

N'shei Chabad Newsletter is grateful for the opportunity to interview veteran *mechaneches* **Mrs. Rische Majesky**, who has been in *chinuch* for 25 years, the last 19 of them as principal of Bnos Menachem

"A PERSON WITH A NAME"

of Crown Heights. Mrs. Majesky is now embarking on a new *shlichus* as principal of Beis Chana High School of Arizona. *NCN* thanks **Faigy Schwei** and **Esther Rosen** for conducting this interview and **Etty Bogomilsky** for transcribing it. -Ed.



Mrs. Rische Majesky and grandchild.

PART ONE

NCN: What is the main ingredient for success in *chinuch*? In other words, how can we raise good children?

RM: Nothing is absolute except Torah. What I say today is just my humble opinion and experience: What children crave and need more than anything else is love and connection to their parents. Everyone understands that self-esteem and a healthy self-image are fundamental in ensuring our children's mental health and resilience. But how to give it to them? Well, a baby gets his first sense of "self" when his mother holds him in her arms and feeds him. He sees his own image reflected in his mother's loving eyes. This unconditional love is as important as the milk the baby receives from her mother and it must continue through adolescence (and forever!). Of course, this love is expressed in different ways at different stages. First there's the holding and feeding of the baby, then the playing with and reading to small children, then the quality time and attention, the conversations, the shared projects, the help offered...

However it is expressed, this connection gives our children a solid sense of self, a belief that "I am loved, I am worthy, I am important" (to the person who matters most to him as he develops—his parents).

We cannot protect our children from pain and from *nisyonos* but we can give them the tools to handle them. The time and the love we give children from birth are the fundamental key components which help to fortify our children and give them the ability to handle life's inevitable challenges, both *b'ruchnius* and *b'gashmius*.

NCN: So loving our children and spending time with them is the secret ingredient?

RM: Yes. It's all about the relationship. The relationship we

have with our children is a big *yesod* in *chinuch* today. Perhaps the natural *kabalas ol* of the previous generation is lacking in today's generation, and our children just need that emotional connection in order for the *chinuch* to "take."

The relationship we have with our kids is what holds them close. Children naturally don't want to leave. By nature, they want to follow their parents in the ways that they lead them. The children who are unfortunately leaving are not leaving because of the lure of the world, or *nisyonos* (i.e., phones, movies, etc). They are leaving because of unhappiness, essentially feeling disconnected from their families and communities.

This could be related to a trauma or a variety of circumstances (ranging from abuse to bad friends to learning disabilities). It is not possible to cover the various causes for this in the framework of this conversation. For the purpose of this discussion, we will focus on the importance of the parent-child relationship, which will not necessarily protect our children from pain or trauma, but it will certainly help them and give them the ability to handle these challenges as they arise.

NCN: So please tell us more about that relationship.

RM: The Friediker Rebbe said that he recalled very vividly the things he learned and experienced as a small child, as if they had happened yesterday. Then he concludes (paraphrased), "The reason I remember everything so well is because of the strong love with which my father raised me." The message is clear!

Children who feel connected to their parents and families will be happy to receive from them. Children generally and naturally want to stay with their families and live the lives

that their parents teach them to live. That is—as long as they feel a strong emotional connection to their parents (which in turn gives them an emotional connection to the lifestyle that their parents are teaching them).

For me that is a valuable message, as a teacher and principal and as a mother: showing that I care about YOU more than about your *tznius*, your marks or your report card, that YOU, as my child or student, are the most important thing to me. That you matter to me and to Hashem. That relationship is what keeps our kids close.

I've been in *chinuch* for about 25 years, a principal for 19 years in Bnos Menachem. I've seen challenges shift, *nisyonos* change over time. There were students who had challenges or were questioning or defiant, or came from homes that were your standard Lubavitcher family. Regardless of what the *nisyonos* were and what their family circumstances were, the way to their hearts, the way to get them to reach a point where they could accept the *chinuch* we were trying to give them, was through love and care and letting them know, "I believe in you. You're okay the way you are." After hearing this, and believing it (you must be sincere), they were receptive to whatever messages we tried to impart.

NCN: You mentioned that we are not a *kabalas ol* generation. But isn't the concept of *kabalas ol* still an important part of *chinuch*? How can we disregard it just because kids today have a hard time with it?

RM: *Kabalas ol* is still a fundamental building block of *chinuch*, and we must do our utmost to instill it in our children. And for many of them it may come naturally, but for many others, it needs to be worked on from the back window. Just like I want to get them to come to a little more *emunah*



Father and son at bar-mitzvah. Photo: Mushka Lightstone, mushkaphotography.com.

in Hashem, *kiyum hamitzvos*, *yiras Shamayim*, I also want them to come to *kabalas ol*, but that will only happen after a relationship is developed. Once they see that they are cared for, they are able to accept and are happy to grow and learn more about *kabalas ol*, *yiras Shamayim*, etc.

NCN: So does that mean there are no rules, only love?

RM: There definitely need to be rules and structure. I'm not negating that. Kids have an innate sense of right and wrong. They know when it's fair or unfair! They don't have a problem with consequences, as long as they're fair. If the rule is, you're late, you get detention, they can accept that. But that doesn't take away from the fact that you handle them with love and

care unconditionally, even if they didn't follow the rule. In certain cases, when there is an issue, you may just have to look away. *Nisht alemul darf men altz zen*. Sometimes you can choose to not see something. Fair isn't necessarily equal. Everyone needs to be treated in accordance with their needs. Sometimes in a school or a home, there is an unspoken understanding that with this child, you don't see everything. No one asks, "How come he got away with..." because no one wants to be in that child's place. They understand that child's struggles.

NCN: Practically, as a principal of a large school, how do you manage to show each student love and build a relationship with so many students, *ka'h*?

RM: I can't claim to have built a strong and perfect relationship with every single student. *Halevye!* But I do think that when you truly care and love your students they sense it and even if you have to take disciplinary action, they know that you love them. Children sense and feel genuine love and care—it comes through in the little things.

On the first day of high school, I ask all the girls their names as they walk in so that I can get to know them. Day by day, I test myself to see if I remember their names, until eventually I get them all. I remember one young ninth grader being so surprised at this small, seemingly trivial gesture: "Why are you asking our names? You actually care to know our names? It matters to you?"

And that small gesture and her recognition of its significance

opened her up to me and we became extremely close from that first day and onward. For the rest of high school, she approached me with her struggles because she knew that she (a person with a name; she as a person) mattered to me.

Some of the students that I became closest with are the ones who needed the most discipline, because I used that opportunity to schmooze with them and I got to know them and understand their struggle. They know that consequences come from love.

NCN: How does this apply in a home situation?

RM: It can certainly play out at home, too. Sometimes a child is going through a hard time and acting out.

Instead of interpreting it as rebellion, see it as an expression of pain, or a call to be noticed. Instead of lashing out and lashing back, it's more like, "What's bothering you today?" Start to interpret things differently. We should try to train our minds to see it in a different way—we can really shift the whole trajectory and ease the pain of our child while becoming closer.

NCN: Like when the Rebbe gave out *Kuntres Ahavas Yisroel to mashpiim*, and explained that if you want to be effective and have *hashpa'ah* on a person, you really need to see who they are and speak to that. [See box on the next page.]

RM: Yes! I once read a letter that

the Rebbe wrote to a *mechanech* who wrote to the Rebbe that he's trying to reach his students but he's not *matzliach*. The Rebbe said that *Chazal say, devarim hayotzim min halev nichnasim el halev*, and that's a fact. So if your words are in fact *yotzim min halev* they will be *nichnasim el halev*. And if they aren't *nichnasim el halev*, then obviously there is something lacking in where they are coming from.

A human being has his own *nefesh habahamis* and his own *netiyos*, it's impossible that when a *mechanech* or parent reaches out to a student or child it's completely without any of his own *netiyos*. It's impossible that he won't feel a little anger or ego ("how dare the child be disrespectful?"). But this approach is not pure *devarim*



Rabbi Pinye Korf sharing a moment with his son, *yblch*, Rabbi Leibel Korf.

Photo: Mushka Lightstone, mushkaphotography.com

“...in order for the *mashpiim* to be effective, they must be filled with a spirit of *ahavas Yisroel*, and therefore a special printing of *Kuntres Ahavas Yisroel* will be printed for the *mashpiim*. A special *kuntres* will also be published for children with sayings about *ahavas Yisroel* which will be on a child’s level, starting with the saying: ‘Love your fellow as yourself; Rabbi Akiva said, this is a great principle of the Torah,’ which is one of the Twelve *Pesukim*. This *kuntres* will be given to those children who are *mashpiim*, and it will definitely give added success to their work.”

-*Shabbos Parshas Vayakhel-Pikudei Parshas HaChodesh 5737*

hayotzim min halev because there is some “revenge” or ego involved. So the Rebbe advised this *mechanech* to say a *kapitel Tehillim* to ask Hashem to help him (despite his own ego and possible anger towards the student) that his

words be completely and purely from his heart for the sake of the *chinuch* of the child. To make his words completely *devarim hayotzim min halev*. I started doing that. If I had a hard meeting I would say a *kapitel Tehillim* before. I

would often tell the student about this letter and that since I’m human and it’s possible that my intentions will not be completely pure, I said a *kapitel Tehillim* before the meeting asking Hashem to help my words be pure *devarim hayotzim min halev* so that they will be *nichnasim el halev*. And very often that would help, by being honest, and a little vulnerable.

As the Frieddiker Rebbe writes in the *Maamer Kholei Chinuch V’hahadrachah*, a *mechanech* really needs to work on himself as a person. You can’t come to *avodas hachinuch*, as a parent or as a teacher, if you are approaching the student from a place of ego. One of the biggest enemies of humanity is ego. Certainly in my work, I’ve always said, the day that I know it all better be the day that I quit.

Ultimately, we have to realize that the Eibershter put us here, and we



Mother and daughter learning together.
Photo: Crown Heights Women’s Circle

have a *zechus* to be Lubavitchers, to be able to give of ourselves. Some of the greatest joys that I have in life are from opportunities I've had to give. I just made a *shidduch* for my Jnet *chavrusa's* daughter. It was such a *nachas* for me. We have to realize that we are here for a reason. Not to let it get to our heads. It keeps us balanced, normal and healthy.

NCN: You spoke about the importance of the relationship as the key to success in *chinuch*. Can you talk more about that, in practical terms?

RM: In a family, I would define it as TIME—and undivided attention and connection. Put your phone away and be there for your kids. I have five boys very close in age, they were all in *mesivta* at the same time, they all became teenagers at once. In one day they all started closing up, not sharing. I didn't have issues in my relationship with them; they weren't rebelling, but I saw them closing up. And I wasn't willing to let that happen. At the time I was teaching in Bais Rivkah. The boys would come home from 2:00 to 3:00 for lunch, and they didn't need me to make them lunch. But I came home for that hour to be there for them. You can't really expect to get an answer by asking them how was your day, right? So I made a statement just by being there. My statement was, "I am here for you. I enjoy your company." I see this as one of the most important investments I made in their *chinuch*. Slowly, even as they became more independent, as they entered their teen years and grew into adults, a relationship and a connection developed and they trusted me and started to share and speak more instead of closing up.

More than any tangible gift is the time we spend with the children. It's invaluable. Unfortunately, many

parents try to compensate for the relationship and the time with their children by giving them lots of stuff but that's not really what they need from us.

NCN: Are you seeing this happening in homes? Are parents not spending time with their kids?

RM: I think people are busy and struggling with many different things. Sometimes we think or maybe we hope that buying stuff will compensate for it. Parents sometimes call me when their children are struggling with values. Especially at this point it's important to focus on the relationship first and the values second. Otherwise you may very quickly lose everything. From my experience: If you put the relationship first the values will come. The relationship is like a bank account. If you have savings then you can make a withdrawal; when you have to say "no" then you can afford it. The bank account is filled with your time and emotional investment... not with things, trips, or lip service. There's no getting around it.

People are losing the knack of looking into other people's eyes and talking to them. Even the art of writing a card is lost. Texting is a poor replacement. There is nothing like sitting in close proximity to another human being physically and talking to them while looking into their eyes. There's just no replacement for that.

My favorite *chinuch* story was told by the former English principal in Lubavitcher Yeshiva, Rabbi Chaim Slomnicki, *a"h*, as he describes his experiences as a young child. He was the son of Holocaust survivors and his entire mission in life was to give his parents a little bit of *nachas*, but he was failing miserably. He was a troublemaker who was failing in school. Although

they were not Lubavitcher *chassidim* his father decided that in honor of his bar mitzvah he would take him to the Rebbe for *yechidus*. He saw his parents' excitement so he was also excited. When he went to school and told his friends that he was going to *yechidus*, they warned him, "The Rebbe is going to test you..." *Es iz im gevoren nisht gut* because he didn't know anything aside for one *mishnah* that he needed to memorize on one of the many occasions when he was punished. The day came, and he was very nervous. His father was going to be so upset with him...

When the Rebbe asked him a question, he was ready for the ground to swallow him up, but he listened and he actually knew the answer to the question! It was on that *mishnah* that he knew! When they left *yechidus* his father was so overcome with emotion at how well his son had done that he was crying, "My *tzadik*, my *nachas*!"

The Rebbe saw not what he didn't know but the one thing that he did know. It was a turning point in the boy's life. This was when Rabbi Slomnicki started to believe in himself and started learning.

I'm sure everyone knows we're supposed to notice the positive, and comment on the good things the kids are doing. But as human beings, we are naturally programmed to notice the negative. We don't notice when everyone is doing what they're supposed to be doing. We notice the one child who is doing one thing wrong. This is what stands out. But if we make the effort to call out the positive behavior, the negativity will fizzle out. What we focus on is bound to increase. ❧

Part II of the interview with Mrs. Rische Majesky will *iy"H* appear in the next (Kislev) edition of the *N'shei Chabad Newsletter*.