

By C. B. Weinfeld

# AGAINST all odds

interviews of “ordinary” people who have accomplished the “extra-ordinary”

## OHR HALIMUD- “THE LIGHT OF LEARNING” ....

### FOR EVERY JEWISH CHILD

This is the story of one devoted mother who just wouldn't give up.

This is the story for every Jewish child who struggles to learn to read.

Mrs. Leah David, founder and principal of Ohr HaLimud, a Brooklyn-based Bais Yaakov school for dyslexic girls, graciously shared the story of her life, and the founding of Ohr HaLimud, which she dubs her “baby.”

“My life was filled with ups and downs as a child. I grew up in the 1950's in a secular home. I was as a child with a weight problem, which left its mark. I liked school and was a good student, except for math. I went to college and studied to be a teacher. I went on and got my Masters Degree. I wanted to get my PHD in child psychology, but you needed to take three math courses including statistics. I threw the program catalogue in the garbage! I did earn my teaching license and worked in the field for a while, but an opportunity came up which led me to become a confident, successful marketing director and the owner of a successful advertising agency. I was led to Hashem 25 years ago under a tree in Central Park, I think I will save that for another time. When I found my “pintale yid” I never looked back. But, nothing prepared me for the challenges I'd face later on in life. Who would have figured!

“Boruch Hashem, soon after I became frum Hashem gave me a wonderful gift, my husband. I was an excited not so young newlywed; eager to embark upon the next stage of my life, hoping that we'd be blessed with a large family, something I'd always yearned for. But reality doesn't always mesh with our dreams. After our marriage, we waited seven long years for our Gittel Bracha. Every month was like an eternity.

“During this lengthy period of ‘waiting,’ my husband and I traveled to

*Gedolim* for *brachos*, tried more *segulos* than I can remember, but most of all, we davened with all our heart and soul. I even went to see a well respected *mekubal* in Naharia, who advised me to do *chesed* with *mesiras nefesh*, to cook and bake for a *tzaddik*, and to bring an orphan into our home.”

Mrs. David shared how she cooked and baked for Rav Chaim Pinchus Scheinberg, shlita, during one of his visits to New York. She also told me how she answered an ad in a well respected Jewish Publication where they were advertising for a loving family to care for a 12 year old “orphaned” girl.

“There were about 200 applicants ready to adopt this child, Mrs. David recalled. “I was told that I was the only woman who asked “What about the child? What does she want?” Naturally, the pre-teen was sent to the David home, where she was treated like an honored guest.

The young girl stayed in the David home for a couple of months, an experience that Leah describes as life altering. Though it was far from easy, Leah feels it was the catalyst that brought about her personal *yeshuah*. By the time the girl went to live with relatives, as her family situation had stabilized, there was good news on the horizon.

Leah was looking forward to becoming a mother, at the age of 43! “There is no question in my mind that the *chesed* we did for this girl was the final *zechus* we needed,” she recalls.

Little Gittel Bracha, the Davids' only child, named after Leah's mother, was born several months later. “From the start, she was an easygoing, good-natured child,” Leah recalls. “It was a pleasure to care for her.”

Leah, who had given up her thriving business shortly before her baby was

born, found the transition to motherhood delightful. “It was everything I'd always dreamed of, and more.”

Being a full-time Mother involved lots of trips to the park, long, leisurely strolls, hours spent on the floor playing with Lego. “From Loehman's to Landau's, we did it all together, it was a great Mommy and Me school.”

When Gittel Bracha was old enough to start school, at the age of four, Leah thought her days of intense, one-on-one mothering were over. Little did she know that they were only to begin...

“The first year or two of preschool were a breeze. Gittel Bracha blossomed in her new environment, and became the unofficial ‘class leader.’ I was sure her school years would be smooth sailing. After all, she was smart, pretty, confident, and had lots of talents. What could go wrong?”

“So there was no indication of any struggles, on any level?” I ask.

“Come to think of it, in Pre 1A, the teacher did tell me she had an issue with ‘blending’ letters, but I brushed it off, certain the teacher was mistaken. After all, my daughter was very intelligent, and so well adjusted. I spent time with her, studying the letters at home. After all there were no other children who needed my attention, Gittel Bracha got it all.

Leah figured that her pre-schooler simply needed more time to adjust to her new environment, and would ‘figure it out’ on her own. But when she entered first grade, the real ‘fun’ began.

“How can I describe it to you? It was a nightmare. Every day there was another issue. Gittel Bracha couldn't do the homework sheets. She didn't get the sounds of the vowels or the consonants. I tried to use my teaching skills to help her but she didn't want that. Every

day was a different letter or a different vowel. She just wasn't reading! It was a disaster. Finally after I met with the school they agreed with me that there was a problem and they recommended the resource room. I thought that would be the answer, but there was no change. I was told that she just needs more time. Chanukah came and went and the other girls in her class were reading fluently, and my Gittel Bracha, my smart and well-adjusted daughter, couldn't put two letters together. She couldn't read the word CAT.

“So what did you do?”

“By this time, my daughter was spending most of her day in the resource room, feeling different and alone—but she still wasn't reading. She began to hate school, and make up excuses so that I should let her stay home. ‘Ma, my stomach hurts,’ she would whine, but her stomach-ache always went away as soon as the school bus left without her. It was at the end of 1<sup>st</sup> grade and the resource room teachers suggested that she needed an outside tutor. We ran all summer to a tutor twice a week and still no results.”

“By the beginning of second grade, the situation was a disaster. This beautiful blossom had turned into a wilted flower, passive, afraid of her shadow, and struggling to make friends. I knew she shouldn't go back to school, because the environment would destroy her. Still, I didn't know where to turn or what to do.

At the time, Rav Scheinberg, was in the States, and Leah went to the Rosh Yeshiva for a Bracha.

“What should I do with my daughter?” she cried.

The Rosh Yeshiva's *p'sak* was clear. “Pull her out of school.”

“The Rosh Yeshiva explained that no child belongs in an environment where they cannot grow, and will simply become frustrated. It was obvious that we

needed another option—and we needed it fast. But I simply didn't know what to do. I had no idea what was wrong with my daughter. She wasn't stupid, she wasn't slow, she had no learning disabilities or ADHD—I had her tested extensively, yet no one could come up with a diagnosis.

“At about the same time, one of my friends, with an advanced degree in education, suggested that maybe Gittel Bracha had a “processing disorder”. It was a classic ‘Aha!’ moment.”

Finally, after almost two years of frustration and ‘hitting a blank wall,’ Gittel Bracha was diagnosed with dyslexia.

“What, exactly, is dyslexia?”

“People think that it means that a child reads backwards. **This is not true!** Dyslexia is simply the brain processing letters and sounds differently. This child just needs to be taught in a specific multi-sensory way.”

Leah was so grateful that she finally had a diagnosis, and could begin the process of helping her daughter succeed.

“Once I started doing research on dyslexia and other language processing disorders, I began to realize how common this was. There was a whole community out there, of brilliant, talented children who couldn't read, not because there was something wrong

I did research on the best methods to help my daughter, and eventually discovered the Orton-Gillingham Approach. At that time, I found The Academy of Orton-Gillingham Practitioners and Educators located in Amenia NY. They seemed like a reliable legitimate organization so I called them and got a list of tutors in my area who were certified in the O-G Approach. An hour later I had an appointment for the following week. We went to the Learning Center and met the Director. She screened Gittel Bracha. She told me how my smart, creative daughter needed to learn. The following week she began to teach Gittel Bracha to read.

It was like a miracle. For the first time in her young life, Gittel Bracha was actually learning how to read! “As soon as she was taught the right way, she caught on, like a fish in water. I only felt sorry that I hadn't gotten her the help she needed sooner.”

Dyslexia, while fairly common, is easily misunderstood. “It's the only medical condition where proper education is the *only* cure,” Leah stresses. “It's a neurological condition, where the neurons in the brain don't fire back and forth correctly or quick enough. I'll give you an example. Let's say the teacher says A is for Apple. For most children, the image of an A and an Apple is sent from their

eye to their brain. But for a child with dyslexia, they're still trying to place the A, and when the teacher gets to Apple, the A just disappears somewhere, and they can't remember where they'd seen it before.

“The Orton-Gillingham tutor was doing an excellent job, but it still wasn't enough. Leah wanted Gittel Bracha to have a real school experience where the teachers knew how to teach her. “With my experience in marketing and education plus my understanding of how to initiate and bring new products successfully to market, the choice was clear as day, I would open a school.”

With dyslexia being so common she thought there had to be many intelligent Jewish children who would need a nurturing school where they could grow. Why should children be in the wrong environment for forty hours a week when the right school using the correct approach would give them just what they needed?

Once the idea went into her head, Leah wouldn't let go. She began contacting professionals, arranging the logistics, trying to get things off the ground. “Many people were skeptical, to put it mildly,” she recalls.

There was one especially biting comment, which she will never forget. “I told someone I'm opening a school, and they said, ‘*yeah, you and everyone else.*’ “

Leah doesn't know about ‘everyone else,’ but today she is the principal and director of Ohr HaLimud “The Light of Learning”, a specialized Orton-Gillingham school based in Brooklyn, which caters to children with dyslexia and other language processing disorders.

“It was a long and arduous process, but we've seen so many miracles, every step of the way,” Leah relates.

The school opened in September '03,

with only three children, (Gittel Bracha included,) plus a completely trained teaching staff. “Despite the small size of our class, we ran it like a “BIG” school, giving these children everything they needed. By the end of the year, all three students were reading and learning, they were on their way!

“Within six years, Ohr HaLimud has mainstreamed 19 students back into their community schools! Our goal is not to keep our students in Ohr HaLimud forever. It's a transitional school; as soon as their language processing disorders are ‘fixed,’ they go right back into their community schools, this time with the tools necessary to succeed.”

Today, Ohr HaLimud, located in the same building as Machon Bais Yaakov High School, is a highly acclaimed school with three classes and 21 students currently enrolled.

“We have students from Flatbush, Boro Park, Kensington, Staten Island, Queens, Manhattan and Williamsburg. There are children in Monsey and Lakewood who would love to join, but the logistics are too complicated right now. Though our school is only for girls, we have boys attending our after-school tutoring center, also with excellent results.”

Ohr HaLimud's After School Tutoring Center offers boys and girls provides Orton-Gillingham 1 to 1 Tutoring. Leah David is also very proud of their Gruss Lipper Family Foundation Teacher Training Program, which offers professional training in the Orton-Gillingham Approach. Over 50 of their trained teachers are now in the community helping children to read.

Though the school, fully accredited by the Board of Regents, has received high recognition and prestigious mention throughout the years, there are still plenty of ‘bumps’ on the way.

Leah explains, “One of our biggest issues, of course, is the financial aspect. The costs of educating a child using our specialized multi-sensory approach are huge. I challenge anyone reading this article that has few dollars to spare to come to my office. Sit with me for a while and tell me how to reject precious innocent *neshomos* who without Ohr HaLimud's help won't ever read. Sorry....”

“Sometimes parents think that a child who is struggling to read will ‘outgrow’ their difficulties. Nothing could be further from the truth. Please don't say it'll get better on its own, because it won't. The only way to help your child is to find a method that talks to his or her brain, a specialized method that has been proven to achieve spectacular results.”

Leah explains that Ohr HaLimud isn't just another ‘specialized’ school. “We're literally changing the face of education for our children, giving them their lives back.”

Take Gittel Bracha, for example. Today, the popular, gifted eighth grader is at the top of her class in Bais Yaakov, breezing through her studies and surrounded by friends, happy and carefree. It's a far cry from the frightened, struggling young student who hated school back in the second grade.

“I look at Gittel Bracha, who now reads everything she can get her hands on, and thank Hashem every day for giving me the *Siyata Dishmaya* to open Ohr HaLimud.”

Leah says. “Gittel Bracha wants to be a teacher at Ohr HaLimud, to help other children just like she was helped. So we've truly come full circle.”

“People sometimes ask me, ‘Why do you do this?’ And you know what I answer? ‘I do it to finally look into the face of a child who says, ‘*Wow, I can read!*’”

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“WE BELIEVE THAT  
EVERY CHILD  
HAS THE RIGHT  
AND THE ABILITY  
TO LEARN TO READ.”