



SEEACH SOD
45 YEARS
of
Building Worlds



BY **Gila Arnold**

Enter, for a moment, the world of a child with special needs.

Imagine the confusion, the fear, the sheer overwhelm of a huge, noisy world in which you lack the tools to make sense of it all.

Life can be lonely and frightening if you don't know how to navigate it. If you don't know how to understand or make yourself understood to others. If your parents themselves are overwhelmed and confused by a new world filled with strange diagnoses and medical terms and therapies that they've never heard of before.

Now, imagine that you've found a place that can provide you with every single one of your unique needs. That can give you exactly what you require, from babyhood through adulthood, to successfully navigate this huge, rocking ship we call life.

Everything?

Yes, absolutely everything.

Enter the world of Seeach Sod.

A PLACE OF MIRACLES

What is Seeach Sod?

This is my question as I meet with staff members at the large center on Yirmiyahu Street in Jerusalem, one of the organization's five buildings throughout the capitol.

And they tell me: It's an all-encompassing education network, from daycare through high school. It's an adult vocational training and residential housing program. It's a child development center, a respite program, and a newly-opened dental clinic.

And then we speak some more, and they throw in more programs. "Oh, and of course you heard about our kollel."

Your what?

And more and more programs are casually mentioned, until my head

is spinning by the sheer scope of this organization.

What is Seeach Sod?

Finally, I get my answer: It's a place where miracles happen.

Take Bracha. A young woman with Downs Syndrome, she encounters us as we walk through the building and gives a cheery hello.

"Bracha has no parents," Leah Mendelowitz, the director of public relations who is giving me my tour, informs me. "She was abandoned as a baby. She had such a craving for affection that she would go over and hug strangers or touch babies in their strollers. We had to develop a program to teach her boundaries." And today Bracha is a happy, self-assured young lady.

Then there's Moshe*. As a nonverbal child, his father had always had difficulty connecting with him. And then, at his Seeach Sod siddur party, Moshe uttered words that he had never said before. Looking at his father, he said, "Abba! This is my siddur!" Moshe's father had tears in his eyes as he thanked Seeach Sod for giving him the gift of his son.

"We have children who come here with prognoses from their doctors that they'll never be able to walk, or speak, or even eat without a feeding tube," says Mrs. Mendelowitz. "And within a few months, or a few years, these children are walking, talking, and eating."

While such miracles are commonplace at Seeach Sod, the beauty and emotion of each individual story never fails to take their breath away. This, says its CEO Rav Shimon Levy, is what drives him to continue taking in more children and build more programs. For him, it's a personal mission.

"My brother, who is seven years older than me, has Downs Syndrome," he says. "I saw his struggles up close, and I know exactly what it means for someone like him to have the right framework to grow in."

It was to provide this framework that Rav Shimon's father, Rav Dov Levy z"l, founded Seeach Sod 45 years ago. At that time, there was nothing

in Israel for children with special needs.

“We were the first organization to focus on this population,” says Rav Levy.

And, while the ensuing years have seen a revolution in both the knowledge and attitude that society has towards children with disabilities, Seeach Sod is still at the forefront of the field — in terms of their numbers, the scope of their assistance, and their level of professionalism.

“We are the only organization that treats every kind of disability, at every age and stage of life,” stresses Mrs. Mendelowitz.

“We’ve gone from one student, back in 1971, to over 1,000,” says Rav Levy. “But our approach is still the same: every single student is his own world.”

EDUCATION: AGE APPROPRIATE, COMMUNITY APPROPRIATE

This is a philosophy that permeates the entire organization, starting from their smallest charges.

“Our two main goals are to give our students quality of life and independence,” explains Mrs. Chavi Kastelanits, director of Seeach Sod’s education department.

“We adapt the curriculum and the physical environment to encourage maximum independence and quality of life. We do so by giving the students the ability to choose according to their preferences whenever possible. For example, during mealtime the students themselves choose the foods they would like to eat either verbally or via iPads or communication boards. They decide which of the spreads for the sandwiches they like best, and they themselves dish out the food from the containers and serve themselves under the guidance of the staff members.

Seeach Sod’s guiding creed is to provide every one of their students with an educational experience that parallels as much as possible the experience of their “normal” siblings. To that end, the schools under their auspices, which includes the Maon Tzur Daycare center (ages 0-3), the Ganei Eshkol preschools (ages 3-7), the Otzar Yerushalayim elementary school and yeshiva for boys (ages 8-21), the Ma’oz Yerushalayim elementary school and junior high school for girls (8-21), and the Beit Metzudot school for severe communication disorders (8-21) all run their programs along the same basic framework as the regular school system — with the necessary adaptations.

“We teach the same things that their brothers and sisters are learning,” says Mrs. Kastelanits. “Reading, writing, math, Chumash — but we provide all of the support necessary to make this learning successful for them.”

This support is provided by a large, professional staff of trained teachers and therapists (Seeach Sod’s staff numbers 700 in all), who receive constant supervision and training in the latest research in the field. The classrooms are equipped with the most up-to-date technology, such as iPads for assistive and augmentative communication use.

It’s a constant balance, trying to give the children the skills

most important for their growth while at the same time giving them an experience that can make them feel proudly on par with their siblings.

Mrs. Kastelanits relates an example.

“Instead of supplying different curriculum and different books, we supply the same title and basis for material as all the other schools. For example, we compiled a simplified booklet called “Musagim Beyahadut” (Concepts in Judaism) for our seventh graders which parallels a similar booklet used by seventh graders all over Israel’s school system. Likewise, we adapt material such as Pirkei Avos, Gemara, and Mishnayos for the school age students. In addition to learning material, we focus on integrating the students in social events in the community. Our girls will perform in Binyanei Hauma at Seeach Sod’s event, and our boys join local Talmudei Torah and yeshivos for many activities such as learning together or joining in Chanuka and Purim parties.”

The children have siddur plays and Chumash parties, make *siyumim*, go on trips, wear uniforms, and get report cards, each according to his or her level.

“We made a Bas Mitzvah party for our class of low-functioning girls,” she relates. “Usually 12-year-old girls put on a show for their class party. We knew these girls wouldn’t be able to perform, so we thought about what they could do, on their own level, to make the party special. What we decided was to invite the mothers to a breakfast party, where the girls would be the waitresses. They practiced this for a long time together with the paramedical staff, using their assistive devices to ask their mothers what food they wanted to order. They were so excited!”

Just like they take the special needs child’s feelings into account, Seeach Sod also looks at the needs of the family unit. The schools run events for siblings several times a year, inviting them to experience a day of fun workshops and programs, enabling them to feel proud of having a brother or sister at Seeach Sod. They also run an annual retreat for mothers, as well as a support group for the English-speaking mothers. And, beyond the educational department, Seeach Sod’s respite center provides parents with a badly needed opportunity to recharge, by allowing them to bring their children to its mini-hotel, run by professional and devoted staff.

LILACS AND LAUNDROMATS: TRANSITIONING TO INDEPENDENCE

Once an individual with special needs hits his 21st birthday, the Ministry of Education stops funding his education. But that doesn’t mean that his educational needs are over — and Seeach Sod doesn’t let loose its helping hand.

There are 35 group residence homes throughout Jerusalem, housing a total of 250 men and women. Each apartment has a dedicated counselor to assist the residents, guiding them in their development of daily living skills and helping them move towards independence and integration in the community. The



jewel in the crown of the supported housing program is the Admor MeBoyan home, a Har Nof villa that is an exclusive residential facility for 24 men, where they live together in a cheerful, homey, supportive environment — “Like living in camp!” says one staff member.

Every member of the residential program participates in a vocational training program, which also draws outside members as well — 450 in all. Their three vocational training centers — the Ma’as centers for men, in Jerusalem and Bnei Brak, and the Ashira center for women in Jerusalem — place individuals in training programs according to their level of ability. The lower functioning adults are taught to package materials in the center. The mid-level individuals work in the on-site businesses that Seeach Sod has developed. And the highest functioning adults are placed at job sites on the outside, receiving supervision and guidance from their Seeach Sod counselor on the job.

Leah Safra is in charge of vocational placements. “We currently have seventeen girls placed at job sites all over the city,” she says. While it used to be a difficult job convincing a place of employment to hire their women, they’ve made such a good impression that now she sometimes has places calling her to send them another one!

What types of businesses do they work in? “All types,” she asserts. “Clothing stores, preschools and daycares, the hospital. We even have one working in the Jerusalem municipality offices! She was so proud when she came to visit us one day, as part of a group from the Iriyah touring our campus, and we all saw her in her uniform.”

For those unable to go out to work, Seeach Sod has developed an impressive array of on-site businesses. On a tour of the women’s vocational center, I saw huge bags of the ubiquitous party “*pekelach*” sold in supermarkets around the country; Seeach Sod women package them. On another table were cardboard cutouts of mitzvah cards — the women cut out and package these games, as well.

And then there is the glass display window, showcasing their special in-house business: Lilac Soaps. Founded three years ago, this unique company is run solely by the Seeach Sod women, producing homemade soap flower arrangements, beautifully presented and packaged. Starting from a plain white block of soap, the women whittle, shape, dye, and scent the soaps and arrange them in artistic displays that are sold all over. Lilac does a brisk business around Shavuot time, and the Jerusalem Municipality has purchased around 7,000 to give out as birthday presents to their employees.

Just around the corner from the Ashira center, a separate entrance of the building leads to the Revach Naki Laundromat, the in-house business of the men’s Ma’as program. Inside the room several industrial-sized washers and dryers are whirring, as Seeach Sod men are busy loading, pressing, and folding.

“We have eight men working here,” says Simcha, the site’s overseer. “They take care of everything in the business, including taking orders and doing deliveries.”

While equipment is adapted to the needs of the workers — color-coded laundry bins, for example, to differentiate between clean and dirty laundry — there is no compromise on the level of service.

“We don’t cut ourselves any slack, because we know we’re competing with professionals,” says Simcha. Their clients include hotels, catering halls, and mikvaos.

Yaakov Moshe, a young man with special needs, gives a wide smile as he works. “I fold towels,” he explains proudly, demonstrating to us how he does it.

There is a shul on the Seeach Sod campus, where many of the men daven before reporting to work. “Men from the outside community come to daven in the minyan, as well,” says Mrs. Mendelowitz. “And there’s even a *kollel* on the premises, Chazon Dov, named after Rav Dov Levy. It’s an integration

kollel, where men from the community come to learn with the high-functioning Seeach Sod men.”

A soap business, a laundromat, and a *kollel* on premises?

But wait. There’s more.

OF CHAZZANUS AND HAGGADAHS

In the world of Seeach Sod, children with special needs aren’t viewed as disadvantaged *nebachs*. They

TOP TO BOTTOM Hydrotherapy in Seeach Sod’s pool. Snoezelen therapy. Menachem with Chazzan Chaim Adler. Men in the vocational program working in Seeach Sod’s Laundromat. Brand new dental clinic on Seeach Sod’s own premises.



PICTURE ON LEFT **Left to Right - R' Dovid Levy, Avraham Levy, Rav Shimon Levy (CEO).** (Rav Dov Levy's zt"l picture hanging above)
 PICTURE ON RIGHT **Adults who earn money in outside job-sites, on their trip to Ukraine**

are viewed as stars. And, as a result, each and every one of them becomes a star.

Some, quite literally.

"We don't just look at what they can't do, we look at what they can do," says Mrs. Mendelowitz. "We work at stressing their talents, and giving them areas to shine in — whether it's music, drama, or art."

Some of this talent will be on display at their upcoming women's event, a large-scale evening for the English-speaking public featuring Rabbi Paysach Krohn and best-selling cookbook author Jamie Geller, which will take place at Binyanei HaUma on February 2. The evening will include a display of a special Haggadah put out by the organization, which includes artwork by the Seeach Sod students, as well as a music and dance performance by the girls.

"They are really excited about this opportunity," says Mrs. Mendelowitz. "They've been practicing a long time for this."

Some of the young men at Seeach Sod are already old hands at stage performances having performed through the Pirchei Seeach choir at venues around Israel, including the Knesset and the 2012 Siyum HaShas at Binyanei HaUma. They've also put out four musical albums, with one more on the way.

"For many of these boys, the choir has been life-changing," says Mrs. Mendelowitz. "It's brought about a huge improvement in their social skills, ability to express themselves, and overall self-image."

She tells about one boy in particular for whom it's been revolutionary. "He's an autistic boy, who doesn't normally communicate. But he can sing — and suddenly his *neshamah* comes pouring out."

One of the most dramatic stories is that of Menachem, a young man with cerebral palsy who is also blind. He first came to Seeach Sod as a sad, shy 21-year-old who had recently lost his mother. Then, one Friday morning, Dovid Reicher, a director of the Ma'as program, handed Menachem a microphone at their weekly Kabbalas Shabbos and asked him to sing. To their shock, Menachem belted out a song with the deep, rich voice of a *chazzan*. Realizing that this was the key to his soul, they quickly integrated him in the Pirchei Seeach choir, and made him the official *chazzan* of the Ma'as shul. But the best was yet to come.

Menachem had long admired Chazzan Chaim Adler, the internationally famous *chazzan* of Jerusalem's Great Synagogue. Reicher decided to surprise Menachem by inviting Chazzan Adler to come sing at Seeach

Sod's annual Chanukah party. It was an emotional moment, when Menachem was called on stage to sing with his hero. And their two voices blended so harmoniously that, since then, Chazzan Adler has sung together with him on numerous other occasions, and introduced Menachem into the world of *chazzanus*.

PART OF THE COMMUNITY

Rav Levy's ultimate vision is to see the Seeach Sod members integrated and accepted into their communities. To that end, they have instituted several programs geared toward the community at large. The Shlabim Center for Early Childhood Development is a multifaceted treatment center for children with developmental delays, offering a wide range of therapies, ranging from physio, occupational and speech, to hydrotherapy, music and art therapies, Snoezelen therapy, and horseback riding.

This large center, located in Ramot, features a swimming pool and a horseback riding course, and they plan, in the near future, to create a large park in the center to be open to the public. They also operate a *simchah* hall out of their Rechov Yirmiyahu facility, to further impress upon the public that Seeach Sod is a "normal" place.

Rav Levy feels strongly that if you start introducing children at a young age to children with special needs, they will learn to feel comfortable with them. For this purpose, they run several integration activities, including *shabbatons*, and invite the greater community to events like their Hachnassas Sefer Torah, which local cheder boys attended.

Rav Levy's motto, like his father's before him, is whatever you can do for the children, do. The question of financing comes later. Whether it's building their new dental clinic on premises so that individuals with disabilities can have their dental needs cared for by professionals who also understand their other limitations, to organizing a trip to the Ukraine for boys in the Ma'as program who had saved their earnings in order to visit the *kivrei tzaddikim*, to the ever-expanding network of group residences and school buildings, Rav Levy's attitude — and the attitude of the entire staff at Seeach Sod — is "yes, we can".

Yes, we can.

It's an attitude that has built an organization over the span of 45 years into the vast, all-encompassing network for special needs that it is today.

And it's the attitude that continues building every single one of its 1,000 students into the true stars that they are.