

## Community Connection / By Devorah Klein

# Yeshivah Ohr Eliyahu of Los Angeles: Inspiring a Love of Learning in Each Student

*An interview with Rabbi Shlomo Goldberg*

Yeshivah Aharon Yaakov Ohr Eliyahu, an elementary school with separate boys' and girls' divisions servicing the Los Angeles Jewish community, has earned a reputation as a cutting-edge institution. Its *menahel*, Rabbi Shlomo Goldberg, has developed an approach to *chinuch* and school management based on the *mussar* teachings of his *rebbeim*, Harav Moshe Chait, *zt"l*, and, *ybcl"c*, Harav Noach Orlowek, *shlita*, both of Yerushalayim, where Rabbi Goldberg learned for a decade.

Rabbi Goldberg, who is also a popular speaker for Torah Umesorah, graciously shared with *Hamodia* his views on *chinuch* and described how they are implemented in his school.

### Rabbi Goldberg, can you tell us about your background?

I learned and taught in Yeshivah Aish HaTorah from 1979 until 1982. After that, I learned in Yeshivas Torah Ohr for a brief period of time, then went to learn in the Chofetz Chaim Yeshivah in Eretz Yisrael, which was under the direction of my *rebbei*, Harav Moshe Chait, *zt"l*.

### How did you get involved in *chinuch*?

I always had a liking for young children. While in Aish HaTorah, I began teaching some classes in *Mishnayos* and beginning *Gemara*. In Chofetz Chaim, I did lots of tutoring and also began giving *shiurim* for N'shei. I was *zocheh* to have many *rebbeim* who were expert *mechanchim*, and I became especially close to my *rebbei* and to Harav Noach Orlowek, both master *mechanchim*. I was also a regular at Rav Wolbe's *beis hamussar*.

I attended Ohr Lagolah - Ohr Somayach's teacher-training program, Rabbi Hillel Mandel's Teachers' Education Institute, and more recently the Chevras Yesud Maalah Principals' Training Program of Torah Umesorah.

### When did you come to the United States?

In 1988, I became Rav of a pioneering community in Sante Fe, New Mexico, and started a small school there. We started with eight children in eight grades, and for the first year, I was the entire *limudei kodesh* department. By 1991, on the advice of Rav Wolbe, *zt"l*, and Rav Simcha Wasserman, *zt"l*, most of the community moved either to Denver or Eretz Yisrael, and I moved to Los Angeles, where I became Rav of a small shul and *menahel* of Ohr Eliyahu.

### Where is the school located?

Since 1995, it's been located in Culver City. However, for this

coming school year, we have completely renovated a beautiful campus in the heart of the La Brea community. We are very excited about our beautiful new building and hope that the central location will make it accessible to everyone in the area.

Ohr Eliyahu is a relatively small school. We have about eighteen students in each grade, in both the boys' and the girls'

give *mussar* even a hundred times. This does not mean to be a nag; it means to realize that it might take the child one hundred steps to get to where he needs to be, and our job is to help him along. A school should not be like a train, where every child is put on the same train and does not need to be thought about again until the end of the line. *Chinuch* is a process that needs constant

always about the kids. I do my best not to make decisions based on the welfare of the institution if that conflicts with the interests of the *talmidim*.

I constantly encourage the teachers to give every child the opportunity every day to be challenged, and the opportunity to shine. That means that the teachers must develop a wide variety of ways to be successful, so that if

or her cutting edge. We also incorporate music, art, and physical education into the curriculum.

Music really helps all students' brains. For some, it is also very therapeutic, and for others it is either their chance to shine or their chance to experience a real challenge. Students who are very successful academically also need to experience some challenges, because to succeed in life, one needs to surmount challenges. We create an environment where the children can experiment and it is safe to fail. They learn how to be resilient and pick up and start over.

### How are the classrooms managed?

We try to turn away from frontal teaching. We give the students the opportunity to think, to participate, to generate ideas. We may not cover as much ground, but we do produce confident and capable kids. Ultimately, the longer way is the shorter way. It takes more time, but everyone learns better in the end.

The teachers are shown how to do a lot of grouping; we often have groups of students working together on projects.

If there is a discipline problem in the classroom, we discourage the *rebbei* from calling out his name to correct him, which creates confrontation and distraction. Rather, the *rebbei* will call the student over to his desk after class and say, "Yankel, what did you do today that might have been a reason for me to be concerned?" Yankel will usually admit his error and will then be congratulated for being wise enough to realize it. The *rebbei* can then respond, "I can remind you every day that that is a problem if you need me to, okay?"

If there is a disruption in the class that needs to be addressed, we have what we call the "independent study center." The *rebbei* will walk over to the student and say, "Independent study." The student understands that he must go to the center, where a specially-trained monitor will discuss with him what went wrong and what he can do to get back to class ASAP. This room is not punitive, it is just a quiet, kind of boring place for discussion and quiet work. It also serves as a place where students can do independent work when necessary.

I don't believe in sending children home for misbehavior. I prefer to deal with it in school; an infraction in school is usually a school issue. For instance, we might say to a child, "I see that things are not working out so well in math class. Perhaps you should do your work privately in the independent study center for a few days." Pretty soon he realizes it is more fun to be back in class. This requires more staff, but it is worth it.



The yeshivah building



Rabbi Goldberg



Harav Yitzchak Dovid Grossman, shlita, from Migdal Ha-emek greets students of Ohr Eliyahu upon a visit to the yeshivah

divisions, with close to 350 students from preschool through eighth grade.

We maintain a very high level of learning and skill-building. Ninety percent of our girls go to Bais Yaakov schools, and ninety percent of our boys continue in regular black-hat yeshivos and excel there.

### Can you tell me about your school's unique approach?

Our approach is based on principles that I received from my *rebbeim* — understanding and accepting kids where they are, while gently and lovingly raising them to the next step. The Alter of Kelm, *zt"l*, explained the *pasuk* "Hoche'ach tochi'ach es amisecha." The terminology is doubled to indicate that one must

fine-tuning and redirection.

We train teachers to be understanding and provide them with the skills necessary to become competent and reliable teachers. Our students become true *bonei* and *bnos Torah* and very capable, confident, and effective decision-makers. They know that even if they might make less than the best decisions, they can pick themselves up again. At the end of the day, they know that they can learn again tomorrow, even if today was not a great day.

### What attracts parents to your school?

People chose this school because of the high level of learning, and high level of caring on the part of very devoted and dedicated *rebbeim* and teachers. It is

a child does not succeed in one area, he will succeed somewhere else.

If the definition of success is only one thing, there will be many losers. Elementary school is too early for students to feel they are not succeeding. We strive to maintain in the older *talmidim* the same level of love of learning and self-esteem that they had when they were three and imbue them with the sense that they can make a contribution to *Klal Yisrael*.

### What are some ways that you do this?

One way we provide a variety of means to succeed is by employing enrichment and remedial specialists to work with teachers so they can keep each student on his

We believe in maintaining heterogeneous groupings throughout the school, because otherwise it is not reflective of real life. In real life, one has to deal with different people at different times – you don't always get that perfect *chavrusa*.

The teachers really develop a love and respect for the children. Every behavior requires a response, but perhaps that response may be that the *teacher* needs to do something different. We encourage the teachers to examine their own teaching methods and behaviors in attempting to address disciplinary situations. Before blaming someone else, like the parents or the children, the teachers should look inside themselves and examine how they might be able to do things differently. We also encourage parents and students to look within first before complaining.

**Can you describe your *middos* program?**

We teach the children that the way they think about an idea generates their response. One can recognize the way he is feeling based on how he is thinking. For instance, if you are feeling ashamed about a certain situation, it shows that you are disappointed in yourself, or angry because you feel unable to control the situation. We conduct written and tactile exercises, and I speak to the students as well. The concept of *bechirah* is emphasized, and we constantly give our students refrains like "That was a good choice." We work on empowering each other to take responsibility.

To see that things can be sweet and painful at the same time, we sometimes have students walk with a rock in their shoes and a candy in their

mouths. They can concentrate on the candy and ignore the rock – or the opposite. We shmooze about it, and we find the students to be very insightful. We teach them that life is not always fun and entertaining – even in Los Angeles.

There is a certain "Ohr Eliyahu culture" that develops. The children have an enthusiasm and respect for the school community and for what they are learning. There is a sense of camaraderie; it is like one big family.

**How do you encourage the children to respect each other?**

If there are conflicts, we try to teach them to "shmooze it out" and give them options for the future, and ask them to get back to us to see how it worked out. We empower them instead of controlling them. It takes longer and it is harder for the teachers, but it works.

It takes time for new teachers to understand this approach. A new teacher will come in and ask, "Where's the discipline plan?" I explain that the plan is to realize that every interaction between a child and an adult is a disciplinary experience, and we must try to make those interactions thoughtful and meaningful. It is true that some children need to be disciplined, but the discipline can feel like a hug, not a strait-jacket!

**How do your teachers adjust to this approach?**

We have several formal in-service training sessions throughout the year. We train the teachers for a week before school starts and a few times during the year, and we have in-service days without the students. Through observation and

conversation, we develop a common language of expectations.

There is also a lot of peer training from veteran teachers. We have certain things on paper – I call them "Expected Schoolwide Teaching Results" and "Core Principles." I present this to potential teachers and ask them if this is something they believe in. If they do, this is a place they want to be.

The teachers are taught to look in before they look out and say to themselves something like, "They are eight years old; I am thirty-eight!" At first some teachers do resent this approach, but eventually they realize that one does not get anywhere by controlling others. A child's growth in decision-making is as important as his growth in the next *passuk* of *Chumash*. Harav Orlowek has stated that the job of an elementary school is to create a person. If we fail, we have, in effect, one less person.

**Do you use incentives in your programs?**

I am not so into that. I feel such programs usually devolve into competitiveness. If you must have incentives, have the whole class work together and offer extra recess or a fun



Threshing

activity as the prize, not candy. Praise or a note from the *rebbe* is also wonderful, as is the greatest motivator of all, according to Rav Simcha Wasserman, *zt"l*, which is clarity in learning.

I once observed a class where the teacher was giving out points for the right answer. What happened? The other students were upset when one student gave the correct answer! Why not say, "When the class gets fifty questions right, you can all have extra recess"?

We want cooperation among the teachers and among the students. Otherwise, you separate

the class into winners and losers – and nowadays, there is an exciting street for those losers. We need to keep the kids "in the game," and as far as learning goes, there will be lots of time to win later on, as long as they keep on "playing."

**Do you have any final comments?**

Hashem is very good to my wife and me. We were *zocheh* to have teachers who educated us in a true Torah way, and we are trying to pay back according to what we received. We are here to serve and humbly do our best, with Hashem's help, to pass on our *mesorah*.

**מרכז אתרוגים מיוחסים**

**Lakewood, NJ**

שמחים אנו להודיע לציבור בני תורה וחובבי מצות שהאתרוגים מפרדס הידוע קופרמן נמצאים למכירה השנה בכמות מוגדלת ובאיכות מעולה ובמחירים נוחים

אתרוגים אלו הם מזן חזו"א באישור מרן הגר"נ קרליץ שליט"א וכמו כן יש לנו כמות גדולה של אתרוגי ברורמן

**We have a Full Line Of The Most Beautiful אתרוגי חזו"א and אתרוגי ברורמן**

If you are a סוחר please call **1-908-216-1998** Rabbi Menachem Sirota  
If no answer please leave a message and we will return your call.

בס"ד

**is proud to offer THREE INNOVATIVE PROGRAMS for the end of summer זמן**

**Machane**

**9**

*Tisha*

**Week 1 • August 9 - 17**  
Only \$450

**Week 2 • August 17 - 23**  
Only \$325  
All inclusive

**Family Room Rentals**

**Your own room for as many days as you'd like.**

**Only \$100 a night!**

Includes breakfast.  
Bring your own linen.

**Avos Ubonim**

**A special program for fathers and sons.**

**3 days, 2 nights**

**Only \$295**

\$100 for each additional son (or Zaidy)

**Take advantage of: kayaking in our creek, ball fields, pool, barnyard, hiking trails, bonfires, local attractions, sunny days and cool nights, and so much more!**

**For more information please call: 518-634-7250**

**Rabbi David Teichman Director • Rabbi Leibel Karmel Head Counselor**  
Camp address: 129 Route 67A, East Durham NY 12423