

Upcoming Chinuch Convention Brings Networking Opportunities

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Five hundred little *Yiddishe* girls streamed into school. I stood and watched them skipping in happily, completely oblivious to their privileged status; unaware that for many *Yiddishe* girls their age living elsewhere, being a part of such a tidal wave of *Yiddishkeit* is an unknown experience.

Having grown up and been educated in England, culminating in three wonderful years in Gateshead Seminary, five years after getting married, I found myself in Moscow, where I have remained for the last 13 years.

Last June I became the principal of Reshit Chochma, the Moscow Bais Yaakov and Cheder, and now I was on a field trip to Beis Yaakov Primary School, NW London, at the kind invitation of Rabbi Yitzchok Weitz, its *menahel*.

How does a school from Russia link up with one of the leading Jewish Orthodox schools in Europe? In the summer months of 2018 a group of *menahalim* and headteachers from Antwerp, Moscow, London and Zurich met in Amsterdam at the invitation of Amsterdam philanthropist Mr. Boruch van de Kamp. Mr. van de Kamp, whose children go to the Amsterdam Cheider, was extremely impressed by the ongoing professional developments that were taking place in the school. Rabbi Yitzchok Uri Dunner, a high school *rebbe* in the Amsterdam Cheider, had recruited the services of Rabbi Yisroel Meir Rubinfeld, Executive School Consultant at Torah Umesorah in the United States, to provide training to the staff and to help develop the curriculum. Mr. van de Kamp was inspired to bring these valuable resources to the wider European *kehillos* — and to that end he formed a steering committee to launch Europe's first Chinuch Convention.

At the meeting, Rebbetzin Dara Goldschmidt from Moscow heard from Rabbi Yitzchok Weitz that the Beis Yaakov Primary School teachers have invested heavily in Active Learning. Hearing this, Rebbetzin Goldschmidt encouraged me to travel to London. And so, we were a small group of visitors from London, Antwerp and Moscow who were all invited for a peek inside the workings of Beis Yaakov Primary School.

Beis Yaakov's staff has invested enormous amounts of time and energy over the last years in defining desired educational outcomes and strategizing how to reach those targets. As part of this deep, holistic self-audit, they have devised detailed curriculums, teaching styles and data tracking systems to exponentially boost the quality and professionalism of the education they provide. They were warm, organized, and willing to utilize every minute of our time to maximum effect.

We were privileged to be invited into three different *Chumash* classes, each containing around 25-30 children ranging from grades 1-5. Beis Yaakov has obviously created a culture of active learning in the school as we saw the same high standard of teaching in each of the three classrooms.

The pace of the learning was so quick and the activities were so varied and interesting, that there was no time at all for the pupils to get bored or misbehave. I did not see any teacher reprimand a pupil the whole time I was in Beis Yaakov.

My attention was immediately caught by the learning environment. The children are not seated in neat rows facing the teacher, but in group stations of four to six pupils. The setup itself hints at the collaborative learning techniques used. The walls are decorated with vocabulary words, *shorashim*, and prefixes and suffixes that the girls need to use during class time and the walls are used seamlessly as instructional support. There is no learning by rote. The children are challenged at every turn to think for themselves, in partners or in small groups. They have clearly been well trained in listening to each other. I eavesdropped on several of these groups brainstorming together, and the work was truly collaborative.

All of us adults, who knew the *pesukim* the children were learning, were still absolutely fascinated by the way they were taught. A wide variety of activities were woven into the lesson to enhance review in an interesting way: true or false activities, domino question and answer games, coloured cards with phrases from the *passuk* that the children hold up in a line for a visual reinforcement, brainstorming in a group about the meaning, and many other tricks ensured

the girls maintain their engagement. I was fascinated by the use of mini whiteboards as a regular part of the classroom to ensure that all children answer specific questions as opposed to everyone being off the hook once the teacher has asked a question to a specific pupil.

In the younger grades, the *shorashim* are reinforced with actions, with the children themselves suggesting actions for new words. The children are obviously trained from Grade One to parse words for the *shorashim*, prefixes and suffixes and they approach the *pesukim* in a very methodical manner.

The teaching in all three classrooms incorporated the use of smartboards in a variety of ways. The smartboards helped the children to guess words from the context using a picture; it provided a timer for short, timed activities; it also helped the students work out an unseen *passuk* by pre-placing the words of the *passuk* into the correct phrases. The smartboards also provided a different classroom zone where the girls could sit on a carpet on the floor as they brainstormed together the meaning of a new *passuk*.

A feeling of privilege for learning Torah was created by a beautiful ritual I saw in one of the classrooms. When the vocabulary had been worked out one lucky girl was called upon to read the *passuk*. This was a huge privilege as the "*Passuk Princess*" got to wear a tiara and hold a sceptre for her few moments of glory. It was a joy to watch little *Yiddishe* girls becoming princesses to read a *passuk*. What a powerful subliminal message!

The teachers in all classrooms were able to ensure that every child had been called upon with a fantastic simple system. Each child's name is written on a coloured lollipop stick in a jar. The teacher picks out a stick every time she wants to ask a question, and as the jar empties she knows everyone has been included.

The atmosphere in all the classrooms without exception was happy, healthy and vibrant, and it would not be an exaggeration to say that 90% of the children were fully focused and involved 90% of the time. That, to me, was the greatest proof of the success of this method of teaching.

Rabbi Weitz and Rabbi Heimann shared

with us the assessment methods used for *Chumash* that cover various aspects of knowledge that the school has targeted as their learning goal. The data is all logged and can be tracked over time.

I learnt so very much from my two days within the school, and hope to use my new knowledge to inspire my staff in Moscow to teach in a far less frontal way. The Russian style of teaching is very much focused on the frontal method with the teacher talking, the pupil writing and then regurgitating for a test, so this will be a challenge.

Being in the company of the other teachers from London and Antwerp and seeing how excited and inspired they were by this active, collaborative learning style, I thought of the children all over Europe who will now be impacted as a result of these two short days. There is so much talent among us, such a feeling of wanting to share for the good of *Yiddishe kinderlech*, and all I could think of was how we must do more of this kind of sharing in a more formal and planned way.

I was hugely excited to hear about the plans for a Europe-wide Chinuch Convention and am delighted to hear that the Beis Yaakov Primary School teachers have agreed to present a workshop on active learning. The networking opportunities are something that I really look forward to. Together, we can do so much more!

Living in Moscow is somewhat of a lonely experience. The warmth I felt from Rabbi Weitz and Rabbi Heimann and their genuine interest in *Yiddishe chinuch* far away from their own *daled amos* was a huge *chizzuk* for me personally, apart from being a growth experience in my professional development.

This type of informal networking and sharing of best practice is one of the opportunities presented by the Torah Umesorah framework and I am sure that the forthcoming European Chinuch Convention will provide many similar networking opportunities that will be used to raise the standards of teaching and learning across Europe — reaching tens of thousands of *Yiddishe* children.



(Left) Beis Yaakov Primary School, NW London. (Right) Reshit Chochma school in Moscow.