



## When Morah IS A REBBI

**I**n the K1 classroom on one side of the street, 4-year-old Zevy and his classmates stare wide-eyed at the real fish head while learning about the *simanim* of Rosh Hashanah. In the K2 classroom across the road, Shimmy and friends nudge closer to get a better look. They eagerly accept an invitation to feel the fish's face, taking the opportunity to run adventurous fingers over its eyeball. No one takes up the offer to *taste* that jelly-like orb, but there is a horror in the very thought that thrills Shimmy deliciously.

Not too long after that, it's almost Sukkos. K1 has a small pop-up *sukkah*, and Zevy is almost finished making a *sukkah* decoration and a flag, both with his picture on them. In K2, Shimmy painted a *lulav* and *esrog* in the morning and now they are practicing for the *hakafos*. Boys are dancing on the tables, performing somersaults and headstands, and being carried on each other's shoulders in ecstasy.

In both classrooms, the 4-year-old boys are learning and thriving. So what's the difference?

In K2, the teacher is a *rebbe*; in K1, the teacher is a *morah*.

As is accepted in many chassidic preschools, as well as in various communities in Eretz Yisrael, boys as young as three years old learn only with a *rebbe*, rather than a *morah*.

Propelled by curiosity, I asked half a dozen mothers my questions: Aren't you concerned about having a *rebbe* for

such young children? How do the boys feel about it? Is the classroom run differently? How does communication with the *rebbe* work?

### Valid Concerns

Many of the women polled for this article shared the same concerns before sending their oldest sons to *cheder* in a *rebbe*'s class.

"I was afraid that a *rebbe* would not be nurturing, and at this young age, children really need that motherly touch," says Mrs. Perl. Her own brothers all had *moros*, and she sent off her son to his nursery *rebbe* with trepidation. But before long, she was won over. "The *rebbe* might not have run a Headstart-type program, but the *yiras Shamayim* that the boys picked up from him was incomparable. He was able to access that deep, boyish part of my son's *neshamah*, and in the end, it turned out to be the most fabulous preschool experience."

Mrs. Abramowitz also found that her skepticism quickly faded. "First of all, the *rebbe* was very warm. But beyond that, my son adored him. He absorbed so much from him because he worshiped him. It was amazing how motivated this made him to be *ehrllich*."

Another common worry was hygiene in the classroom. Little boys need their hands and faces washed, noses wiped, and help in the bathroom. Thankfully, in most cases, this did not turn out to be an issue. "We got a note to send baby wipes, and my son came home clean," says Mrs. Perl.

## Compare and Contrast

Boys who don't do that well with a *morah* might see more success with a *rebbe* both behaviorally and academically. They may respect a man more and take him more seriously.

On the flip side, a *rebbe* might not notice if a student doesn't hold scissors correctly, and parents are less likely to be advised to apply for services. In this area, it's crucial for parents to go with their intuition. Be proactive in your communication; don't expect the *rebbe* to notice. Ask specific questions, and give examples of your concerns.

If you do identify an issue and are approved for services, you will need to find a male provider; these yeshivos will not allow a female therapist into the classroom. Some preschools have a provider on staff to service all the children. If he's competent and a good fit for your son, all is well; if not, you don't really have alternative options.

Do the learning and activities also differ?

Mrs. Perl and Mrs. Gross both found that their sons' projects were rather different than they were used to from their girls. "The arts and crafts were very original, many of them with moving parts — a lot of paper fasteners and spinning wheels," notes Mrs. Perl.

Mrs. Gross recalls some examples. "They brought home the pit that Yosef was thrown into: it was a cup suspended under a hole in a paper, and there were (jelly) snakes inside! There was also a project where you could chop off Esav's head with a craft stick." These projects are not coming to Morah's classroom anytime soon!

A child's song repertoire will also vary from a *morah's* class to a class with a *rebbe*. A *morah* is more likely to teach *Dreidel, Dreidel, Dreidel*, while a boy who has a *rebbe* might learn three versions of *Yevanim*, plus *Al Hanissim*, *Maoz Tzur*, and a dozen songs from *Hallel*. At the Shabbos party, there will be *zemiros* and classic *niggunim*. In fact, the impetus for this article was observing a 3-year-old boy belt out Yom Tov *niggunim* at a family *seudah*, and making the connection that he had learned them from his *rebbe* in *cheder*.

## Communicating With the Rebbi

Most women do find communication with the *rebbe* to be overwhelming. In most cases, having the father call is not the solution, as he might not grasp the nuances of the situation. One woman had an issue with selective mutism; her son was not saying a word in *cheder*. It took almost four months to get the relevant information from the *rebbe*, in order to arrange intervention.

Another mother recalls, "When I had to discuss my son's care following a surgery, there were sensitive issues that I definitely would have felt more at ease discussing with a *morah*. But we made it work."

Mothers are encouraged to call freely, though, and should

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do so when they have something they need to discuss. "You can't think that the *rebbe* won't want to talk to you. It's your job to call and advocate for your child."

Another drawback for a mother is that with a *rebbe*, you never have the option of hanging around the classroom and observing your child.

Still, one mother whose son was incredibly anxious about school figured out a way to obtain a first-hand analysis: she stood outside the classroom door and watched through the window. After 15 minutes, she realized that this *rebbe* was clearly not a match for her son and was able to have him transferred to a different class.

So, yes, you might have to step out of your comfort zone and take initiative, but your obligation to your child is primary and, if you are determined, you will find your way around the obstacles in an appropriate way to ensure his success.

## The Perks

It turns out that there are some unexpected perks to having a *rebbe* in preschool.

"My son's *rebbe* sent home a CD every single week with a recording of himself saying the *parshah*," remarks Mrs. Gross, "including songs, sound effects, endless corny jokes and plenty of high drama. The CDs play in our house non-stop. That's something a *morah* can't do, halachically."

"An added bonus was when my son turned three," says another mother. "We were able to bring him to his own class to say the *alef-beis*. He was perfectly comfortable, sat happily on his *rebbe's* lap, and cooperated beautifully."

Mrs. Gross notes that a *rebbe* can deal with fighting very nonchalantly and not make a big deal about it. "Here's a skill everyone should have if they want to teach boys: Recognize a fight in the making and whip up a distraction before it begins."

"It's very authentic to have a *rebbe* teach your son *alef-beis*," adds Mrs. Perl. "In general, with a *rebbe*, everything is done loud, at the top of their lungs. I once passed the yeshiva and heard a *brachah* so loud that it burst out of the building. There's an enthusiasm, an openness, that a *rebbe* can tap into that a woman probably would not be able to access." ■

*\*All names have been changed; stories lightly fictionalized for your reading pleasure.*

Mrs. Paluch is the author of "Boy Oh Boy!," the engaging guide for mothers of one boy or a dozen. Comments and topic suggestions related to this column can be directed to [magazine@hamodia.com](mailto:magazine@hamodia.com).