

Launch of Legadel

The organisation that will help our children achieve their potential



Mr Rafi Gutwirth, a Legadel committee member, fixes a mezuzah in Legadel's new premises.



Rabbi Dr David Roth (L.) and Mr Yoeli Schwartz (R.) place a mezuzah on the new headquarters of Legadel in Golders Green.

Menachem is an energetic five-year-old who used to love going to *cheder*. He loved meeting his friends and learning from his *rebbe* and Auntie.

As the class started to learn the *nekudos* in Reception, Menachem began to struggle. He just couldn't keep up with the pace. His Auntie noticed that his speech was unclear and also that he was often getting confused with some of the letter sounds. The school staff did not immediately notify his parents, as they did not want to concern them unduly, in the hope that Menachem was somewhat immature and would eventually catch up with the rest of his class. However, his parents began to realise that Menachem had some difficulties and was not making progress at the same pace as his peers.

In Year 1, the *rebbe* notified Mr. Freed, Menachem's father, that Menachem's reading was too slow and laborious and that he was continuing to fall behind. His father started learning with him every evening to improve his reading skills, and when he felt himself getting frustrated, he paid a seminary girl to come to the house to practice Hebrew and English reading with Menachem. After several months, and hundreds of pounds, the seminary girl conceded defeat. It was obvious that nothing much had changed. That's when the sleepless nights started kicking in. Mr. Freed, who worked hard to eke out a living, was at a loss as to

where to go from here. The parents met with the *menahel*, who reassured them that everything that could possibly be done at school to support Menachem was being put in place.

This year Menachem turned seven and he found himself unable to read the small letters, and try as he might, the *rebbe's* words continued to be incomprehensible. When the *rebbe* asked the class a question, he strained to listen to the eager answers from his classmates, but as much as he concentrated on what they were saying, the answers kept on going over his head.

Now he has stopped trying and is starting to feel like just a piece of furniture in the classroom. It hurts every time again when he sees how enthusiastic the other boys become when the *rebbe* tells them to take out their *Chumashim*. He feels so left out and isolated. The *rebbe* has stopped asking him to read the *Chumash*. It is just too painful to watch him struggle with the words. Questions are never addressed to him either, as the *rebbe* doesn't want to embarrass him.

What will happen to Menachem when his classmates begin to learn *Mishnayos* and *Gemara*? By then he might have completely lost all drive. Even *davening* may become a boring routine, especially when the class starts saying *Shemoneh Esrei* and he won't manage to know it all by heart, as he knows the *davening* now. Reading it from the *siddur* will take him much too long.



וזכני לגדל בנים ובני בנים...
ומאירים את העולם

May I raise my children
and grandchildren to grow
...and enlighten the world

Mrs. Freed, Menachem's mother, tries very hard to make him feel good despite his failures in *cheder*, but she, too, is concerned about his continued lack of success and is worried how this may be affecting his self-esteem. The Freeds realise that they need some sort of professional help but are at a loss as to where to turn. Besides, even if they could find the right person, they are worried about how much all this is going to cost them. They appreciate all that the school has been doing for Menachem but wonder if it has the resources to support Menachem in being able to access the *Kodesh* and *Chol* curriculum as he progresses through school.

What will happen to Menachem? Who can help him succeed? Is he doomed to become another statistic in a couple of years? Will he eventually start realising that there are other ways of receiving the attention every child craves and find other – less savoury – avenues to put his innate creativity and energy to use?

It is with children like Menachem in mind that the voluntary organisation "Legadel" was created in June last year. Legadel is a local organisation in North West London that has been set up to help children in Key Stage 1 who have mild or moderate learning difficulties, by providing professional support in schools. The focus is on children who are having difficulties mastering key learning skills including handwriting, coordination skills, adequate speech and language development and reading skills. Any such problems can lead to behavioural, social or emotional issues and make the child's experience at school an unhappy one. Legadel will be the answer for parents like the Freeds who are aware that their child has a problem and without a supportive model can spend many years trying to find the appropriate help.

Legadel is already working in partnership with two North West London schools, and, *b'ezras Hashem*, its aim is to accommodate all primary schools across the area so that all children get every chance to receive appropriate support early on in their school-life in order for them to achieve a maximum level of success whilst at school.

The way the organisation works is that a child who is struggling

in school should be identified by the *rebbe* or teacher and then referred to Legadel through the school's SENCo. Under the skilled leadership of its project manager, Mrs. Rivky Ives, Legadel has put together a team of professionals, consisting of an educational psychologist, senior occupational and speech-and-language therapists, a specialist Hebrew reading teacher and a specialist literacy practitioner.

Together, this diverse team will identify which areas of difficulty need to be addressed and will advise how the child can be best supported. Being a multi-professional team enables children's areas of difficulty to be identified in minimal time and then help can be made available immediately at school, instead of leaving it to the parents to grope in the dark, wondering where to turn.

Legadel has trained a team of LSAs (learning support assistants) who have been assigned to work with the children at school. The way they will operate is that once a child's area of difficulty has been identified, the relevant professional(s) will direct the LSA how to help the child in his/her specific area of weakness. Some advantages of this model are that (a) the child will receive the help he/she needs within the school setting and hours, avoiding the need of ferrying the child to his/her therapies and removing an additional burden from the parents' shoulders; (b) a lot of money is saved by not having to pay huge professional fees, when at the same time, the child is getting a custom-made program to cover all his/her needs.

Parents will be asked to pay only 40 percent of the costs involved in helping their child. It is anticipated that the balance will be raised through fund-raising and pledges from philanthropists, as well as assistance from the government and grant-awarding bodies.

Mechanchim often comment that a large percentage of teenagers "at risk" actually began their progressive slide to the brink when they first felt the lack of success in their early school years, which gave them a sense of "inadequacy." This new organisation was founded by a team of caring individuals who have experience with children facing difficulties at school, either in a personal or a professional capacity.

Rabbi Aharon Denderowicz is a veteran educator who has taught in schools in the North West London Jewish community for over 40 years. He has always been particularly passionate about supporting children in mainstream classrooms who are failing in their education as a result of underlying learning difficulties or emotional issues, and he is well aware of the bitter price paid when difficulties have not been identified or addressed in good time. As a notable *mechanech* in the community, for a number of years, he has sensed the need for a framework which can work in close collaboration with schools. His enthusiasm and service as a committee member has been a driving force in the making of Legadel, and his conviction is that Legadel's model of service delivery will, *b'siyatta diShmaya*, meet this community need.

Mr. Yoeli Schwarz, another committee member, paid tribute to two of Legadel's professional advisors, educational psychologist Rabbi Dr. David Roth and specialist Hebrew Reading Teacher Mrs. Faigy Gross, both of whom, he said, had dedicated many hours of hard work to getting the project off the ground.

It is the committee's aim to give all children a fair chance at success so that their school years will be years of success and growth and will give them a fair chance to start life on the right foot. "*Vezakeini legadel banim ubnei banim oskim baTorah ubemitzvos* – may I merit to raise children who will occupy themselves with Torah and *mitzvos*..." is what we ask from Hashem. Legadel will be part of the *hish-tadlus* in, *b'ezras Hashem*, achieving that goal.

