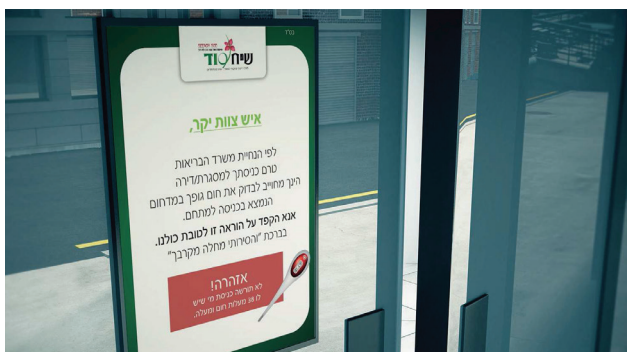




# “But Mommy, I Want to Go to School!” For Some Families, the Corona Crisis Hits Even Harder!



Strictly following the Ministry of Health guidelines

How have you been feeling these past few weeks?  
Scared? Anxious? Confused?

These are frightening times for all of us, as we try to make sense of a world suddenly turned upside-down.

Now, imagine you're a child or adult with special needs. Routine, that blessed daily routine which you rely on so much to get you through your everyday life, has abruptly stopped. And you don't quite understand why, other than that people around you seem very nervous, and they're whispering about a big, scary illness.

If we're feeling frightened and confused, can you envision what it feels like for the special needs population among us? And for their parents, who have suddenly been thrust into the position of 24/7 caregiver, providing the intensive care these children require while also trying to run the rest of their household?

## In Times of Challenge, Our True Colors Show

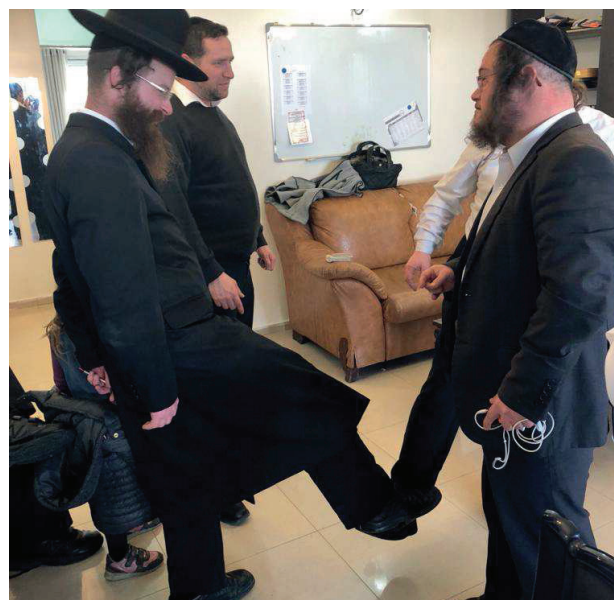
Rabbi Shimon Levy doesn't have to imagine what this scenario looks like; as the CEO of Seeach Sod, he's been



living it for nearly five decades. Seeach Sod was the pioneer in servicing the special needs population in Israel, and throughout the decades it has been at the forefront in

the field, constantly opening new programs, providing cutting-edge treatments, and utilizing every opportunity to advance their students' growth and development.

The full-service organization that he's built - from the 0-3 Day Care facilities to the adult residential and vocational



Teaching the residents how to "shake feet"

programs - provides for every possible need a person with special needs may have, enabling him to lead an enriched life at maximum functioning capacity. Seeach Sod has earned a reputation among government bodies, service providers, parents and supporters for being a highly-organized, well-run organization with professional and dedicated staff that provide the highest levels of excellence in care.

It's a reputation that has been proven over and over again throughout the years. But never has it been put to the test as it has in these past few weeks.

“Back when we started the organization, I would never have imagined that in 2020, the world would be shut down because of a virus,” says Rabbi Levy. “No one did. Yet, right from the outset, we moved to put our emergency regulations in place, and make sure all of our students were taken care of.”

There were so many questions at first: Would special education schools still be allowed to remain open? What about adult residential apartments? Would the higher-functioning adults still be allowed to go out to their jobs, as part of Seeach Sod's vocational program?

And then, once the Ministry of Education decided that special ed schools would, in fact, close down, there were a host of new questions: Would staff be allowed to visit students in their homes? How could they set up the students for maximal success in their home environment? How could they provide support to the families to get through this difficult period?

Seeach Sod has worked closely with the Ministries of Health, Education and Welfare in order to ensure they are fully complying with all regulations while at the same time continuing to care for every one of their students as best as possible. It's been a difficult balancing act, but, says Rabbi Levy, his staff has come through with flying



The educational staff prepare special Pesach packages for the students

colors.

"This challenge has proven to me just how caring and dedicated our entire team is," he says proudly.

For all of us who've been finding it challenging just managing our own homefronts in this trying time, here's a glimpse into the multi-city operation that Seeach Sod has managed to pull off in a matter of days to make sure that every single one of their students and residents are cared for.

### At Home, But Still Connected

"Our students have such a hard time with transitions that we usually prepare them well in advance for any small change," says Mrs. Chavi Kastelanits, director of educational programming. "But here we were dealing with a major change that happened so suddenly, we didn't have time to prep them at all."

Under her purview are all of Seeach Sod's 0-21 programs, which includes day care centers, preschools and schools for girls and boys ranging from mild to severe disabilities. The word went out on the Motzaei Shabbos after Purim that special ed schools would be closed the next day. First thing Sunday morning, Mrs. Kastelanits met with her administrative staff to put together a plan.

The first step was to set up a phone system for parents to connect to. The system includes constantly updated recordings by teachers, a support section for parents with tips from the social workers, and an enrichment section

with activities from the paramedical staff. Parents can also contact the school nurse for any questions they have about their child's medical care.

The staff also put up a very rich array of educational activities on the Seeach Sod website. However, since not all of their parent body has internet access at home, they decided to go even further, and put together individualized learning kits for every single student. For some, this meant designing communication boards for iPads, while for others, it meant Pesach worksheets, projects, or shiurim for the Seeach Sod yeshiva bochurim. And this was all done in the space of one or two days!

But the logistical feat was just beginning. Seeach Sod students come from all across the country, and these kits now had to be transported to 500 students living in 25 different cities.

Once more, the dedication of the staff shone through, as they cheerfully made their rounds across the country - Yerushalayim, Beit Shemesh, Rechovot, Ashdod and more. They were rewarded by the reactions of the families, as they saw these huge, loving packages delivered to their doorstep.

As one staff member describes it, "The parents were so thrilled to see me. In one of the homes, the child himself came running out to me - he just couldn't contain his excitement!"

One of the mothers, he says, an older Sefardi woman, couldn't stop heaping brachos upon him, and upon all of Seeach Sod.

The dedicated staff did not stop there. They are now in constant contact with the families; at the beginning, some of the teachers would even travel to students' homes to give the parents some respite, until the tightening restrictions made this impossible.

"My staff is constantly calling me to ask how they can help the parents, what more they can do. They're not getting paid extra for this - they're doing it because they care so much."

The fact that everything was able to happen so quickly, she says, is a testament to the strength of the organization.

"We were given all the necessary equipment and every possible means of support to pull this off. Our tech team worked 24-hour days to set up every teacher with her own home computer system so that she could be in touch with each student. It's unbelievable."

And then there's the story of Shmuli's new home. A severely autistic 12-year-old boy, his parents were unable to cope with him being at home all day. Seeach Sod saw that the situation was getting desperate, and so they stepped in to help.

Pulling off yet another logistical miracle, they managed to get Shmuli placed in their residential home for younger children. Placing someone in residential living is a process that usually takes months to years and requires the coordination of the Ministry of Welfare. Yet Seeach Sod's dedicated staff managed to accomplish this in a

matter of days.

### Around the Clock Care

Unlike the schools, Seeach Sod's Supported Housing Program for adults is still running, having been deemed an essential societal need. Residents usually spend the bulk of their day either working in jobs as part of Seeach Sod's Vocational Training Program or, for the more severely disabled, in Day Centers where they receive therapy and skills training. But when they return to the house at the end of the day, they know they are coming home. The houses are run exactly like a regular one, with each resident having his chores and responsibilities,



A student in the Day Center communicates through an iPad

while also enjoying a variety of enrichment classes before eating dinner and preparing for bed. For the residents, this is their home, and their fellow residents are their family.

Now, however, the vast majority of them must stay at home all day (except for those who work in essential industries such as supermarkets or bakeries). This means, says R' Chaim Hirschman, director of welfare programming, that the staff now had the sudden challenge of needing to occupy the residents all day long inside the house. For a program that encompasses 300 residents living in 50 houses, this was quite an operational challenge.

"We decided to try to keep up their routine as much as possible," he says. "Jobs that can be performed off-site, such as packaging, we're bringing home to them. We've also tripled the number of enrichment classes we're providing."

All of this has required the help of a lot of additional staff. He describes his staff as a phenomenal group of people who have really risen to the challenge. And when I hear some of the details, I am awed.

For example, aside from their regular residences, Seeach Sod has set up a special home for residents who need to be in quarantine. In order to do this, they needed their staff to be on board - in other words, to voluntarily enter quarantine together with the residents!

And then, of course, there's Pesach. When I ask whether the residences will be open for Pesach this year due to the special circumstances, R' Hirschman replies, "They're always open for Pesach! Every year, we have a staff that

runs a Pesach seder for the residents in our homes."

However, he adds, this year, things are different. Because none of the residents are able to go to their families for Pesach, every single residence will be running at full capacity this year. For Seeach Sod, this means more staff, more logistical arrangements, more time and energy to ensure that the Pesach for their residents is beautiful and meaningful.

How have the residents been reacting to what's going on right now? R' Hirschman says that they explain the situation to each one according to his level of understanding. They are all able to understand and follow the Ministry of Health regulations.

Still, some of the regulations were harder for them to accept than others. For example, the higher functioning men who are used to going to shul everyday were incredulous upon being told that they're no longer allowed to do so. They insisted that they need to daven with a minyan. Finally, the administrators came up with a way to convince them - by recording several leading rabbanim issuing a clearly worded psak halacha, along with a beautiful message to the Seeach Sod residents.

### Operating at Half-Budget but Full Strength

Rav Levy is justifiably proud of his extraordinary staff, and the way every single one has stepped up to the plate in the current crisis. And although the organization is presently experiencing its own financial crunch due to substantial government budget cuts for people with disabilities, he's expended huge effort to pay all of his staff members their regular pay checks in advance of Pesach.

It wasn't easy, but he knows that his dedicated staff deserves it.

Rav Levy adds that it's not just his staff that has taken responsibility to care for Klal Yisrael's most vulnerable population during this crisis, but all of Seeach Sod's supporters throughout the world. Now more than ever, Seeach Sod relies on the generosity of the Jewish People to help them continue to provide the highest possible care for their special needs students.

"In times of crisis," says Rav Levy, "That's when we see the best of Klal Yisrael."



The spacious complex that Seeach Sod has set up to house people with disabilities who have a mild case of Corona