

SPOTLIGHT

ON
a CommunityCoverage by
Devorah KleinBinyan Yisroel:
Building *Neshamos* in Baltimore

"I am so proud and so privileged that I can send my son to Binyan Yisroel, and that he has the opportunity to attend. People tell me that I am a Nachshon, but I say, without Nachshon, the Yam Suf would never have split! I am supremely grateful to Binyan Yisroel and feel that this type of school is needed in every community."

These are the words of Mrs. A., a mother of a delightful 9-year-old, fourth-grade boy, who is one of the fortunate students in the newly formed Binyan Yisroel of Baltimore, attending classes at Yeshivas Chofetz Chaim/Talmudical Academy of Baltimore.

The Baltimore community is blessed with many wonderful organizations and diverse educational opportunities that help families in myriad ways. Nevertheless, children with a language-based learning disability, often referred to as the "invisible disability," have always presented a unique dilemma. These children may seem typical in their social perceptiveness, emotional development and maturity. Yet when the child reaches elementary school, reading instruction begins, and the child must perform in the classroom, the disability reveals itself.

In some instances, the path for remediation is immersion in a skill-based program to provide individualized instruction for the child, which can be attained in a remedial environment. However, in some instances, it has been necessary to recommend the family to a non-Jewish program for proper intervention.

Now, this has changed. Mrs. Alana Weinberg has created Binyan Yisroel, a program to address the needs of students in the Baltimore community who meet a very specific profile and provide them with quality instructional models within a Torah school environment.

Binyan Yisroel opened this year with two branches, a class of eight fourth- and fifth-grade boys located in Yeshivas Chofetz Chaim/Talmudical Academy of Baltimore, and a class of eight third-grade girls, located in Bais Yaakov of Baltimore. The students were selected based on specific criteria to ensure they were a good fit for the methodology of Binyan Yisroel. This includes children with language-based learning differences, including dyslexia and other language challenges, and executive functioning difficulties, who have average to above-average intelligence and have not reached their potential levels of success in traditional classroom set-

tings.

While Binyan Yisroel students are in their own classroom for the entire day, they have opportunities to interact and play with their peers during activities and recesses throughout the day.

The schools are very happy to accommodate Binyan Yisroel. As Rabbi Hillel Hexter, Associate *Menahel* of the Lower Elementary School at YCC/TA remarks, "We believe that every child deserves an opportunity to thrive in a nurturing and supportive yeshivah atmosphere. We are honored to host Binyan Yisroel. Their boys are our boys, and we are proud to include them in our recesses, lunch, assemblies and various other activities and learning programs. This collaborative effort allows us to provide an inclusive *chinuch* that benefits all our *talmidim*."

Mrs. Alana Weinberg, director of Binyan Yisroel, explains, "Children who have language-based learning differences such as dyslexia need to learn in a dramatically different manner. These students require direct, explicit instructions, with information spiraled and reinforced. The material has to be explained in a way these learners learn best and can understand; otherwise, it is as if they have not heard or learned it at all. Regular frontal classroom teaching alone does not work for them, and resource room remediation is not enough."

In Baltimore, there is a private school, Jemicy, designed for children with language-based learning differences. Founded 50 years ago, the Jemicy school has developed the best methods to teach these learners. These methods are being utilized in Binyan Yisroel for *limudei chol*, as Jemicy is providing training, mentorship and curriculum development.

What about *limudei kodesh*? For *kriah*, Binyan Yisroel is using a method called Yesodos, created by Mrs. Adele Schwab from Detroit. Based on extensive research and brain science, Yesodos uses a multisensory approach to help children transition from breaking their teeth over the Hebrew words to reading with fluency and automaticity.

At Binyan Yisroel, every child gets 60 minutes a day with a special educator trained by Mrs. Schwab. They are divided into groups of two based on their current *kriah* abilities and other factors such as attention span and executive function. The children help each

other, encourage each other and play games together. They also learn using hand motions, forming letters with the mouth, skywriting and using clay, sand and WikkiStix to shape the letters.

In addition to *kriah*, the boys learn *Chumash* and *Mishnayos* for 40 minutes each day, in groups of four, together with a *Rebbi* and an assistant. The girls learn *Chumash* using the same system.

All planning for Binyan Yisroel has been in conjunction with local Rabbanim, including Harav Moshe Heinemann, *shlita*, and Harav Yaakov Hopfer, *shlita*.

"Founding Binyan Yisroel has been an extremely challenging journey, and many times I wanted to give up. Nevertheless, the Rabbanim have been extremely supportive and kept pushing me to try just a little bit more," recalls Mrs. Weinberg. "It took a lot of work to get the project off the ground and to be accepted into the school campuses, but Harav Heinemann insisted that we have to open for both boys and girls at the same time."

What prompted Mrs. Weinberg to embark on this daunting project?

"I have been in education for over 20 years, and I trained in the Wilson and Orton-Gillingham reading programs. When my son was in first grade, I found out that he was dyslexic. I went back to school to learn more about language-based learning differences.

"When we moved to Baltimore, I sent him to Jemicy and discovered that they have many *frum* students. I said to myself, 'We live in such an incredible community. Why is there no *frum* school for these children?'"

"Several years ago, Harav Heinemann spoke before *Selichos* and bemoaned the fact that there were over 300 students in the community who were not enrolled in Jewish schools. He was pushing for answers to solve this crisis, and this encouraged me to try to find a solution."

Rabbi Yochanan Stein, principal of the Upper Elementary School at Bais Yaakov, shares his perspective of Binyan Yisroel. "Working to support children with language-based disabilities has always been a concern, and Mrs. Weinberg has stepped up to find a solution for these children. In the short month since school began, I have seen the children coming into

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school, and I noticed their confidence and joy in learning.

"I see the girls in small groups, doing exciting learning activities and integrating with the other children on the playground, who view them as just another class. While it has just been the beginning, Binyan Yisroel has started with a solid foundation. We at Bais Yaakov are proud to host them and look forward to seeing them thrive."

Now that they have gotten off the ground, Binyan Yisroel plans to expand every year, with the goal of having second through eighth grades. For seventh and eighth grades, the students will hopefully be ready to be mainstreamed, with support in the classroom and remedial sessions under Binyan Yisroel's supervision. Ultimately, Mrs. Weinberg hopes to be able to follow the students all the way through high school.

Binyan Yisroel's model, with special classes for language-based learning differences held within another Jewish school, is without precedent. However, there is a great need for other similar programs in many communities.

"When we opened up enrollment for Binyan Yisroel, we had 30 applicants for the eight boys' slots alone," notes Mrs. Weinberg. "There is a tremendous need, not just in Baltimore but in other communities as well. People were calling me from out of town; they were willing to move their entire family if their child with learning differences would have a proper school."

"I would love to encourage other communities to open similar programs. What we accomplished is not rocket science; it can be done anywhere, from the smallest community to the largest, and I hope that it will be done across the United States and across the world. I invite others to be in touch with me, and I will be happy to share what we have achieved."

Mrs. Weinberg can be reached at aweinberg@binyanyisroel.org.



Parents' Perspectives

Mrs. A. related, "My son, Chaim, is 9 years old, in fourth grade, and is a great kid. When we applied to Binyan Yisroel, it was a process, as they had to ensure that our son was the right fit for the school. They were looking for something very specific — there had to be no behavioral issue, a certain IQ level, and the presence of a language-based learning difference."

"Last year, Chaim was in third grade in YCC/TA, and spent time in the school's learning center. He was doing nicely, but his parents knew that it was not enough. If they really wanted him to succeed, not just pull through, they had to do something about it. Many children like Chaim end up leaving the *frum* schools."

"I am lucky and grateful that this school opened up when it did. We know the school building and the other boys; and the teachers are *ehrllich*. Mrs. Weinberg is a *tzadekes* — she has put her whole heart and soul into this project and really pushed it through. It

comes from her love for these children, and she has given everything to make this work. It would not have happened without her. We owe her a tremendous amount of gratitude."

Another parent commented, "My adorable, sociable daughter was having trouble with reading, and was spending a significant part of her day out of her classroom in the learning center. Once she reached 3rd grade, when the class is no longer focused on reading and *kriah* skills, we knew she would need more support to succeed. It is tremendous *Yad Hashem* that Binyan Yisroel opened this year. She still feels like a regular Bais Yaakov of Baltimore girl, but she is within a class that provides tremendous support, expertise and focus on her needs."

"Additionally, the girls in her class are all sweet girls like her who just have reading challenges. We feel very blessed and grateful that our daughter has this opportunity."

The Rabbanim Speak

Harav Moshe Heinemann, Shlita, Rav of Agudath Israel of Baltimore

"*Baruch Hashem*, nowadays, there is a possibility for children with dyslexia and other reading disorders to have a Jewish education, which will make it easier for these children to be *frum*, successful citizens. It is important for us to help them in any way we can."

Harav Yaakov Hopfer, Shlita, Rav of Shearith Israel Congregation And President of the Vaad HaRabbanim Of Baltimore

"These children need and deserve to be taken care of by the community. This program is designed to provide a full complement of *limudei kodesh* and *limudei chol*, and to enable the children to really succeed in the classroom instead of being pulled along. With the proper training for the teachers and staff, provided by Binyan Yis-

roel, we, as a community, are finally able to service these children correctly and are really able to make a difference to these precious *neshamos*.

"In the past, there were viable options [of schools] available to the general public, which many of these children attended, but as society's attitudes have changed, these options are no longer palatable to the *frum* family. Our children are now receiving a full education in an *avirah* which is appropriate for a *frum* child."

"By necessity, Binyan Yisroel started small, and we appreciate how other local *mosdos* have generously offered space to Binyan Yisroel, which allows for inclusion of the Binyan Yisroel students in the social fabric of the larger *mosdos*. Binyan Yisroel is a wonderful asset to the community, and we are grateful to Mrs. Weinberg for all the knowledge, enthusiasm and energy she has brought to successfully launch this new school."