

'My Child Deserves a Jewish Education!'

Fifty years ago, Rabbi Dov Levy z"l led the fight on behalf of Jewish children with disabilities. Today, his son Rabbi Shimon continues to advocate for their welfare, quality of life and inclusion

Sharon Gelbach

When Rabbi Dov Levy z"l was taken to observe the excellent care provided for children with special needs at the Saint Vincent Monastery in Ein Kerem, he was shocked to the core. In the mid-1970s, this was one of the best facilities in Jerusalem for children with disabilities. But Rabbi Dov was perplexed and dismayed that Jewish parents would give their children to be treated by nuns in an institution with crucifixes on the walls.

Noticing several boys with *peyos* that belied their bare heads, he became even more agitated. "Those are *frum* kids!"

"That's right," replied his host. "There are many children here from religious and chareidi homes."

"But who teaches them to daven? To say brachos? About Shabbos and Yom Tov?"

"You know that *frum* families are anxious to keep these children as far away as possible because of shidduchim. In any case, the children are kept clean and fed, and they don't know the difference."

"That's not true!" Rabbi Dov raised his voice uncharacteristically. "These children understand a lot more than anyone gives them credit for. They feel that they're rejected, that their families are ashamed of them. Do they at least receive kosher food?"

Rabbi Dov's host shrugged. None of the *frum* families had ever investigated that detail.

"My child will never come here," said Rabbi Dov.

What began as a search for an appropriate framework for Avraham, the Levys' firstborn, who was born with Down Syndrome, became a mission to provide a proper Jewish education for all religious children with special needs in his city.

Just Like a Regular Child

Where did this reserved chassidish *yungerman* find the energy and fortitude to fight City Hall — literally — to receive recognition and funding for a *frum* special education framework where none had existed before?

When Rabbi Dov Levy and his wife Miriam learned that their firstborn son had Down Syndrome, they were advised by the hospital's medical team not to take him home. "You're young, you'll have many more healthy children. What do you need this for?"

But unlike the majority of parents in those days, the Levys were determined to keep their baby. The most significant encouragement they received was from their Rebbe, the Beis Yisroel of Gur, ztz"l. At the bris, where he served as sandek, the Rebbe told Rabbi Dov to treat his son, Avraham, just like a regular child.

When Avraham grew old enough to go to cheder, his father consulted with the Rebbe, who was uncompromising about the need for a religious framework. When Rabbi Dov explained that none existed, the Rebbe told him in his customary terse manner, "Then search for one."

Armed with the Rebbe's instruction and brachah, Rabbi Dov went on to spark a revolution in the chareidi community. Starting with nothing, he created the foundations upon which the Seeach Sod special education network was born.

A Historical Process

The beginnings were — like its founder — quiet, under the radar, yet extremely thorough. That first year, the municipality threw him a "bone" in the form of a leaky, dilapidated apartment in one of the older Jerusalem neighborhoods. Without recognition or funding, Rabbi Dov began to outfit his kindergarten with some discarded, broken equipment and toys that he



Rabbi Dov Levy z"l

fixed with the help of his children.

Rabbi Dov used all his powers of persuasion to form his first class of seven children, and also, to recruit professional staff members. Both Mrs. Naomi Barres, an *olah chadashah* from Boston with an MA in special education, and Dr. Yaakov Koltov, a child psychologist from Amsterdam who had also studied under Prof. Reuven Feuerstein, were moved by Rabbi Dov's sincerity and passion. "I realized that Rabbi Levy couldn't pay much of a salary," said Dr. Koltov, "but I wasn't financially strapped at the time. I felt that I was part of a historical process, and I knew that I'd get paid eventually."

Mrs. Barres, who began on a voluntary basis, describes the first class: "We began with a small core staff that included two kindergarten teachers, graduates of the first Special Education track from the Seminar Hayashan; an occupational therapist, two speech therapists, and myself. We bought only the most basic equipment and materials. It wasn't ideal, but we had to start somewhere.

"You could tell that Rabbi Dov was under a lot of pressure from the financial burden," Mrs. Barres recalls. "He disappeared during all of Aseres Yemei Teshuvah, and I couldn't understand it until I happened to hear that he worked as a shochet, and that he was busy shechting the chickens for *kapparos*. He needed the *parnassah!*"

Looking Ahead

Since those humble beginnings, Seeach Sod progressed until it became a recognized institution. After that, the developments started coming in leaps and bounds. From separate girls and boys frameworks for older children, including seminaries and yeshivos, to campuses in different cities, different levels of vocational frameworks and supported housing in five cities across Israel, Seeach Sod today provides the special needs population, from birth onward, with cutting-edge therapies and education as well as community and employment solutions.

Rabbi Dov's untimely passing 15



Rabbi Shimon Levy

years ago, in Adar Rishon, left his family bereft. His charges felt his loss just as keenly. "It's hard for me to write about the *Menahel z"l* because my eyes keep filling up with tears," a Seeach Sod student wrote during the shivah. "I used to come to his office every morning and tell him what I needed and he would help me."

His son and successor Rabbi Shimon observed his father carefully during the 15 years that he worked at his side. "Abba always said that when these children grow up and go out into the community, then people will understand what we did."

Since assuming the helm of Seeach Sod, Rabbi Shimon has taken the organization forward to unprecedented new levels. Seeach Sod has become a leader, not just in education and treatment, but in bringing about a broad change in society.

So much has been accomplished, but there is still work to be done: "As we look toward the next 50 years, we aim to change how society views people with disabilities so that they recognize their right to be fully included, independent and respected."



Rabbi Shimon Levy (R) with his father Rabbi Dov at the chanukas habayis of the first employment center.