The Online Resource Room

By Rabbi Yaakov Aichenbaum

The internet is fraught with danger and presents tremendous *nisyonos* to *kedushas Yisroel*. Nevertheless, *zeh l'umas zeh*[1] it also provides us with unprecedented opportunities. An example of the great potential that can be tapped when the internet is used appropriately is Torah U'mesorah's chinuch.org. As a result of chinuch.org., hundreds of *mechanchim* have gained access to material and *pilpul chaverim* that would otherwise have been unavailable to them. This article will describe another example in which the internet can assist *klal Yisroel* to combat an unaddressed dilemma: The enormous shortage and accessibility of quality *limudei kodesh* remedial services for children who have mild learning disabilities.

In my field of *limudei kodesh* special education, I am periodically contacted by parents of children who have mild learning disabilities. Many of these parents live in areas where few or no *limudei kodesh* remedial services are available. The parents desperately seek advice about how to help their children. These parents realize that their children are *rachmana lyatzlan,* highly at risk of going off the *derech* because of their academic frustration and isolation. These feelings of frustration are geometrically increased if the child lives in a community or society that places great emphasis on excelling in learning Torah. Such children are not an anomaly; rather ten to twenty percent of children statistically fall into this category. Unfortunately, this problem is not limited to small or out of town communities. The current economic recession has significantly affected many existing special education programs. Budget cuts have reduced or even eliminated special education programs in many *mosdos hatorah*. In addition, many *mosdos* even in major cities had minimal or no special services even before the current recession. The tragedy of this situation cannot be overstated. So much can be accomplished when a proper remedial program with trained staff is in place. These children can be taught to read *lashon hakodesh* **fluently,** to learn *Chumash* and *Rashi*, and even to learn *Gemara.* Until recently, I could offer only minimal direction and encouragement to these parents, but I could not offer any substantial help. This situation changed last summer when I was invited to present an online workshop to *mechanchim*.

I was then introduced to the world of webcams, screensharing, and online meetings. After some initial technological research and consultation with *daas Torah*, the idea for the online resource room was developed and soon became a reality.

The idea is actually quite simple. Screen sharing technology is used to display the desktop of the teacher's computer onto the student's computer. This allows the teacher to display texts, write words, and to use the same computer programs that are used in a regular resource room. The teacher can even give students control of the mouse so that they can write on the teacher's screen as well as manipulate different programs on the teacher's computer. In this way, the student takes an active role in the learning process. Also, the teacher can see and speak to the student via webcam. In this way, the learning retains as much of the characteristics as possible as an in person remedial session.

Special education involves the use of many modalities in the learning process.[2] It is vital to use auditory, visual, tactile, and kinesthetic techniques in order to maximize the effect of the lesson. I was initially concerned that this would be challenging to accomplish online. Likewise, I was somewhat apprehensive that it would be difficult to implement and maintain the necessary behavior modification systems that are often needed to keep a student on task and motivated. *Baruch Hashem*, my fears were soon alleviated. As time goes on, I am discovering various ways of designing interactive lessons that employ multimodalities and behavior modification techniques.

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Smartboard technology and notebook software have helped me to actively involve my students in the lessons in a fun way that incorporates the essential elements of a good special education lesson.

The results so far have been encouraging. My students are engaged by the learning and each one is making observable progress in his unique areas of weakness. I have helped students strengthen their *kriah* skills and to build their *Chumash* vocabulary. It is likewise feasible to teach *Chumash* and *Gemara* in ways that are similar to my regular resource room techniques. I have not yet discovered a way to give incentive prizes online like I frequently do in my regular resource room. Surprisingly, the lack of incentive prizes has not made a noticeable difference in student motivation. Rather, my students' academic success, progress, and enhanced self-esteem are the greatest motivators of all. No external motivation system can compare to the intrinsic motivation that a student experiences when he sees success.
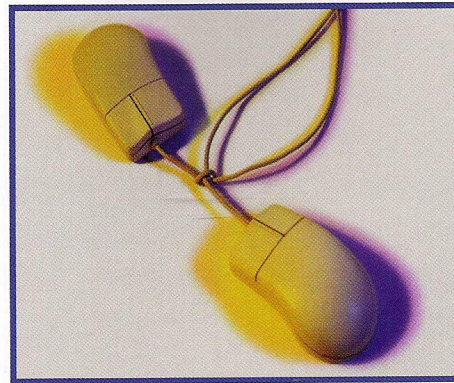
The Online Resource was designed not only to facsimile the high quality, state-of-the-art instruction of my regular resource room, but also to maintain the same professional standards of evaluation and accountability that is expected of a quality special education program. After a student is referred to the program, I obtain a comprehensive student history and background from the parents, teachers, and student. I then evaluate the student's *kriah*[3], *Chumash*, and *Gemara* skills (when applicable). After the evaluation is complete, I discuss the results with the parents and teachers and a unique individual education program (IEP) is designed.

The success of my regular resource room (and the Online Resource Room as well) is based on intensive instruction that promotes the automaticity of skills[4]. Each skill is overlearned[5] until it is automatic. In order to reach this goal, a student needs to attend the resource room three or four times a week for thirty minutes each session. After a student is accepted into the Online Resource Room, a schedule is designed to that will minimize the intrusion into the student's schedule as much as possible. Inevitably, it is often impossible to accommodate everything. Some regular classroom time might be lost and the student will miss that subject. However, the *klal* in special education is (as it ideally should be in the mainstream classroom as well) that one must have long-term vision. Where do we want this child to be five years from now and how will that goal be achieved. The Online Resource Room strives to coordinate a program in which the special education teacher, parents, and classroom teacher work together to formulate long-term goals and help the child achieve these goals.

In order to insure the safety of the students of the Online Resource Room from internet abuse, it is vital to have proper supervision and safeguards in place. The student's school needs to install filters and blocks on the computer that the student will use so that nothing else can be accessed besides the tutoring session. In addition, the computer should be in a room that is open to public access and an adult supervisor should be *yotzei v'nichnas* to monitor the situation. Likewise, the teacher's computer is located in a school in a public location.

At the present time, the Online Resource is limited in how many students it can accommodate. Also, parents have to pay for the program. This by definition precludes some of the neediest students from receiving help. *B'ezras Hashem*, as the Online Resource Room becomes better known, it will receive grants and additional funding that will enable it to increase its staff as well as to accommodate students who come from families that cannot afford to pay for remedial services.

In an ideal world, teaching should be done in person[6]. Likewise, the internet should be avoided as much as possible[7]. Unfortunately, we do not live in an ideal world. Hundreds of children are drowning in a river of frustration while we look on with our hands tied. The Online Resource Room offers hope to this situation. The Online Resource Room has the potential to reach many of these children and to help them achieve academic success. For many children this is *hatzalas nefashos* since a child who fails to learn on a minimum level in today's world is in danger of losing everything.

Pikuach nefesh indeed! ◆

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1 קהלת פ' ז' פסוק יד'

2 - לא כך כתוב (שמואל ב' כ"ג) ערוכה בכל ושמרה, אם ערוכה ברמ"ח אברים שלך משתמרת, ואם לאו - אינה משתמרת (עירובין נד.) וע' מהרש"א שם.

3 It was during such an evaluation a few months ago that I administered one of the world's first (if not the first) online Kriah Scan. I was able administer the Kriah Scan online just as easily and effectively as in person.

4 רש"י דברים ו:ז) ושננתם. לשון חדוד הוא, שיהיו מחודדים בפיך, שאם ישאלך אדם דבר, לא תהא צריך לגמגם בו, אלא אמור לו מיד

5 ואינו דומה שונה פרקו מאה פעמים לשונה פרקו מאה ואחד (חגיגה ט:)

6 (סוטה מט.) והיו עיניך רואות את מוריך

7 לך לך אמרי נזירא סחור סחור, לכרמא לא תקרב (שבת יג.)

For further information about the Online Resource Room, please contact me at the Scranton Hebrew Day School (570)346-1576 or by email at theonlineresourceroom@live.com. Rabbi Yaakov Aichenbaum MA Sp. Education is the Director of the Limudei Kodesh Resource Room of The Scranton Hebrew Day School.