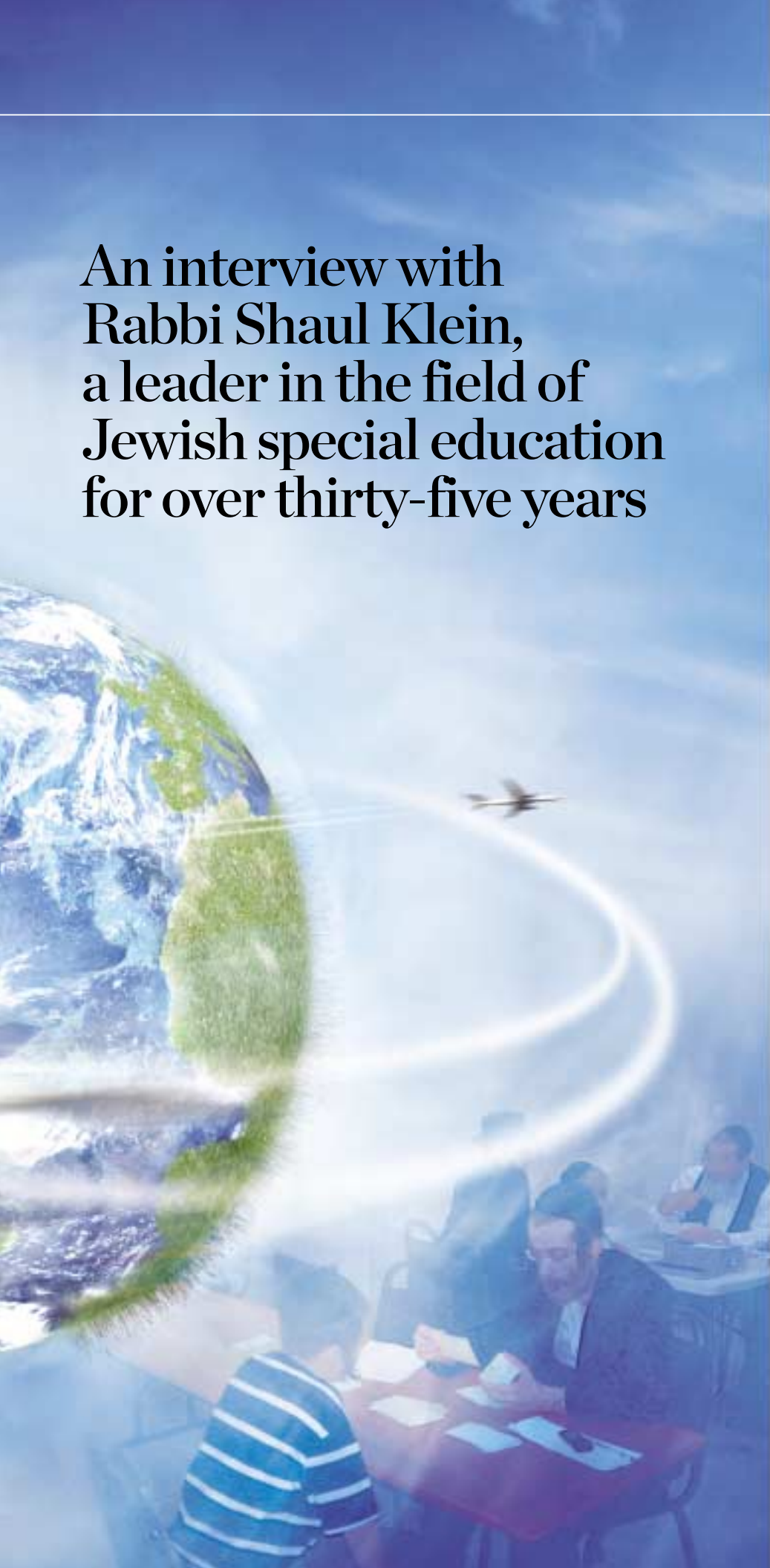


From Antwerp to Zimbabwe



RESOURCE ROOM



An interview with Rabbi Shaul Klein, a leader in the field of Jewish special education for over thirty-five years

BY YITZCHOK S. DREZDNER

Late on a wintry Wednesday night, following a full day's work, Rabbi Shaul Klein made time to meet with us and share his knowledge of and experience in special education and his vision for the future in this highly specialized field.

Long renowned for his work in Chush, a pioneering cheder for special ed in the frum community, as well as for the countless limudei kodesh resource rooms he has set up in yeshivos, day schools, and Bais Yaakovs across the globe, Reb Shaul has sparked a revolution in special ed from Antwerp to Zimbabwe, where he stopped off on his way to visit a cheder in Johannesburg.

How did you start working with children with learning disabilities?

We know that everyone is born with an aptitude for something. Some people's innate talents show even when they are very young, and then life has a way of building on that. I had this type of personality, the ability to relate empathically to children, even when I was very young.

Also, I lost my mother, *a"n*, in a tragic accident that I witnessed when I was not quite eight years old. I have struggled all my life to deal with that pain. This is not recommended as required background, but it did give me a special empathy and

unique insight into life and child development that one can't learn in any university.

When I was fourteen years old and learning in a *chassidische* yeshivah, I had my first "remedial teaching" job. In those days, in the first generation after World War II, most people were not yet established and money was scarce. The fee for the eight-week stay in the learning camp that was mandatory in my yeshivah, after "discounts" were applied, was \$200, which was a lot of money then.

I had the *zechus* that the parents of two *bachurim* in that *chassidische* camp asked me to tutor their sons — both of them my age — and throughout that summer I

tutored those two *bachurim* in *maseches Shabbos*. I still see them from time to time; they're both *zeides* already. My camp fees were paid this way, and that was a wonderful thing for my parents. So I guess you can say that I became a *chinuch meyuchad* "professional" at the age of fourteen!

Close to thirty-five years ago, when Chush — the pioneer *cheder* that was exclusively dedicated to providing special ed for the *frum* community — opened, I was there. I was a *rebbe* there on the front lines for ten consecutive years. Special education as we know it today was very, very primitive then.

We did not have a *mesorah* from the



Rabbi Klein trains new *mechanchim*.

alter heim guiding us on how to deal with children who are categorized today as learning disabled (LD) or who have ADHD; there was no special education in the *shtetl*. In the *shtetl* then, most children who started *alef-beis* at age three went to work by the time they were fifteen. They were apprenticed to a tailor or a shoemaker in the village. The terrible *pamassah* situation at that time was such that people quite often did not have enough food on the table; actual hunger existed then, something that, *baruch Hashem*, we can't fathom today.

In that environment, children who were dyslexic or suffered from ADHD or the like — who today constitute some 10 to 15 percent of the school population — were not stigmatized. They joined their non-LD friends who were also going out to work. Only a small percentage went on to *yeshivos gedolos* when they were fifteen or sixteen. That was the economic situation in much of Europe before WWII.

So the *frum* communities did not have to address the problem of children with special needs. If a boy didn't know how to learn a *passuk* of *Chumash*, it was no big deal, as long as he knew how to *daven* and remained an *ehrlliche* Yid. Such boys went to work, and at night they went to shul and the Rav taught them a little *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch*, *Ein Yaakov*, and so on. They got married, continued in their trade, raised families, and that's how people lived generation after generation until the Holocaust.

Today a child cannot go to work at age fifteen; it is even illegal in certain places. Today if a child can't learn, if he can't find satisfaction from studying a *sefer*, it's just a matter of time before he either implodes and develops psychological issues, or explodes and goes off the *derech*. That's why today special education is also a form of *hatzalah*, because these untreated children get totally lost — to *Yiddishkeit* and even to normalcy. If they can't succeed in school, they get into trouble with the law and, *chas v'shalom*, abuse alcohol and drugs. This sociological situation is radically different from what it was before the war.



Rabbi Klein giving a CVS workshop in Antwerp, Belgium, January 2012.

How did you acquire the knowledge and professional tools you needed to offer services that rival — and perhaps exceed — those of highly credentialed professionals?

To earn a living while pursuing my calling in special ed, I worked for the U.S. Postal Service for sixteen years, at first mostly nights loading trucks and doing other physical labor, to pay the mortgage. The last few of those years I was a training executive in their system. They sent me to various training schools, from New Haven, Connecticut, to Oklahoma, and I lost fifty pounds from stress before I cut the cord. When I gave it all up to pursue a full life in Jewish *chinuch meyuchad*, I gave up a pension and other benefits, but *baruch Hashem*, I felt repaid many times over.

I don't have an official title; I'm just a *rebbe* who works with children who have learning disabilities. I've been doing that for thirty-five years, so I haven't had a chance to seek degrees. When I retire, I'll find out what title I had.

As an interesting aside, I studied under the sainted Satmar Rebbe, Harav Yoel Teitelbaum, *zy"ta*, the Divrei Yoel. When I became a *chassan*, my family urged me to

become a CPA since at that time it was thought to be a surefire ticket to a very good living. When I went to ask the Rebbe's advice, he would not give me a *heter* to go to college.

Later, as a young married man, when I was struggling to make a living in the garment trade, in the jewelry line, and in other ways, I went back to the Rebbe and asked again about going to college, but he would not allow me to study to be a CPA. Obviously, he saw something in my future that no one else foresaw.

When you started to work at the Chush cheder as a rebbi, what was the attitude in the Jewish world toward special education?

There was obviously a need, but people were lost, feeling around like a blind man at midday, as the saying goes. Some of the initial reaction from many well-meaning people, including Rabbanim, was negative. These *omdim al hamishmar*, the Rabbanim whose responsibility it is to watch over "the vineyard of Israel," looked at what was happening and saw that we were teaching children differently from the way it had always been done. We were experimenting with using tape recorders

and various other new methods to teach Torah to these children. So initially the Rabbis saw our ways as being prohibited. “*Chadash assur min haTorah*” — our newfangled ways with *tinokos shel beis rabban* must surely be automatically forbidden. Certain *kol koreis*, public announcements, came out decrying this radical new approach to *chinuch*, this “special education.”

At the time, I discussed this dilemma with my father-in-law, the Debreciner Rav, *zt”l*, who was very sensitive to the issue. He understood immediately that if we didn’t help these severely learning-disabled children, it would destroy them and their families. He spoke to the other Rabbanim and explained to them the purpose of our program.

As a result, many of the Rabbanim who had vehemently opposed the founding of Chush, once they came to visit and saw what we were doing, wholeheartedly supported our work. Their opposition was based on the fact that special education uses different materials that are not used with children who don’t have special needs. Understandably, using these systems and methodologies in regular *chinuch* was considered to be compromising the *mesorah* and would fall into the category that the Chasam Sofer termed “*chadash assur min haTorah*.” But these were *ehrlische* Yidden, nonpolitical and *modeh al ha’emes* [committed to the truth]. A year later some of them were even guest speakers at fundraising dinners for Chush.

I remember the first year I was in Chush. I was a *rebbe* then, not in public relations as I was in later years, but a soldier in the line of fire. So I actually experienced the changes that took place over the years.

For instance, today we have discrete categories and institutions for each of the various learning disabilities. There are children who, unfortunately, are developmentally delayed or have Down syndrome or are autistic. Thirty-two or thirty-three years ago I had students in my class who today would be categorized as autistic and sent to schools specializing in autism. Then, however, when Yidden



Sample of flash cards used in the CVS program. The program addresses several skill including *kriah*, and integrating right- and left-hemisphere brain functions.

heard that there was a new approach called special ed, everybody came knocking on our doors — whether it was for a child with a relatively mild learning disability or one with a very severe emotional or mental issue; they were just desperate for any kind of help. “*Ulai yesh shever b’Mitzrayim*.”

Later on, as the profession matured, various *mosdos* were established to serve specific fields within special ed. Today we have a selection of *mosdos*, each specializing in different areas and fulfilling different needs. We don’t place an autistic child with a child who does not understand a *passuk* of *Chumash* and Rashi but is basically normal in all other respects.

Are there methods that work well but are not accepted?

When I developed my new systems or learned other systems, I had one criterion only: Does it work? I never sold any product, idea, or *shitah*; I just wanted to see what worked in most situations. Nothing works all the time in all situations in special ed; nothing is 100 percent.

Besides, one needs to define the word

“works.” I tried to be as honest as possible, and one of the conditions for honesty, I saw, was the absence of monetary considerations. If I am pitching a certain therapy or technique, and at the same time I’m diagnosing a child — well, that doesn’t work, because automatically I am probably looking to make money from this, which is unfortunately a situation that exists today.

As a *rebbe* I tried many of the things that were being peddled on the special-ed street and found that in the classroom they often did not work. *B’ezras Hashem*, I developed certain programs that are now being used in resource rooms and in more than forty special-education programs around the world under the heading of CVS, my Chumash Vocabulary System [see a sample flashcard from this program on this page], but I always used the same criterion: Does it work?

Many techniques had to be revised countless times to reach their optimal value. They were developed by trial and error, with blood, sweat, and tears, on the front lines, not in an ivory tower. I tried so many methods that did not work!



(Near right) Passports from some of the many places Rabbi Klein has traveled.
 (Right) Rabbi Klein with the staff of the Victoria Falls Hotel in Zimbabwe.



What eventually evolved was a distillation of many different methods that did work in most situations.

Another important criterion: When you develop any system or therapy, whether in business, medicine, and even special ed, you have to be sure that it can be replicated. If something works for you in your classroom or resource room but

when you train someone properly and it fails to work in their environment, then it is not a good system. My methods were replicated in

Jewish schools all over the world, from regular day schools to *chassidische* schools, Bais Yaakovs, and various *chadarim*.

Many special-ed techniques are as counterintuitive and insubstantial as the flight of a bumblebee.

Logic says they make sense but in practice they don't work, or vice versa. I've seen this many times — and I've worked with over nine thousand boys and young men with a wide variety of learning disabilities over my thirty-

five-year career.

For instance, let's say you have eleven- or twelve-year-old boys with LD whose parents spend a fortune over a few years to get them to learn *Gemara*. They've had special *Gemara* tutors and even a special color-coded computerized *Gemara* to work with. And yet when I sit down with one of these children, I often see that his foundation in *Chumash* and what must precede it, *kriah* and basic language skills, are woefully deficient. This child is on a second-grade level and he's being tutored in an eighth-grade curriculum!

This would be unacceptable in the outside world. A twelve-year-old public-school kid deficient in math would not be

allowed to sit in a seventh-grade classroom and be taught algebra. They would go back and teach him basic arithmetic, not algebra. Only when he mastered the basics would they move him ahead progressively until he reached his grade level, and then mainstream him back into his classroom to learn algebra.

Unfortunately, in many of our *chinuch mosdos*, even the specialized ones, because of political pressure from the *hanhalah* or pressure from parents who want a shortcut to *nachas*, basic problems are glossed over. It's like building a tenth floor on a building with a crumbling foundation. You may shore it up for a

time, get it to work for half a year or so, but eventually the whole edifice comes tumbling down.

Therefore, in the resource rooms in the more than forty *mosdos* I'm involved with, I always try to make sure that the foundation is firm and will last even when I'm out of the picture, even when the child grows up. "*Lechu banim, shimu li* — go, children, listen to me," as the Yismach Moshe says, meaning that when the child leaves his instructor, he should have the foundation for future learning — not, as they say in Yiddish, like "last year's snow," which melts when spring comes.

(Top left) A Johannesburg *cheder*.

(Top right) On a porch in Zimbabwe.

(Bottom) In Kruger National Park, South Africa.



What are the greatest changes you've seen in your years in education?

What I have seen is growing acceptance in many different segments of our *frum* society. I see parents and *mechanchim* accepting the reality of learning disabilities. I see acceptance on the part of Rabbanim and philanthropists. The fact that there is such a thing as a clever child who has certain learning deficits, and that today we have ways of helping him or her, is becoming accepted. But too often we wait too long; we must start to help as early as possible.

Another positive change is that there is less stigmatization. If a resource room is set up correctly in a *mosad*, it avoids stigmatizing the children who need help. There are ways to set up resource rooms in a regular yeshivah that reduce stigma; I won't go into the details here because *Hamodia* is not a specialized journal. But there are ways of integrating LD children. The key is that where there is a resource room, it should be integrated seamlessly as a normal part of the yeshivah. Just like there is a lunchroom, just like there is a lab or a room for arts and crafts, there is also a remedial room.

Today it's increasingly accepted that many children have private *rebbis*, for whatever reason. Even gifted children, even children whose only special need is for enrichment, may receive special help. All this reduces the stigma that existed in the past.

This wonderful progress is most evident in the *chassidische* world. When I was a *rebbe* in Chush thirty years ago, I found that in the yeshivish world at the time, people accepted the fact that a normal child could have a severe learning disability — could not read or could not focus. Unfortunately, in the *chassidische* community then, there seemed to be no gray area. Either you were normal or you were labeled not normal; either you could learn or you were stupid. Today, it is understood in every *chassidische* community that even a normal child may need help, and people are more willing to provide that help.



Rabbi Klein models a program for new trainees, who observe him teaching actual students.

And with the well-known affinity for *chessed* in *chassidische* circles, today this is happening, finances permitting.

What's the process of establishing a resource room in a *mosad*?

I've set up resource rooms in *mosdos* from Antwerp to Johannesburg (with a stop in Zimbabwe) to Canada, and in many cities throughout the United States. I've trained over four hundred people from all over the world and from all shades of the Jewish spectrum in how to set up a successful resource room.

First you need community support, and good communication is the key. When I come to a place, I speak to the parents both as a group and individually. I speak to the school's board of directors so they know exactly what is planned, what to expect, how much it will cost, and what type of services I will provide. I also speak with the children and the classroom teachers; I talk to them and explain to them how it works. Then, slowly but surely, things start to happen.

One of the key words is "slowly." You cannot come blazing into an established educational environment and make instant changes. Slowly you explain, you build, and eventually you make a difference.

One of the things I do when I set up a resource room — of course, with the

permission of the principals and the board of directors — is meet with the *rebbeim* and *moros* and ask them to give me the names of the three weakest students in their class. I then evaluate these children, as one would in triage. If a child's issues cannot be addressed by a limited new program, we advise the *hanhalah* that they would benefit more from a different, full-day program. If a child simply needs a homework helper, we don't slot that kid either. We have to look at the whole picture, *mi vami haholchim*.

Based on what the evaluations tell me, as well as on the available human resources and funds, I *slowly* set up and train those involved. As the years go by, they become more productive, because initially they can only work one on one, but eventually each trainee might be able to head a resource room with three, four, or five children, with each child doing differentiated instruction. I don't have half the kids sitting there vegetating; I design the programs and train the people to deliver individual instruction, even when it's in a group setting.

Do you think that the world of internet and technology has made education more difficult?

There's no question that technology has changed the field of education across

the board. Today, all large universities offer online courses. In our *heimishe* society, the internet is dangerous, especially in education. It's not accepted in about 90 percent of our *kehillos*. In business we have no choice, but in education it can cause destruction.

In limited circumstances in various resource rooms, there are a few computerized programs that could be helpful. But the reality is that *limudei kodesh* in special education today — for the type we're talking about, normal children with some learning difficulties who visit resource rooms to get help with learning a *blatt Gemara* with Rashi the way a fifth grade learns — you really need trained personnel with an up-to-date program and techniques.

I want to make another point here. If you want to build a house, you don't just hire a builder off the street and say, "Here's my property — just put something on it." The builder must have a plan. Unfortunately, I have seen so many children, even *bachurim*, whose parents tell me, "I've spent \$50,000 on this child's special education," but they have no record of the work that was done with their child. They have all the bureaucratic papers and forms from the Board of Education but no linear record of their child's development, of how he read a *passuk* of *Chumash* in the third grade so it can be compared to what he is doing now.

When I call the tutors these children had in previous years, they tell me, "What, do you think I'm a doctor? I should keep records? I have to pay my rent, and the guy gave me a couple of dollars to learn with the kid, that's all."

When I work in a resource room, or when the people I've trained work in one, we start by giving a child what I can best describe as a *chinuch* X-ray. He gets a foundational evaluation to see what his level is in all the areas that are necessary for learning. Does he know a *shva na* from a *shva nach*? It's done in very clear terms that even a layman can understand. We explain to the parents, "This is how your nine-year-old reads. This is how he *teitches* the *Chumash* word



A CVS resource room in Montreal.

rechush ["possessions"]. This is how he thinks."

We don't deal in fancy psychobabble. I find that this type of programming and planning is very effective in Jewish special education. We give all interested parties the specifics, sometimes using the builder's analogy: "This is the 'property' we have today, and this is the 'architectural plan' and the 'design.' It may take three or four years, but this is the way we fit it all together for a building that will, *b'ezras Hashem*, last until 120."

Everything is recorded and filed, so we can always go back and check if we're following the plan and if it's working. Sometimes even the best-laid plans have roadblocks. We don't wait five years to notice and react; we wait a little while and then redo the plans, or design alternative plans. This is very important; this is what we do in effective resource rooms.

As a person who has trained educators for many years, do you think that every person can become a *mechanech*, or would you say one has to have a gift for it?

Even a general *mechanech*, whatever that means, has to have certain talents, an aptitude for it, as in any profession. But in special education it's even more

necessary. There are a lot of people who make great *Roshei Yeshivah*, fantastic *maggidei shiur*, amazing classroom teachers — but terrible special educators. They don't have the patience for it; they don't have the love deep inside for a child who is very slow. They may even resent these "dummies" without being aware of it.

When I'm involved in the staff selection process, I try to sense this. Of course, background helps. If you have experience in working with weaker students, or if someone in your family had an issue and you grew up with it and are sensitive to it, that also helps. When I interview, I sense whether that person truly has the prerequisites for being a good *chinuch meyuchad mechanech* — and more important in Jewish special ed, if that person has the *mesirus nefesh* required for special ed — which, by the way, according to studies, has a burnout rate four times higher than regular *chinuch*.

The patience required and the frustration that builds year after year are unimaginable to someone who enjoys giving high-level *shiurim*. This "business" requires many years in the trenches, suffering, pushing, trying to reach a child and pull him out of the situation he's in.

Even today, when I design a program

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and manage it, if I can, I roll up my sleeves and work with the children — on the white board or on paper or whatever it is we are working with. This is more of a joy to me than bureaucratic management.

But it's important to know this: A person who does not have the various prerequisites, including patience, love of children, and the long-term outlook — like Rav Preida, who taught the same material to one particular student four hundred times — if you do not have that, even though you may be a very *ehrlische* Yid and a major *talmid chacham*, a great *mechanech* and a great person, you cannot be a good special educator.

What are the early red flags that can alert parents to the possibility that their child may need special help?

We're talking about children who are developing normally. I'm not talking about children born with damage like low birth weight, in which case they are likely to need special services to some degree. We won't talk about children who have had severe accidents, *chas v'shalom*, that damaged their nervous system or brain. We're referring to normal children with learning disabilities.

A red flag would be language

difficulties at a young age. As a general rule, if children need speech therapy at age three or four, parents should have a strong awareness that when they begin *alef-beis*, there is a possibility that there will be a delay in that area and the child will need help. Parents of such children should see an expert to determine when this help should begin. It is not good to begin massive learning help too early; you have to let a child develop on his or her own. On the other hand, it is important to give help at the proper time and not neglect it.

There is a concept of *yeshev bein hatalmidim* ["let the child sit among his peers"], but that does not mean the child should sit there when everyone is learning on a third-grade level and he can't read on a first-grade level. It's when he's sitting *bein hatalmidim* and cannot keep up that help is necessary.

By now some of your students are grandparents. How do you feel when you meet them? How do they react when they see you?

I've been all over, from the *chassidische* yeshivos to the Modern Orthodox. I've worked in many types of *mosdos* and watched them develop. I can tell many stories that are truly heartwarming.

A *chassidische yungerman* in Boro Park stopped me in the street once on a summer Friday night, when nobody was

around. He was dressed *rebbish*, with *strokkes* [velvet cuffs and lapels] on his *bekeshe*. He's my height, a six-footer, and he called my name across the street. "You don't remember me, but when you established the Satmar resource room in Williamsburg in the early nineties, I was in there, first in the Zupnick building and later in the one on Throop Avenue.

"I want to tell you something," he continued in Yiddish. "I come from a dysfunctional family, and I had difficulty learning. Neither my parents nor my *rebbeim* understood me. I never had a minute's *menuchah* in my childhood. The only time that my life was wonderful between the ages of six and eleven was in those forty-five minutes in your resource room. ... Those forty-five minutes a day were an oasis in my life. Now, *baruch Hashem*, I'm a father, thirty years old, and I crossed the street on this quiet summer night to thank you."

This type of *hakaras hatov* and joy, which I've seen literally hundreds of times, is what keeps me going, keeps me from burning out, and many special educators I know say the same. *Hazorim b'dimah b'rinah yiktzoru. Sof hakavod lavo.* There's no experience more wonderful than *hataras sefeikos*, when things become clear; you take a child who may be a diamond in the rough, but nobody sees it except you, and you polish it, clean it, and work with it, and one day later on that child truly shines.

I have former *talmidim* who are Rabbanim. I have former *talmidim* all over the world who are engineers, doctors, social workers, businessmen — successful people today.

It's getting a little scary — some of my *talmidim* are starting to have gray hair! But when I see them and I see that smile, feel that firm handshake, that is one of the greatest joys of life that one can have.

That's why I say to people, "If you have the prerequisites and the natural aptitude, even though it's not a lucrative profession, especially in *limudei kodesh* special ed, if you stay in it long enough and do an honest job, you will eventually reap one of the greatest joys that life can give. □

Training a group in Montreal in August 2010.

