



Binah HINUCH .O.A.C.H

Connections Outlook Approaches for Classroom and Home



MAKING A DIFFERENCE

From the Field

*Mrs. Miriam Bracha
Handelsman, LCSW*

*Machon Bais Yaakov, School
Social Worker*

*Bais Yaakov D'Chassidei Gur,
School Social Worker*

*Bnot Chaya Academy, Clinical
Director*

*Co-Founder, Clinical Director of
Maayan Academy, Jackson, NJ,*

Miriam (Katzin) Handelsman was raised in a busy *kiruv* home in Brooklyn centered around the hundreds of Russian students who streamed through their doors throughout the years. She was raised with the notion that if something needs to be done,

don't wait for someone to do it: figure out how you can do it, and get it done.

Miriam was working as the clinical director in a Brooklyn school for struggling teens when New York shut its schools for the second time. Knowing how detrimental it had been for her girls the first time school was shut, Miriam and a colleague, Mrs. Chaya Aviva Katz, decided to take their fourteen girls upstate to a farm to quarantine together and continue their program there.

"What we found was incredible; our girls were thriving when they were away from the city and the things that were holding them back from growth. Within two weeks, we were seeing movement and growth that we had been struggling to see back home, which for some reason hadn't been happening. Suddenly, away from everything, the girls were able to internalize and sort of let down their guard to feel safe enough to begin a healing process. That's when we knew we had to recreate this model for real, in a proper school setting."

So began the groundwork for Maayan, a boarding school deep in Jackson, NJ,

where girls from all over live during the week and most Shabbosos. Miriam's goal was for the girls to be focused without outside distractions, but not be cut off entirely. They have their phones, they go home every fourth Shabbos (the other three have a cycle of in-Shabbos, out-of-town Shabbos and *Shabbaton*) and most of the girls have jobs or volunteer after school hours in Lakewood or Jackson. While the dorm is in a house in Jackson (complete with open space, sheep and goats!), the school building itself is about twenty minutes past that, in New Egypt, NJ.

Miriam describes Maayan's model as three-prong, placing equal stress on emotional, academic and religious well-being and success. "These three components are equally important for our girls to feel whole. A girl who is ready for our program is one who is committed to focusing on all three simultaneously. It can be at different levels, and with varying degrees of balance, but we need all three." Each component is represented by a staff member, with Miriam working the clinical (emotional) end, Mrs. Chaya Aviva Katz ("the leader and visionary behind the entire school"), as

S. Greenspan

principal and curriculum director, and Rabbi Yisroel Brotsky, *shlita*, as the school's *moreh horaah* and Rav on staff — in addition to what Miriam calls the most incredible and dedicated teachers, therapists and staff she could have dreamed of. “If there is ever an issue that a girl is having,” says Miriam, “it’s not isolated.” It will affect all three parts of her growth, and she, Mrs. Katz and Rabbi Brotsky will all be on board.

In her quest to help teens, Miriam has worked with all stages of struggling girls, from being kicked out of Bais Yaakov to attending *levayos*, *Rachmana litzlan*, of girls who were not helped in time or resisted the help offered.

“There are too many horrible stories, and I wanted to try to cut into a place in the process — in the downward spiral — where these stories can be prevented.”

What makes Maayan unique is that the starting point, i.e., where a girl is holding just prior to her acceptance, doesn’t matter. While all of the girls come from *frum* homes, some have been off the *derech*. There isn’t a common factor in how they look or act in order to be ready for this program.

“We created an environment where the goal for everyone is to go up,” explains Miriam. “If you’re going up, you belong here regardless of what was bringing you down or how far down you went.” The commonality is that they are girls who have been in some sort of pain, even if they never acted out that pain. “They are ready to heal, but that takes tremendous work, and they understand that they can’t do all that work in their current mainstream environment,” Miriam continues. “They need an enclosed, safe place to do all that work. So, for example, we have girls who were always *shomer Shabbos*, girls who have just become *shomer Shabbos* and some who were, but are not yet there again.”

This means that in terms of where the students are in *ruchniyus*, they may be holding at different places, but that strong commonality of everyone going up and growing is there, making it

conducive to individual growth.

“While we might take a girl who has really, really struggled and hit rock-bottom and is now ready to move back up, this doesn’t mean that a girl *had* to have done anything very bad or hit rock-bottom, not at all,” clarifies Miriam. “Just that she’s at a point in her journey where she is ready to heal.”

The main criteria for entrance into Maayan are that a girl has a desire to grow and is ready to move in the right direction — again, in all three areas. “The girls are so supportive of each other, even if they aren’t holding at the same place. One girl was ready to start keeping more *halachos* of *tznius* again, and because the culture is one of movement and growth, even her friends who were not yet there cheered her on and applauded her success. It’s amazing to see.”

The Snow Globe

A powerful metaphor Miriam uses for her students is that of a snow globe.

“In a snow globe,” she explains, “things get shaken up, and the snow flies, and then it settles. It settles within itself rather than scattering because it’s encased in the glass, and it can’t just fly out with nowhere to go. There’s something protecting it, holding it in.”

Miriam’s school, she says, is not like a rehab, where people are cut off from the world. “What we are, though, is that clear, glass casing, helping our girls stay grounded and secure so when things get shaken up, they have a protection. They don’t just scatter. They can still settle in the safety of our ‘snow globe.’”

To that end, there is a strong focus on goals and accomplishments, and the girls are heavily prepared when they go home. Every girl has something or someone back home that is a trigger for her, whether emotionally or religiously. Thus, for some, leaving the confines of school once a month for Shabbos to go back to where the triggers are can be daunting. Miriam and her team work hard to prepare the girls when they go

home, empowering them with their accomplishments, reminding them of their strengths and that they believe in them and their ability to fuse their two worlds into one safe one.

Enter The Snow Globe.

On a paper that has a picture of a snow globe, the girls write down what they have been working on strengthening in the past weeks inside the snow globe. What have they accomplished? Every single girl is able to write that list. Next, in the bottom base of the globe, grounding them, is what they will be working on next, when they come back. The last piece, which is written *outside* the globe, are the potential triggers they might face when they leave. Each girl then discusses these lists with her therapist before going home, working on strategies, coping skills and staying focused. This exercise grounds the girls and helps them prepare for leaving the safety of their surroundings.

“One of my favorite things,” says Miriam, “is that we also do a snow globe as a group, for the school as a whole, and it’s amazing. Before midwinter break, which was almost a week long, each girl did her own, and we also did a combined school globe. What have we accomplished, what are our goals when we get back...? It’s a great way for us to see what we’re doing here and for the girls to see that each one is an integral part of something so big.”

Prevention

“My real goal,” says Miriam, “is to try to get to girls before they enter a place of enough pain that they act on it — let’s try to skip it altogether — and have girls want to grow and develop and get back on track *before* they become set and complacent in their new, troubled lives, which will make them cause more pain to themselves.

“There are two parts to the trauma,” Miriam says. “There is whatever trauma went on in a girl’s life that is causing her

to search for something, and then there is a second trauma — that's what she does to herself in that searching stage. The trouble she gets herself into is a trauma all in itself. *That's what we're trying to prevent.*"

There is so much more that Miriam and her partner, Chaya Aviva, do on a daily basis — more than we can describe here. There are vision boards and rocks and Oreo (the dog — Maayan's mascot!) and so much heart, soul, tears and triumphs. And these are all part of a person with a vision and a dream for teenagers. That vision is to prevent the tragedies that Miriam witnessed when she worked with teens and young adults who were so far gone that they lost all *cheishek* to turn themselves around. To help Hashem's struggling children. To build them before they ever enter that stage.

To that end, Miriam has one more dream: to somehow, in the near future, begin initiating preventative measures in Bais Yaakov schools. She wants to open dialogue between principals, *mechanchim* and *mechanchos* of mainstream schools to discuss patterns, trends and issues that they notice and see how these patterns can be halted before they ever emerge. Why wait until a girl has deteriorated spiritually to start with prevention? While Miriam understands that these may be difficult conversations to have, and

that there may be some who feel it "doesn't apply to their students," she's hopeful that *mechanchim* will see the benefit of such dialogue and it will become something they can speak about and brainstorm together to tackle.

Mommy First and Foremost

How does a person balance an all-encompassing career in education and counseling with her home life? Where do her kids fit in? Are they part of this?

For Miriam, the answer is no. While her husband is behind the entire practical side of Maayan, her children are still young enough that she can separate the two. She also has what she considers a most fortunate situation of living too far away from her kids' school to have bus transportation, requiring Miriam to drive them the half-hour trip to school every morning and pick them up for the half-hour drive home. While most parents would find this a great inconvenience, Miriam says she loves this time.

"We have nothing else to do other than shmooze for half an hour!" she enthuses. "They can do homework in the car, which frees up our time at home, or we talk or listen to a CD... It's the best part of the day. It's pure,

uninterrupted Mommy time."

When she and her husband embarked on this journey, Miriam knew that she wanted her family time to be sacrosanct, and that her position as wife and mother had to be first and foremost, which is what she endeavors to do. Keeping her anchored is also the connection Miriam and her husband have with their Rav, whom she says has been supportive of her work from the start. While Maayan has its own halachic and hashkafic advisors (a powerful lineup including Harav Tzvi Berkowitz, *shlita*; Harav Reuven Leuchter, *shlita*; and Harav Uri Deutch, *shlita*), Miriam's Rav, who was her husband's *Rebbi* before marriage, is there personally for her and her husband twenty-four hours a day, six days a week, which keeps her focused and balanced.

Does she ever feel like a mommy to her students?

"Always," Miriam admits. "When I light candles, I beg Hashem to help me; I say, 'Hashem, these are Your children! I'm just trying to help them, but they're Yours! Please help me continue balancing both of my roles.'"

And that's how, with Hashem's help, Miriam Handelsman will keep doing what she's doing, for as long as she can, one of Hashem's children at a time.

How do you define success?

Our girls come in with inner conflict and pain. We know they're on their path to healing when we see them feeling carefree while at the same time, making healthy and thought-out decisions; when we see them appreciating structure, routine and responsibility. We feel a sense of success when they know we are here as their second family, but at the same time are ready to move on and forge ahead into the real world.

ACROSS THE BOARD

PRESCHOOL

I try and inspire my students in the weeks leading up to Purim with the theme of *hashgachah pratis* and that even when we can't see it clearly, we know that Hashem is the Master Puppeteer. Through puppet shows, songs and stories and eliciting responses from the girls with *hashgachah* stories of their own, the children can really gain a foundation of *emunah* to take with them always.

Goldie Sebrow
TAG Preschool, Far Rockaway

We put a huge emphasis on the Purim story. We start learning the story a month before Purim and the children love it. The children have the opportunity to draw their own pictures of the Purim story and narrate the words as well. We also act out the story. We teach the four *mitzvos* of Purim day as well, but the biggest focus is really on the Purim story and Hashem saving us.

Chana Bracha Alcabes
Gan Simcha, Nevada

I introduce the *mitzvos* of Purim in a fun and exciting way. Each *mitzvah* is wrapped up in a special box and then when I teach it, they can open the box and see something concrete. I also create a book with pictures of the children acting out each of the *mitzvos* of Purim and read it and show them how beautiful and special it is to be part of the *mitzvos* of Purim and not just focus on getting *mishloach manos*.

I also send home a checklist with important ideas like "I gave *mishloach manos* to a lonely person" or "I helped set the table for the *seudah*," so they feel part of the *mitzvah* and they aren't focused on getting *mishloach manos*, but giving. If the parents partner with you in this important idea of giving to someone in need or who may not get from anyone else, that is so special.

Debbie Ungar
Philadelphia

As a preschool *morah*, one of the Purim projects we make is their *V'ahavta L'rei'acha mishloach manos*. I found the project on e-chinuch — a coffee cup that is shaped like a crown and decorated with jewels — and the boys learn the idea of making someone else feel good and being grateful for their friends, as that is what happened in the Purim story. In the newsletter to the parents, I specify the type of recipient this *mishloach manos* is intended for and they can help their son choose whom to give it to, even if it's within his own family!

Additionally, we reiterate that the *mitzvah* is to GIVE and not to GET, because really the pleasure is in giving and making someone else feel good! This further reinforces the idea that we feed our *neshamah* with *mitzvos*, a concept that is mentioned throughout the year.

Judy Landman
Baltimore

What is something special you do for students to emphasize the *bein adam lachaveiro* aspect of Purim? How do you help your students shift their Purim focus so that it is not all about the number of *mishloach manos* they receive?

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GRADES 1-2

When we learn about Purim, I explain and try to impress upon them the *mitzvos* of Purim and the importance of *davening* on Purim. I tell them to take a *pushke* with them when they bring *mishloach manos* because everyone gives *tzedakah* on Purim. I give them a checklist with things they should try to do over Purim so they can remember all the really important things.

N.W.

GRADES 3-4

Before Purim, everyone can bring in two small treats in a bag and they get the name of a girl in the class to give them to. They also attach a nice note to it.

L.M.

After Purim, I have everyone bring in two of their own nosh (not from their family) and give it to a *chessed* organization that collects nosh. I explain to them that they have so much, so they should give some of it to others in need.

B. Eisgrau

GRADES 6-8

The Secret *Mishloach Manos* Project (SMMP)

- Each boy is (secretly) assigned another boy in the class.
- Each boy assembles a *mishloach manos* for that classmate. It should have something to do with his character, hobbies, likes/dislikes, personality, etc. Then he writes a

poem about what he placed in his *mishloach manos* and what it has to do with the recipient.

- The boys bring in their *mishloach manos* and read the poems aloud so their classmates can guess whom it is for.

Sima Braunstein

Yeshiva K'tana of Waterbury Middle School

Grades 6,7,8

HIGH SCHOOL

There are some incredible *shiurim* and *sefarim* on Purim that really teach in-depth ideas of how deep the day is. I have taught some ideas from Rav Shimshon Pincus or Rav Brevda on Purim and then challenged my class by asking what we can do to make it meaningful and inspiring.

These are some outgrowths of our discussions throughout the years.

1. My students (from Persian families who were barely *shomer Shabbos*) and their mothers all went to one student's house at midnight after Taanis Esther. Using *Tehillim mechulak* translated into Farsi, they completed *Sefer Tehillim* five

times between midnight and 5:00 a.m.

2. Taanis Esther afternoon, my students came to my house and created costumes and learned a song and dance about Purim. I rented a party bus and after *Megillah* we went to a Chai Lifeline family and sang the song, brought the kids into the bus, took them for ice cream and then back home. We did this for five different families.

3. My students met me at the local hospital dressed up, with five *mishloach manos*. They escorted Jewish patients to the chapel where we heard *Megillah* together and then we gave them *mishloach manos*.

4. My students went to homes of homebound children and did face paint for them.

Penina Rosenberg