedersen says. “I saw the children’s faces. They were shining.”

“They run to get here – they’re so excited,” Rabbi Libman adds. “They love it.”

One mother was concerned before the program began. Her child was coming home from school at 3 p.m. and was exhausted. Would an extra hour of learning at the end of the day be too much for him?

Now, Rabbi Libman shares, that mother says that her son can’t wait to come to Shaar Lev every day. Gone is the exhaustion; instead, there’s exhilaration.

“You have to see them when they jump off the bus,” Mr. Altabe says. “They cannot wait to come to HALB. Three children in Shaar Lev have siblings in HALB – they are so excited to ‘join’ them in yeshiva every day.

“We make a big deal out of it – ‘You’re part of the HALB family,’ we tell them. They feel so good. They tell people that they go to HALB. It really makes them feel like they belong.”

This year, Shaar Lev is geared towards children from kindergarten (the pre1A age in yeshivas) through second grade. As the children grow, though, the program will, *iy”H*, grow along with them.

Because the children are on different levels, after a bit of downtime with snack and coloring, they are divided into three groups depending on their abilities. Some children have behavioral challenges, and in collaboration with the Diamond Program, there are counselors who assist with those children at the program. Other children have different levels of learning disabilities. The different groups help the educators reach each child on his or her level.

The one-hour program is divided into two. There is a schedule set up each week so that the children get at least two sessions with each morah and rebbe every week.

One class, led by Rabbi Eli Herzberg, pre1A rebbe in Yeshiva of South Shore, focuses on *parshas hashavua*. The *parsha* comes alive each week as these children – who never learned *parsha* before – hear about the Avos, the Shevatim, and the Jews in Mitzrayim. They are introduced to Hashem’s creations in *parshas Bereishis* and learn about Noach and his huge *teivah* during *parshas Noach*. Even more than learning about these fundamentals of their history and heritage is the joy these children have after *kiddush* on Friday night when their siblings pull out their *parsha* sheets. They, too, go to yeshiva! They, too, have *parsha* sheets to show proudly to their parents and grandparents.

Two classes, one taught by Ms. Mosak and another taught by Ms. Milworn – both special education teachers – focus on *kriah*. Many of these children had never seen the letters of the Hebrew language before joining Shaar Lev. Now, after weeks of spending time with their morahs, they can identify the letters, vocalize the sounds, and are reading Hebrew fluently. Ms. Mosak also spends time each week teaching the girls and boys *tefillah*. Many are well on their way to *davening* from a *siddur*.

“When the child with the greatest need can recognize Aleph Bais for the first time in his or her life, that, to me is unbelievable,” Mr. Altabe enthusiastically. “The children in our top level are

already reading Hebrew like ‘regular’ children in yeshiva – two of them are already accepted to a yeshiva next year. It’s amazing *nachas*.”

Rabbi Dovid Libman, a fourth grade rebbe in HALB with a master’s degree in special education, teaches the children about *halacha*, *ya’hadus*, *brachos*, and *yomim tovim*.

Before each *yom tov*, Rabbi Libman gives over the excitement of the upcoming holiday. Before Pesach, for example, the children spent the whole month before the *chag* preparing for the *seder* and even enjoyed a model *seder* at the program. One parent told Rabbi Libman, with tears in her eyes, how her family was enthralled when her child was able to say the “Mah Nishtana” at the *seder* in front of his parents, siblings, and grandparents. The students in Shaar Lev, Rabbi Libman says, are still singing the “Mah Nishtana” weeks later, so engrained in them are the lessons from *yom tov*.

On a visit to the program one day, Dr. Pedersen walked in on a lesson on *brachos*. Rabbi Libman was showing the group photos of different foods and the children were going over which *bracha* to make on each food. One child, who has very limited utterances and spontaneous language, was shown a photo of challah. Asked what it was, she answered that it was challah. Asked when we eat the challah, she answered, “On Shabbos.”

“I had tears in my eyes,” Dr. Pedersen shares. “Here was a child who is very limited in her speech, and yet she was able to listen to the question and respond appropriately.”

“That was it – this is what we wanted, what we knew was missing. Those gaps are being filled.”

The Shaar Lev program has been so successful – much more than anticipated – in just the few months that it’s been running.

“You know,” Mr. Altabe muses, “when we started the program, I didn’t know how well it would work. I didn’t envision that all the children would actually come out of this program and really know something. Maybe I thought the children on the higher levels would grasp the material. But no – everybody in the program has really learned so much. Everyone has improved in their *kriah* skills. Everyone knows the



parsha each week and can discuss it around the table. They all know about the *chagim*, about *davening*. They exceeded – no, they have surpassed – my expectations.

“The parents don’t want it to end. We thought we would end the program this year around Pesach time but I was able to get a donation from a foundation so we can continue until the end

every afternoon.

Even more than that, these children have formed a unique bond. In public school, during the day, they aren’t in the same classes. Some are different ages; some are on different levels. Being together on the bus every afternoon and then connecting in the Shaar Lev program has made them a cohesive group.

“I saw the children’s faces. They were shining.”

of the year for free. The families are ecstatic. Their children are doing so well.”

Mitch Kirschner, co-president of HALB, notes that the program has thrived and has been an enhancement to the whole school. “We are proud that HALB has embraced the Shaar Lev program,” he says, “realizing the importance of each Jewish child and their need to receive a Jewish education. It has been beneficial not only to the children enrolled, but also to the school as a whole.”

Aside from the knowledge that the children are soaking up each day, these lessons are preparing these children for a life of Yiddishkeit. Two of the students at the Shaar Lev program will be attending a local yeshiva next year and will be able to join a yeshiva classroom because of what they’ve been learning at HALB

“You have to understand,” Mr. Altabe says, “fifteen kids may sound like a lot but in a public school, they could be in ten different classes and no one may know each other.”

Dr. Pedersen observes, “They’ll greet one another in the hallway, during lunchtime or at recess. ‘Oh, you’re part of my HALB family,’ they think to themselves when they see each other. They really have connected.”

It’s not just the students who are bonding, it’s their parents as well.

Being a parent of a child with special needs in the public school system can be isolating. Although one knows that there are others like them in the system, it’s hard to find the other Jewish parents in a school so vast. But now, with Shaar Lev, the parents have become a unified group. They support and encourage each other, communicating easily their dreams and desires

for their special children.

There’s a WhatsApp group created by the parents of the children, and carpools had been formed for after the program. The children enjoy playdates together. It’s more than just an after-school program; it’s become an opportunity to bond.

On Chanukah, Shaar Lev made a Chanukah *mesiba* for the families. It was then that the families were able to meet and connect and became a support for one another. During the event, the parents and children made projects together, possibly the first time these children spent time together with their parents creating Jewish projects in a school setting.

On Purim, Rabbi Libman made a special Purim *seudah* for the children who attend Shaar Lev and their families. Dressed in costumes, the children trooped into his home and spent an hour singing and joining in the Purim fun with their parents. They left on a high. Their siblings had their rebbes and morahs to visit on Purim; they also had a rebbe who wanted to see them in their Purim splendor.

“These parents had a very hard decision to make,” Mr. Altabe notes. “What do you do if your child has certain needs but doesn’t fit into CA-HAL or Kulanu or other programs in the community? Do you send them to Manhattan, to a program that’s really far away? With Shaar Lev, the parents who decide to send their children to the public school system know that we’re there for them to help their children in another way – to build them up and teach them about Jewish fundamentals.”

Mr. Altabe has been in *chinuch* for 35 years. Asked what has changed in Jewish education over the past few years, he asserts that it’s still the same as it was years ago.

“It’s different,” he admits. “There are different challenges. But there always were challenges, and there always will be challenges, but the goals are the same: you have to inspire the children. You have to give over an excitement. You have to reach them in their hearts – that’s the only thing that sticks.”

Shaar Lev – the program with the heart that touches their souls.

“You get to their hearts,” Mr. Altabe adds, “well, that’s everything.” 