





Loads of Success

A one-of-a-kind laundromat in Yerushalayim generates much more than loads of fresh laundry

BY SHIFRA MANOWITZ

Revach Naki is a unique laundromat located in the heart of Yerushalayim that's run almost exclusively by individuals with special needs. This innovative establishment not only provides the community with professional laundering services, but also gives people with special needs a chance to revel in the sweet taste of accomplishment and success. When I first heard about its existence, I was intrigued by this revolutionary idea and was determined to see the place with my own eyes.

Even before I stepped into the spacious, brightly lit room, the fresh scent of detergent and fabric softener wafted out on the breeze, as if to welcome me.

One wall was lined with a row of state-of-the-art commercial washing machines and dryers. A long counter in the center of the room was piled high with freshly laundered linen, which was being carefully folded by two diligent workers, members of Seeach Sod's Vocational Training Program. At the far end of the room, a young man whose name I soon learned was Uriel was hard at work feeding snow-white tablecloths into a wide pressing machine. Soft background music played against the whirring backdrop of the washing machines; the atmosphere was pleasant and relaxed.

First Impressions

As I stood there taking in the sight of challenged young men loading machines, folding pillow cases, and pressing tablecloths, an image suddenly swam up in my memory. In my mind's eye, I could see a group of men sitting around in a concrete-paved courtyard. Some had the identifying features of Down syndrome, some were rocking back and forth in endless rhythm, and some were sitting motionless, unfocused eyes gazing at some invisible point. Whenever I passed by the special-needs facility located a block away from my childhood home, a feeling of sadness and pity would well up within me at the pitiful sight of adults swaying, babbling, and drooling like infants.

Standing in Revach Naki's inviting facility, I couldn't help but note how different my reaction was at seeing these disabled individuals working hard at their jobs. Here too there were some with Down syndrome, some with autism, and some simply with lower intelligence levels. And yet, in stark contrast to my childhood memories of the piteous residents of the special-needs facility, the feelings that filled me now were feelings of admiration. I was amazed at how these young men with limited abilities were able to master such skills, I marveled at their assiduousness, and I could actually sense their pride at being

productive members of society.

Determined to find out more about this unique endeavor, I went over to Mr. Eli Mizrachi, Revach Naki's affable and capable manager, and asked him how this project was conceived.

A Pioneering Endeavor

"The laundromat was the brainstorm of Seeach Sod's CEO, Rabbi Shimon Levy," said Mr. Mizrachi. "Seeach Sod

has a division called Ma'as, which offers vocational training and employment to adults with special needs. Many members of the Ma'as Vocational Training Program have jobs stocking shelves in supermarkets, packaging parts for craft and food companies, or serving as delivery boys. These young men earn a modest salary each month — too modest, in fact. Rabbi Levy felt that some of these individuals, many of



whom are graduates of Seeach Sod institutions, deserved higher rates of pay. A strong believer in constantly raising the achievement bar higher, Rabbi Levy also felt that many of the Ma'as members were capable of mastering greater skills and working at tasks more responsible than just counting candies and putting them into bags. So he devised the idea of opening a laundromat that would employ Ma'as

members exclusively.”

Mr. Mizrachi was interrupted for a moment by Uriel, who tapped him on the shoulder and showed him a stain he had found on one of the tablecloths. Mizrachi nodded approvingly, commending Uriel for his attentiveness and telling him to put the tablecloth on a pile of laundry that would receive extra stain treatment. After giving Uriel a friendly pat on the back, he turned his

attention back to me and told me more about the training and employment process.

A Special Workplace for Special People

Approximately twenty men with special needs are currently employed at Revach Naki. Before starting to work, these men undergo a sixty-hour training course, divided over a four-



About twenty men with special needs work at Revach Naki. Before starting work, they undergo sixty hours of training, learning how to sort laundry, load and operate the machines, use a steam iron, take phone orders, and pick up and deliver laundry.

From washer to dryer to folding table, this special laundromat is humming with productive work, contented employees, and the satisfaction of a job well done.

week period. Each week they are taught a different aspect of the laundromat's operation. In the first phase, the men learn how to sort laundry, load the machines, and activate them with the proper settings. During the second week, they learn how to operate the steam iron cautiously and responsibly. The next stage focuses on administrative work, which includes taking phone orders and filing them in an organized fashion. In the final week of the course, the men receive training in how to pick up the soiled laundry from customers and deliver the clean items.

"Once the men actually begin working," Mizrachi related, "it's all done under my or the other counselors' careful supervision and direction.

"There are usually five men on a work shift, and one can cover for his friend if there's a *simchah* or special event that [the other] needs to attend," he continued. He added that in the afternoon, after they've finished working, many of the employees go upstairs to Seeach Sod's Ma'as wing to participate in Torah *shiurim* and recreational activities.

This one-of-a-kind laundromat has just completed its first successful year of operation. A special ceremony took place last winter in which *mezuzos* were affixed to the doors of the laundromat, with the participation of former MK Aryeh Deri. The laundromat is located on the ground floor of the beautiful new Ma'as building, a major construction project that was sponsored by the Dear Foundation of Switzerland and the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation of Baltimore, Maryland.

Mizrachi told me that the laundromat currently services only commercial and public establishments. "At present, we're busy enough providing laundering services to hotels, yeshivah dormitories, and shuls. We



You can almost hear the music playing in the background of the laundromat.

Seeach Sod: Enriching the Lives of People With Special Needs

NOT MANY DECADES AGO, children with Down syndrome and other disabilities were locked away in institutions or kept hidden from the public eye because of the shame and stigma associated with handicapped individuals. In recent years, with significant input from pioneers in the special-education field, society has developed an attitude of greater acceptance toward those who are physically and intellectually challenged.

One of the chief figures who can take credit for this monumental metamorphosis in Israel is Rabbi Dov Levy, z"l, the pioneering leader in special education who founded Seeach Sod, a special-education empire that caters to the religious community in Eretz Yisrael. Rabbi Levy, father of the current director, Rabbi Shimon Levy, founded the organization forty years ago when he could find no suitable religious educational framework for his son who had Down syndrome. Rabbi Levy made it his lifelong mission to effect a 180-degree change in society's attitude toward the special-needs community.

Today, Seeach Sod is the front-runner in religious special education in Eretz Yisrael. With Rabbi Levy's legacy of valuing those who are different from us as its guiding light, it boasts a large, thriving network of early-education day-care centers, preschools, elementary schools, yeshivos, and adult group homes, in addition to a wide gamut of programs for individuals with special needs.

Revach Naki, its innovative laundromat, is the newest cog in a huge apparatus that is devoted to enhancing the quality of life for those in the special-needs community.

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wash the linen of several local hotels and dormitories, we wash and press dozens of white tablecloths for a large Chassidic *beis medrash* here in Yerushalayim, and we also launder towels for local *mikva'os*.”

In Sync With Integration Goals

Knowing that Seeach Sod's principal goal is to help the special-needs community integrate with mainstream society, I asked Mr. Mizrachi if employment in a supermarket doesn't offer more community interaction than working in a specialized facility that's located on the premises of Seeach Sod's main building.

Mizrachi hastened to assure me that his workers get to interact with the community as well. “My employees go to pick up linen from hotels, and part of their training is learning how to approach hotel clerks and collect the laundry in a cordial and professional manner. True, a job stocking shelves in a supermarket may seem to offer more exposure to mainstream society, but our workers definitely get to mingle with the community — and they do so in a polite and pleasant manner.”

Mr. Mizrachi went on to list other ways these special-needs individuals benefit from a workplace where they are

the main employees. “They get specialized support throughout their vocational experience. An individual with special needs can tire easily or become distracted if something is making his work difficult. In a regular workplace, a boss will not take well to an employee who slacks off. But because I have received training in special education, I know how to help them overcome their difficulties and keep them motivated to continue working.

“If a worker shows signs of frustration, I try to find the cause of the disturbance. For example, sometimes one of the boys may stop working if it's too hot in the room, so I'll turn up the air conditioner. Or the counter may be too low, so I'll adjust the height. Maybe he simply needs a drink and a short break.

“Another benefit of working here is that we enrich our workers' knowledge of finances and teach them how to economize. For example, we compare the prices of regular fabric softener to the price of the concentrated version, and they realize that it's more economical to buy the concentrated version and dilute it. These are all principles and life skills that broaden their horizons and enhance their competence.”

The Employees Testify

One of the staff members, a charming Chassidic *bachur*, saunters over to us. It seems as though he could use a little break from his diligent laundry folding. Sporting dark, curly *peyos*, a sprouting beard, and a bashful smile, he told me his name was Yossi. Having observed me from his spot at the folding counter, Yossi understood that I was very interested in learning more about his workplace.

"I worked throughout the entire summer and didn't take any vacation," he ventured proudly.

"Wow," I replied, "you sure are a diligent worker. You must enjoy working here if you didn't take any vacation."

His wide smile was enough to answer my question.

Benny, a neatly dressed fellow with Down syndrome who comes from Miami, shared his enthusiasm in his native English. "I enjoy working here. I work here every day from nine to three, with a lunch break in the middle." He flashed a brilliant smile, and I was in awe of the contentment that permeated the soap-scented air.

I was most impressed by the workers' well-kept appearance, their clean, pressed shirts neatly tucked in. Once again I marveled at the major achievements we are witnessing today in the field of special education. I can't help but recall the unpleasant odor and unsightly stained clothing associated with the special-needs institution that was a familiar marker on my childhood landscape. What a far cry these special, hard-working young men are from those sad, lonely images of my memory. These fellows are holding down productive jobs, earning a well-deserved salary, and interacting positively with the community — a wonderful phenomenon.

I voiced my wonder, and Mr. Mizrachi responded, "This is Seeach Sod's ultimate goal: to help people with special needs integrate in the community and lead happy, productive lives."

Well, from what I saw at Revach

Naki, it certainly looked like Seeach Sod is achieving its goal.

Knowing that Seeach Sod has a community-based living program for adults with special needs, I asked Mr. Mizrachi if all the employees at Revach Naki were residents of such apartments.

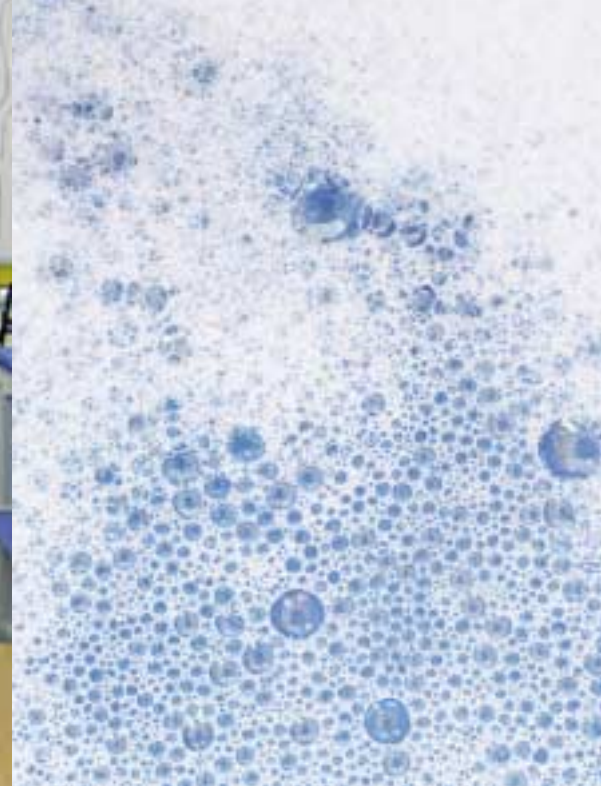
"Not necessarily," he replied. "Many of them are residents of our group apartments, but some live at home with their parents or have some other living arrangements. I must point out, though, that we do see a very big difference between members of our residential



The laundromat's net profit goes completely toward its workers' salaries, so that the employees can receive a decent paycheck at the end of the month and achieve a degree of financial independence.



A glimpse of Revach Naki's folding tables and the air of contentment that permeates the facility.



all of it is kept strictly contained within the laundromat budget so that the employees can receive a decent paycheck at the end of the month. In addition to their sense of accomplishment and boost in self-esteem, these young men attain a degree of financial independence, which certainly eases the monetary burden on their families.

"The customers' 'net profit' is high-quality laundering service at a relatively low price, including door-to-door delivery. And, as an added bonus, a customer who uses the services of Revach Naki helps enhance the quality of life of special-needs individuals."

As I prepared to leave, Mr. Mizrachi offered me a drink and showed me where the water cooler was. Eager to be of help, Yossi rushed ahead of me to hand me a plastic cup. Special people? Special indeed, I thought to myself as I filled my cup — special people with hearts of gold!

As I left the laundromat, I inhaled one last sniff of the soapy scent, enjoying the fresh fragrance and appreciating all that it signified: the quantum leaps that have been taken to help people with special needs lead productive and happy lives. ■

program and other workers. Those who live in group homes have much better skills and organizational ability because they are used to performing regular chores, such as making their beds, helping to prepare meals, and tidying up."

Revach Naki: Net Profit On All Accounts

When I first heard about this unique laundromat, I was charmed by the name "Revach Naki," which is a clever play on words. *Revach naki* "clear or net profit," but the word *naki* alone means "clean." I asked Mr. Mizrachi who had come up with this very cute name.

Mr. Mizrachi told me that much thought went into creating a unique name for this unique establishment. A name-giving competition was launched among the entire Seeach Sod staff. The

reward for the staff member who submitted the winning name was half a year's worth of free laundering and ironing services.

"The faculty members got their creative juices flowing, and dozens of suggestions were submitted," said Mizrachi. "When the name Revach Naki was suggested, it fit like a glove." And yes, the winning staff member got to enjoy free laundering and ironing for six months.

"The name Revach Naki wasn't chosen only because it's a cute catch phrase," Mizrachi explained, "but also because it conveys the truth about this enterprise. The laundromat's net profit goes completely toward its workers' salaries. None of the earnings are diverted to other Seeach Sod functions;