

Special Employees on the Job

HELPING THE DEVELOPMENTALLY DISABLED
FIND AND KEEP THE RIGHT JOB



DESPITE WHAT PEOPLE MAY THINK, INDIVIDUALS WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES HAVE A LOT TO OFFER IN A WORK SETTING. AND A REGULAR JOB GIVES THEM THE MEANS TO MAKE MONEY, AND CONTRIBUTE TO SOCIETY – AND A PRICELESS CHANCE AT FULFILLMENT

BARBARA BENSOUSSAN

Nobody quite knew what to do with Yaakov.

Already in his early 20s, he could easily fall through the cracks: developmentally delayed but high functioning, with emotional issues that impeded his integration into constructive activities.

"We couldn't pull him out of bed," says Suri England, director of Day Services at HASC. "He'd sleep till three in the afternoon, then wake up with tons of energy that he often used to bother other people. We'd tried putting him in day programs, but nothing worked out."

Yaakov had shown interest in computers, so HASC staff decided to enroll him in a six-week computer course offered by COJO (the Council of Jewish Organizations). To their surprise, he went religiously and even did all the homework.

"One day the teacher had to leave class early, and he put Yaakov in charge!" exclaims Suri.

"We wanted to keep the momentum," she continues. "So we invented a job for him at the agency, asking him to create a sort of computer inventory of our supplies. It worked so well that now he's been employed for eight months by a hospital at one of their offsite offices, doing filing and office work on the computer. He's usually on time, he dresses himself, and best of all, he's *happy*. He feels fulfilled — he feels that he's like everyone else."

Many of us derive satisfaction, self-esteem, and a sense of identity through the work we do, whether it's inside or outside the home (or both). People with developmental and/or emotional disabilities are no different; they also want to contribute to society and enjoy the social milieu a job often provides. "A job changes everything for them," Suri says. "It produces a ripple effect that makes other aspects of their lives better."

These days, just about every agency for individuals with disabilities runs programs to help

copying, shredding, or organizing, and they often have more patience than non-disabled people.”

But disabled clients can also get bored, warns Perele Mayer of Women’s League Community Residences. “We had an employer with an agency where a lot of shredding had to be done,” she says. “They used to hire high school graduates, but after a few months the girls couldn’t stand it anymore. Our clients are *chalishing* for office work, so we sent them there to shred, but after a while they’d get bored, too. Now we have a system where they shred for a few months, then we have them learn some light filing.”

Yael Schochat also finds that clients’ interests may change; they may need more stimulation after several months at a repetitive job. “But that’s a good sign,” she says. “It means he or she is growing and developing skills. It’s always trial and error until we find the right fit, and even then things can evolve.”

There’s surprising variety in the types of jobs available. Yael, who canvasses businesses for possibilities, deals with all types of employment situations from large retailers like Target, CVS, and T.J.Maxx (where clients are hired for stocking shelves, organizing, and maintenance) to restaurants (where they help in the kitchen or make deliveries), to offices (for filing, copying, scanning, and some computer work). Employers may qualify for tax credits when they hire the disabled, who don’t cost any more (and sometimes less) than traditional employees.

“Yachad put on its own job fair this past March,” Yael relates, “and we’re planning another one, probably for late August, to offer opportunities for the entire tristate area.”

Nissim Burnham, an employment counselor for Seeach Sod, says he learned from his supervisor to think out of the box when making placements.



VOICES: AN EMPLOYEE FROM OHEL

My name is Yaakov Yisroel, and I work at a pizza store in Boro Park. I do very good work. I clear the tables, I sweep the floor, I take out garbage. I make pizza boxes and fill the spice dispensers. I make coffee, too. I’ve been here a few months and I enjoy it very much.

Before this I worked in a clothing store and then a different pizza store. In those places, the state was paying me. Now I get paid by my employer [directly], so I make more money.

I come here from my residence in Flatbush all by myself. I take a bus and a train to come to work, and two buses to go home.

Yanky, the owner of the store, is friends with me. I know a lot of people from my job now. I also know people from shul and the residence I live in. But I like coming to work the best.



“He has ideas for jobs that sounded insane to me!” Nissim says. “For example, he suggested a kitchen job for a guy who can’t walk. But this young man would sit and help an old lady peel vegetables and stuff peppers, and got along well with everyone — even the Arab workers were very nice to him. Later he moved on to a job at a wedding hall where he removes water stains from glasses that come out of the dishwasher, and he’s doing a great job.” A client with a paralyzed arm amazingly manages to work in the laundry of a *mikveh*, folding towels one-handed.

The moral, Nissim says, is that you never know — the seemingly impossible is often possible. In fact, those are the cases that give him the greatest sense of satisfaction.

BEYOND THE JOB DESCRIPTION

Often the day-to-day execution of a particular job isn’t the most demanding issue. The fear of getting started can be so crippling that some never manage the transition.

Sara Levy’s son, who lives in a New York residence, is impaired with cognitive delays compounded by emotional disabilities. He’s capable of simple jobs, but he’s terrified of change and responsibility. “His paranoia kicks in, and he’s unable to function,” Sara says. “It’s a shame, because he could use the money — he’s a man now, in his late 30s.”

Sara’s son’s situation is not uncommon according to Matvey Khaimov, OHEL’s employment specialist. “A lot of our clients are afraid to work. They’re worried they might not succeed. We reassure them — we’ll tell them, ‘Let’s just try it out.’ We’ll even go with them and give encouragement as needed.”

“Many clients are socially isolated, afraid of new situations,” Nissim Burnham concurs. “We have to give lots of *chizuk* and pep talks to encourage them at the beginning.” At HASC, clients are offered incentives when they

clients find and hold gainful employment. Most follow similar procedures. First, clients receive preemployment training, not just in job skills but in areas like appropriate job behavior, transportation coaching, and money management. Once on the job, counselors and coaches initially shadow the clients, gradually withdrawing until only spot checks are necessary, and continuing to serve as the go-between between employers and their special employees.

Seeach Sod, the largest *frum* agency in Eretz Yisrael for the developmentally disabled, has an extensive job program in place. Their approximately 500 clients learn until age 21, after which some continue in a sort of kollel two hours a day; the rest enter on- or off-site job programs. For example, on Seeach Sod's premises, teams of clients put together products in supervised assembly lines, such as *pekelaeh* for bar mitzvahs and weddings, or *mikveh* bags containing sponges, shampoo, and soap. The agency even has some workers assembling delicate, complicated plastic pieces for baby cribs. Workers assigned jobs off site are initially accompanied by counselors who gradually withdraw and do weekly follow-ups.

In the *frum* community, many employers are willing to take a chance on employees who might need a little extra help. The newsletter from Kinor Dovid — the division of Harmony Services that oversees employment of the disabled — reads like a list of iconic Boro Park stores, with upbeat photos of smiling young men packing boxes in bakeries, bagging groceries, even cleaning ambulances in official company shirts and badges. Program director Yechiel Hirth notes that job sites are chosen to incorporate at least one of the life goals clients are being trained for: "Individuality, inclusion, independence, and productivity. The ideal job site is one that encompasses all four."

New York State's Office for Persons



VOICES:

A FRUM EMPLOYER

Baruch Hashem, all my OHEL workers are doing what's expected of them — even beyond what we expected! We took on one man five months ago, and later a couple of girls. Each comes with a coach who shadows him or her all the time.

They work for us three days a week filling orders, and they do a great job. We've come to rely on them. They don't have so much interaction with customers, but they do okay when they interact with other workers. Most are quite high functioning.

I would absolutely recommend this to other employers, if they have a soft spot and the ability to take someone on. I personally feel honored to be able to help out in this way.

— Shamsi Segeden,
manager of Gourmet Glatt,
a supermarket in Boro Park

"A job changes everything for them. It produces a ripple effect that makes other aspects of their lives better"

with Developmental Disabilities supports Jewish agencies via its Employment First program. When all goes well, employers gain workers who are loyal and enthusiastic. "They're the first ones to show up when there's a blizzard," says Suri Greenberg, the area coordinator for the Kadimah Clubhouse and employment program at OHEL Children's Home and Family Services.

MAKE ME A MATCH

Matching disabled employees with employers is like any *shidduch*: you have to carefully consider the suitability and readiness of both parties, arrange meetings, and once the *shidduch* is finalized, keep an eye on the relationship to make sure no major issues arise that could damage it. Even after the partners have settled into the relationship, you have to be ready to tweak when necessary.

Those who have little experience with people challenged by disabilities often assume they're cut from roughly the same mold. But while the disabled may share cognitive, physical, and sometimes emotional difficulties, their personalities and talents vary widely.

"We place individuals according to their levels, trying to maximize their potential," says Derek Saker, director of communications at OHEL. He explains that different strengths accompany specific diagnoses. "People with Asperger's or other autism can be hard to manage, but they integrate into a work situation better than a person with severe Down syndrome who can barely communicate," he says. "But Down's has a very large range. A high-functioning individual with Down's will be more personable on the job than an Asperger's client."

Yael Schochat, a job developer with the Orthodox Union's Yachad program, concurs: "Sometimes our clients with autism are great in positions that require focusing on one task for a long time. We place them in jobs like data entry,

Another of Nissim's clients had to be toned down because he makes no secret about his wish to get married — to the point of annoying others. He also gets frustrated easily and falls into an emotional funk when upset. A more high-functioning and spiritually oriented young man who ties tzitzis as a job has to be reminded to soften his *musar*-preaching and accept his less-than-perfect fellows who occasionally talk in shul. Another client who has "golden hands" always wants to leave his jobs after one month, despite his ability to perform — which is frustrating for the staff and employers.

In addition to social skills, disabled workers need to manage time and productivity, mentions Yael Schochat. "Clients have to learn to be on time and to handle responsibilities, what to do when they finish a task and aren't sure what to do next." Sometimes clients even need daily wake-up calls for their first few weeks on the job.

Ironically, the more high-functioning clients may have a harder time integrating into a work setting because they have a stronger desire to be like everyone else. "They tend to be more demanding," says Devora Thau of Human Care Services, a division of Women's League Community Residences. "But often the high-functioning clients have a dual diagnosis with an emotional disability as well. One can pull down the other."

Nissim relates that a client of his amazed his employers with his ability to perform in a yeshivah kitchen — after a day or so, he could slice vegetables better than the old-timers. The *bochurim* took a shine to him as well. But working six hours a day was overwhelming him; he didn't have the maturity to stick to a schedule for so many hours. "We pulled him back to twice a week, and that's working better," Nissim says. "And there's still the possibility we'll be able to increase his hours in the future."

But it's equally true that emotional



VOICES: A PARENT

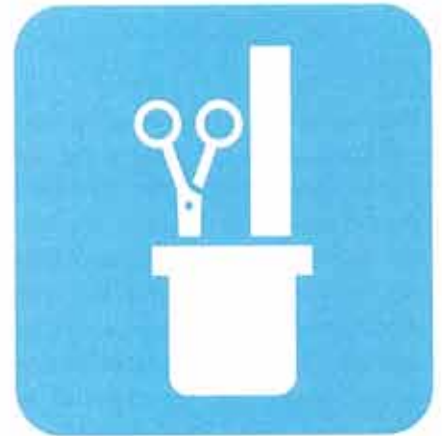
Our son David Gad aged out of the educational system at age 21 and qualified for a day-hab program. He's high functioning, and he was given a job as a checkout boy at Kosher Corner.

I was happy he was able to remain in a Jewish environment. After a year, he moved into a maintenance and delivery position at Amnon's Pizza in Boro Park. Now he's in his third year and doing so well, he received an Employee of the Year award from OHEL. Amnon's has a long history of hiring the developmentally disabled — one of their employees has been there something like 20 years — and Amnon Levy was honored in 2012 by the State of New York as the most Outstanding Small Business in hiring the disabled.

My son is a social butterfly, so a pizza store was a good fit for him. He has a lot of connections now. It wasn't always perfectly smooth — there were times he could be inappropriate, and he'd need to be reprimanded or even suspended for a few days. But that happens less and less as he learns appropriate behavior on the job.

I'm extremely happy with the way the job has helped our son mature and taught him responsibility. He feels part of regular society, and many of the customers know him. The job has really boosted his self-esteem, and he's able to enjoy having money of his own to deposit in his account or buy things he wants.

—Mrs. Gross



"They're the first ones to show up when there's a blizzard"



begin a job, to help overcome the inertia.

Once a client has jumped the initial hurdle, Suri England warns, "it's often not the job itself that's the issue. Instead, it's the 'soft skills' that need work." Clients require coaching in areas like proper dress, grooming, and hygiene (the latter especially important for those who work around food). They also need to hone their social skills. "Our clients need to learn how to deal with bosses and customers," says Suri, "like knowing not to

tell them all about their fight with their housemate last night."

Nissim shares the example of his client Shmuel, hired to deliver boxes for a local grocery store. "He knows that most people around here tip the delivery guy five or ten shekels," Nissim says. "He also knows it's supposed to be optional, but if someone didn't tip him, he'd let them know his displeasure. He had to be taught not to give people a hard time. The funny thing is that while some of our clients don't know

the difference between a 20-shekel bill and a 1,000-shekel bill, others are very savvy about money — a few don't stop asking their bosses for raises!"

Then there was the time Shmuel didn't want to work on Chol HaMoed, but his boss had decided the store would be open. "Shmuel went around informing the customers the store would be closed!" Nissim laughs. It was less of a laughing matter for the boss, however, and Nissim had to intercede to correct Shmuel's behavior.

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Decorators Welcome

issues can mask cognitive abilities. Laurie Corlin of Mishkon assumed a young woman in one of the programs was developmentally disabled; she was confined to a wheelchair and, although she went through the school system, she did poorly. But once she began working as a receptionist in an office, her self-esteem soared, and she began functioning at normal levels. "Now we see a happy, fulfilled person!" Laurie enthuses. "The depression and physical handicap had masked her true abilities. But now she even does computer work as well."

As Derek Saker points out, an employee's value encompasses more than his intellectual abilities. "Many of the disabled offer other kinds of value, such as loyalty," he says.

Area coordinator Suri Greenberg couldn't agree more. "They never call in sick," she says. "When they get sick, we have to tell them to stay home."

"*Chesed* will get them through the door of a workplace," Suri continues, "but it won't keep them there. Ideally, they should remain employed because they're doing a valuable job, and doing it right."

THE THRILL OF A PAYCHECK

The desire to be a productive member of society is universal, regardless of one's skill set, but it's that paycheck at the end of the month that really gratifies and offers a true sense of power and possibility. As part of their preemployment training, clients are taught about budgeting, saving, using ATM machines, and other financial responsibilities.

"When our clients come home with a paycheck, they feel great," Suri Greenberg says. "One told me, 'This is the best thing in my life! I'm just like my brother and sister!' Another girl was so happy she could buy a baby gift for her sister just like her siblings."

A man with Down syndrome, whom Nissim Burnham's worked with, was so excited when he received his first paycheck that he ran around showing it

to everybody he met. "He was literally shaking with excitement," Nissim recalls. "But there are also those who have no understanding of money and just hand their checks over to their parents."

One of his clients is a very productive worker in a bakery, and since his father lives in Russia and his brother lives in Spain, he saves his money to visit them both once a year. Other clients are happy to be able to buy their own cell phones or music CDs and DVDs. "It gives them a sense of independence and self-esteem," Nissim says. "One guy took himself very seriously; he complained to me about the long hours he was putting in, but then he gave a resigned sort of sigh and told me, 'Well, what do you want? I have to support myself.'"


More exciting perhaps than a paycheck is the sense of social integration a job brings for people who might otherwise fall into isolation. "Our employees get invited to coworkers' birthday parties; they often receive *simchah* and Shabbos invitations," Suri Englard says. "They frequently tell us, 'My best friends are at work.' One of our girls was into baseball, and since her boss coached a team, he made her his assistant coach."

Her colleague, clinical director Dr. Chaim Wakslak, recalls one client who worked in a large cell phone warehouse, a young man with Down syndrome who was a passionate fan of Lipa Schmeltzer. On his birthday, his *frum* employer arranged to have Lipa come sing for ten minutes at the warehouse, with over a hundred Mexican and Polish workers joining the party to sing along. The young man was thrilled and touched by the elaborate gesture.

"A job makes all the difference," Suri Englard says, adding simply: "It gives these individuals focus, purpose ... it gives them a life." ■

For a list of agencies providing employment services for the disabled, readers can contact Mishpacha.

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Do you want to see success in business? Take "Kollel Chatzos" as a business partner! - confided the new entrepreneur, relating his story:

"I recently opened a new business and despite my careful plans and high hopes, it seemed destined to be crowned "a successful failure"...he went on to describe how he had tried different advertising methods but the customers failed to show up. He sought advice from all sectors including business experts as well as blessings from Rabbanim, but it seemed as if, for him, the doors of prosperity were closed.

"Until one wise Rav shlit" pointed out a verse from the holy Zohar Hakodesh" - continued the man-"where he writes (מזוהר נ"ג) in the merit of waking at Chatzos at night, Hashem generously bestows wealth each and every day! As the pasuk says: "By rising at night, you attain income for your family".

Seeing the holy words, I came to a decision: I'm taking "Kollel Chatzos" as a business-partner! I also pledge my masur money from the business to "Kollel Chatzos". And what were the results?" he concluded "on the same day that I became a Chatzos partner, I saw my first two customers! And from there I went on to achieve other clients and success, Hashem should help it continue!"

Nachamu, Nachamu - Hashem's Comfort!

"Kollel Chatzos" - That is Hashem's only solace! Jews all over see it as a holy honor to sign up as Chatzos-partners - now in the days of Shabbos Nachamu - knowing that by doing so they are consoling Hashem and thereby seeing success in all they do! The holy Zohar Hakodesh (מ"ח ר"ל"א) writes clearly that "since the destruction of the Bais HaMikdash there is no happiness or comfort in Heaven, except for each night when Jews gather to learn in Bais Hamedrash! Only then is there incredible joy for Hashem!"

The Torah Centers of Kollel Chatzos:

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