

# Bais Yaakov of Baltimore's



## “G” Whiz Class *by MARGIE PENSAK*

Not being a mother of girls, I can only imagine the typical reaction of a daughter opening up a beautifully wrapped gift from her parents, only to find a school uniform inside. But for Esther Danziger, the broad smile on her face was indicative of a dream come true — it meant she would attend a Jewish school for the very first time and go on the same bus as most other girls living on Yeshiva Lane, located on the Yeshivas Ner Yisroel campus.

In September 2012, Esther was just one of a group of five young girls with developmental disabilities who walked into Bais Yaakov of Baltimore. They were third-graders who, up until that point, had attended public school. Mainstreaming these students wasn't working, even with full-time class shadows. You had to meet these girls where they were. You couldn't just stick them in a classroom.

“My husband and I actually moved our family to Baltimore for this class,” shares Sara Katz. “We were living in New York and looking to relocate for a number of reasons. This class opened the door for us to move to Baltimore, as we never would have moved to a community that didn't have a Jewish schooling option for Huvi.

“The big difference we noticed right away was that Huvi was now on the same schedule as the rest of the family,” continues Sara. “When she was in public school in New York, her bus would pick her up at 7 a.m. — before my other kids even woke up — and dropped her off at 2:30 p.m., leaving her with a long afternoon to fill. Once she started Bais Yaakov, she was able to leave at the same time as everyone else and come home in carpool with her sister. It helped her to be part of the family!”

## A Joint Effort

It was thanks to the dynamic push from former Bais Yaakov of Baltimore Elementary School principal Rabbi Mendel Freedman, *a”h*, that this innovative class took shape in under a month. He named it the “G Class,” because the school already had divisions A through F; it has been known as “G” ever since.

This fall, seven years later, the members of this class are tenth-graders at Bais Yaakov, taking sign language classes and a full complement of Judaic and general studies classes, as well as participating fully in school functions and extracurricular activities. The class is a joint effort of SHEMESH — a program that provides educational support for Jewish children with learning differences in a Jewish setting — and Bais Yaakov. The school provides space for the girls and pays their morning *limudei kodesh* teachers; parents pay tuition to Bais Yaakov.

Program Director Fayge Friedman elaborates, “Bais Yaakov takes ‘ownership’ for the ‘G’ class — it doesn’t feel like it is just housing the class. Over the years it has had to work out some challenges. For example, when we first came to the middle school in sixth grade, there wasn’t a classroom for us. The principal, Rabbi Hexter, gave up the school’s conference room for the ‘G’ class. School conferences were held in the nurse’s office all year.”

## Mainstream Success

The “G” girls are included in all extracurricular activities, whether it is participating in the school Gemach program, going on the annual eighth-grade trip to Washington, D.C., visiting nursing-home residents weekly, or taking part in the bas mitzvah program or bi-annual high school production. This past school year, as ninth-graders, the girls participated in the school’s biggest production ever — held on the Goucher College stage. They were not hidden in the back; they joined just like everybody else, front and center!

“I love how the class has their own specialized learning within their classroom but are mainstreamed for extracurricular activities and really made to feel like part of the school,” says Sara. “Huvi initially resisted socializing with the other girls but now considers her classmates to be her closest friends. The learning is really fine-tuned to the

girls’ needs, and they are learning way more than anyone ever thought they could.”

Aviva Shafran’s mother, Shalva, adds, “The *limudei kodesh* teachers really reach out and ask the parents what they want covered. Even if we don’t know, they come up with such good ideas of what would make a lasting impact on the kids. This past year, the teacher went through different phrases that are constantly being used in our culture, such as *b’ezras Hashem*, *baruch Hashem*, *limudei kodesh* — phrases that we throw around but that could get lost in the shuffle if they were never introduced to them. Also, songs that are constantly being sung at *kumzitzes* when the girls are together, *zemiros* sung at home, *davening* tunes — making them much more meaningful to the girls.”



Photo Credit: Esky Cook

Rabbi Mendel Freedman, z”l

“Hashem gave each special-needs child a *neshamah tehorah* and it needs to be fed with *kedushah*,” remarks “G” parent Shaindy Chaifetz. “We felt that Sara Rivka would be able to gain from a Jewish education, especially by being able to observe and interact with other typical *frum* girls on a daily basis. She is very happy to be in Bais Yaakov and has many ‘non-G’ Bais Yaakov friends.”

## Shout-Outs from Teachers

Esther Resnick teaches the class sign language once a week.

“‘G’ class makes me smile,” says Esther. “I jumped at this opportunity to teach these young women. American Sign Language (ASL) is used many times from birth-2 years of age and I knew these girls had early exposure to sign language. Sign is a gross-motor skill and easier than speaking/verbal communication, which is a fine-motor skill. Their talent and deep feeling were displayed at our ASL Purim production for the Jewish deaf community.”

Chumi Millman teaches the girls social skills, lessons that focus on any areas of need identified by the teachers and parents — like those related to peer relationships, setting and striving toward personal goals, zones of regulation, social thinking, relating coherent stories, maintaining attention and more.

Remarks Chumi, “It’s clear that the girls have come a very long way in these skills and I believe they’re more prepared to engage with similar-aged peers now than

they were a couple of years ago, despite their older age and the need to be even more adept at this than previously.

“It’s hard to identify exactly what is so special about the ‘G’ class,” continues Chumi. “A few things I’ve noted is the girls’ eagerness and excitement for life and for others, their infectious personalities, their amazing ability to see right through to the core of many matters, and the way they absorb, remember, and assimilate what they have learned.”

Shaindy Silver teaches all the *limudei kodesh* subjects to the girls — *Chumash, Parashah, Ivris, yedios klalios, halachah, biur tefillah, ma’amarei Chazal*, and others, depending on the year.

“I strive to give them a positive atmosphere and a love of *Yiddishkeit*, of learning and of growing,” says Shaindy. “We focus on mastering academic skills while working on social skills and self-improvement at the same time. I feel that teaching the class gives me an enthusiasm for life which is what the girls have in abundance. They are such happy people! Also, they have taught me what it means to really work on oneself.”

Elisheva Jacobs teaches reading, writing, math, and social studies/science to the “G” girls in the afternoon, focusing on practical life skills and building content and background knowledge.

Elisheva elaborates, “We have a lot of fun doing it. When practicing money skills, we went to the JCC’s restaurant and enjoyed putting our skills into real-life practice. I really love teaching and working with this class for so many reasons. They are growth-oriented. When we worked on a social skill of ‘opening doors’ (i.e. not giving up, being positive, etc.), the girls all encouraged and complimented each other for doing this. All of these things constantly

inspire me, and on top of this, we have an amazing support team of teachers, therapists, administrators, and others to work with!”

## Thriving in COVID Times

Using a variety of distance-learning tools, the girls participated in Zoom sessions, conference calls, and prerecorded lessons. They took culinary arts, social skills, sign language and math on Zoom and learned appropriate behavior for participating, such as using the chat, muting and unmuting, raising their hands and posting reactions. In *Chumash* class, they even learned *Rashis* and *Rambans*.

“Typically, students with special-needs have not fared as well as their peers with regard to online learning; this group shone,” shares Fayge. “They were able to get the hang of the Zoom sessions, cooking online, learning social skills and sign language. They developed skills for communicating online that they didn’t previously have.

Prior to COVID-19, notes Fayge, even making a phone call was not easy for these girls. Although they are very happy to be social, it can be hard for others to understand them. Also, sometimes they get on the phone and stay on too long; sometimes they call, hang up and call right back. Recordings of these girls show that they were pretty silly in the first session — some of them not looking at the screen; some of them busy doing other things — but by their final activity, three months later, they had really picked up some good skills.

“Esther adjusted very easily to Zoom,” says her mother, Rivky. “She loves having a schedule, and she was super responsible about getting to class on time every day. She definitely missed in-person interaction with her peers, but her class participation increased over Zoom. Whereas in class she was often reluctant to answer questions, she had no problem over Zoom. It’s

## SHOUT-OUTS FROM “G” STUDENTS

Aviva: “I love learning, taking notes and sharing my notes!; “I love playing drums in production and doing activities with the school.”

Sara Rivka: “I love my ‘G’ class because I always have nice teachers and my special friends. My favorite part of the day is to hear the daily announcements from the G.O. or Gemach singing new cute songs, and being with my friends all day. I go to Bais Yaakov to be a true *bas Yisrael/bas melech!* I learned to *daven* and connect closer to Hashem! Most important part of the ‘G’ class is to be with my friends and my teachers. I love all of my subjects but my favorite one is social skills because I’m still working on being positive and ‘open doors’ and my goals. I want harder subjects this year.”

Meira: “I like the ‘G’ class because I can get advice about the right thing to do. I learn Torah and we do *mitzvos*. Science is my favorite subject because we do experiments.”

Esther: “I love learning math and science. We went to a science lab and watched a litmus paper change when we dipped it in chemicals. It was very cool! *Chumash* and *Navi* — everything that is Hebrew is my favorite subject. I learned how to count money. I’m also learning about responsibility and being organized.”

Huvi: “My teachers are the best! I like Hebrew the best. The most important thing I learned is being nice and making friends. This year, I’m going to do every single subject, every single class.”

"The typical girls of Bais Yaakov will never need to attend consciousness-raising workshops. They have experienced and continue to experience the bonuses of opening their minds and hearts to others who are not exactly the same as they are. And in the future, when a Bais Yaakov graduate is in the position to hire someone with disabilities, she won't have to agonize over the decision; she'll know in her heart and mind that a person with disabilities can be an asset to almost any enterprise. It's been an amazing journey and we feel sure it will continue to be so.

— Executive Director Dr. Aviva Weisbord



Bais Yaakov of Baltimore's High School

Photo Credit: Esky Cook

possible that she didn't feel the pressure of 'all eyes on her.'"

### Lifelong Friends

"Esther has a very close-knit relationship with her classmates," remarks Rivky. "Although she is with typically developing peers in the morning and in the 'G' class only in the afternoon, she and her 'G' class friends are kindred spirits. They share interests and a similar sense of humor. They just plain 'get' each other."

"One of the most emotional moments for me came at the end of the third school year," shares executive director Dr. Aviva Weisbord. "Our practice is to meet with the parents of the girls — fathers and mothers — and the school principal, along with Faye Friedman and myself. We take a look at the progress — academic, social and emotional — that took place over the past school year. One of the parents said, 'I'm hearing a new word from my daughter: *friends*.' I don't think there was a dry eye in the room. Friends! Girls who had seemed doomed to be stuck on the sidelines were experiencing friendship with classmates and grade peers. Our *tefillos* were answered."

At this meeting, parents are encouraged to commit to

getting the girls together outside of school. "It's wonderful that they make our girls feel part of things. I want them to have other girls to hang out with who can become lifelong friends. So many girls who had preceded them didn't have that; they didn't have the benefit of such a class," says Faye.

This year, the Katzes acted on this encouragement when sleep away camp was canceled because of COVID. They hosted a daily backyard camp for the girls where they spent time doing activities together and really bonding.

"I loved listening to them shmooze and joke around together," says Sara. "They even put on a show with music and singing!"

Concludes Rivky, "We really don't have words to express our appreciation to Bais Yaakov — for their tremendous commitment and for truly valuing our girls — and to SHEMESH, dedicated to developing practical academic curricula and valuing our input as parents. There are so many reasons for this not to have worked, but we have found time and again that as a team, they do not approach this as 'Can this work?' but rather as 'How can we *make* this work?' When you have such a dedicated team, is it a wonder that such a beautiful class exists?" ■