

Fall 2009

P'TACH VISTA

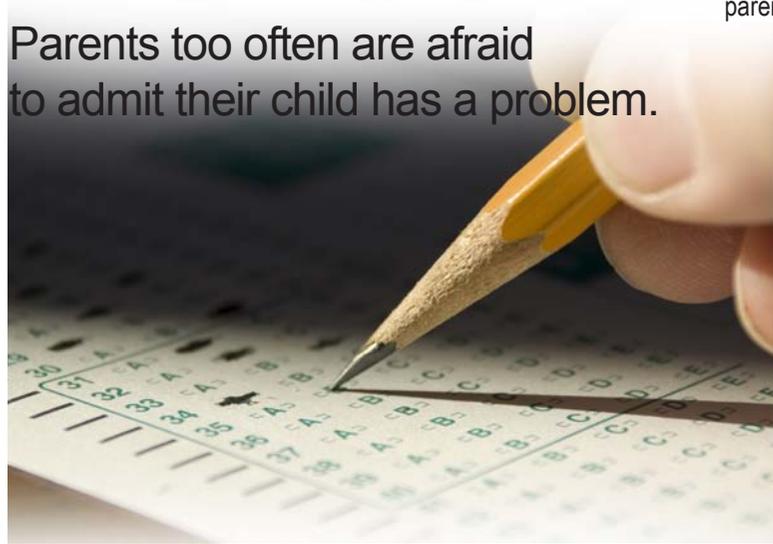
opening new opportunities for children since 1976



The Challenge of Stigma

From the National Director Rabbi Burton Jaffa

Parents too often are afraid
to admit their child has a problem.



This edition of "Vista" has a very important purpose beyond reporting on our organization's many achievements: recognizing and eliminating the stigma associated with learning differences. Defined as "a mark of shame or discredit" by the Merriam Webster Dictionary and applied to children with learning differences, the painful truth is that children are helpless in the face of stigma.

Parents are the first step to a normal, happy life for children with learning differences. They are, most often, the first to recognize something is "not quite right." The questions then become, "How do I help my child?" and "What path will I take?"

At P'TACH, we have found that answers vary widely. Some parents tackle the problem right away, consulting pediatricians, therapists, teachers and other professionals. They educate themselves and believe that in life, everyone has challenges to overcome.

On the other side of the spectrum, parents too often are afraid to admit their child has a problem, or they are embarrassed by his or her social or academic weaknesses. Others fear their child will be irreparably labeled with "disabilities" and ostracized from the community. Thinking they are protecting their child, they try to hide his or her special needs.

The result is delay, causing a tide of failure in school, low self-esteem, depression and other emotional problems.

Miriam (Kulik) Serkez Speaks Out

Mrs. Miriam (Kulik) Serkez, P'TACH Coordinator at Bais Yaakov D'Rav Meir and a twenty-year P'TACH veteran, supervises thirty-four children, grades one through eight. They benefit from a teacher and assistant in small classes, where they are taught the same curriculum as those in mainstream classes, but at a different pace suited to each child.

"We are very sensitive to the needs and fears parents have when they are told their children have

learning disabilities," says Mrs. Serkez. "The stages of grief are similar to those of the mourning process; shock, denial, anger, blame, acceptance and planning for the future."

Unfortunately, due to the stigma of learning disabilities, parents in the early stages often delay enrolling their children in suitable programs. Because their children look "normal," parents look for excuses for their child lagging behind – bad teachers, lack of sleep, a new baby in the house – when, in fact, early detection and intervention is crucial. Many children have to fail before their parents will enroll them in P'TACH.



The pressure to conform is very strong," Mrs. Serkez reiterates. "Parents worry about *shidduchim* at the risk of educational and social failure, psychological problems and their children rejecting Torah." Parents must make the first move without regard to "what people will say."

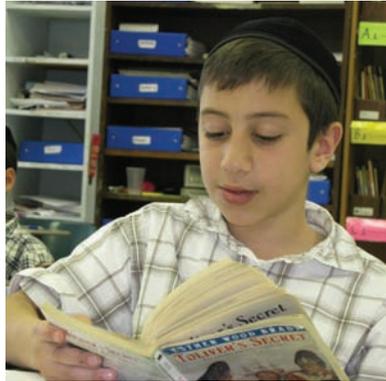
"Many children's needs are not addressed until the later elementary years, when we are forced to do

Every day lost to the stigma of learning differences is an opportunity lost.

With early guidance and education, however, every single child can succeed. A 2009 report on the state of learning disabilities by the National Center for Learning Disabilities (www.nclcd.org) states:

...there is a growing body of data to support neurobiological causes [for learning disabilities] including new evidence documenting that families are genetically linked to LD... Many [people with LD] suffer from low self-esteem, fall into juvenile delinquency or fail academically because their LD is not discovered... until it's too late to prevent these and other psychological problems from happening...

...learning disabilities last a lifetime and vary in the impact they have on those affected. That said, individuals with LD are not powerless against their disabilities. Over time, they can learn to compensate for their weaknesses, and if they receive effective support early enough, most people with LD can develop good academic and related skills and enjoy great success academically and professionally.



EVERY DAY LOST
TO THE STIGMA
OF LEARNING
DIFFERENCES
IS AN
OPPORTUNITY
LOST.

We as a community must embrace all our children. While we know the great principles of *B'tselem Elokim* (we are all created in G-d's image) and *V'ahavta L're'echa Kamocho* (love your neighbor as yourself), living by them isn't easy.

Children must feel they are accepted members of the community in order to thrive. A study published in the *British Journal of Learning Disabilities* (2007) by Karen Bunning and Gabriela Steel asked a small group of Jewish college students with learning disabilities to describe themselves using several measures. The results highlighted the importance of "cultural belonging."

Three themes emerged from the data. "Being young", "having a learning disability" and "being Jewish" were all key elements in their lives. Membership in the Jewish community was central to their self esteem.

Negative labels only hurt. Children with learning differences need love and support, as do their parents, who are taking important steps to ensure their child's success in life.

With your support, P'TACH is here to help.

Rabbi Burton Jaffa ■



damage control," she says. The huge academic gap, frustration and lack of motivation become the front line of the battle.

According to Mrs. Serkez, the best way to fight the stigma associated with learning differences is to educate not just the children, but the community. "Parents need good advice and ongoing resources, and teachers and principals must be taught to recognize

and deal with learning differences." P'TACH's National Educational Resource Center, a professional development program for regular K-12 educators, provides intensive workshops on the tools and strategies necessary to manage learning differences.

"Rabbis," she says, "because of their profound influence on family members, must be knowledgeable about learning differences as well and lead families in the right direction; those who are uninformed can misdirect them terribly."

Parents often worry that once in P'TACH their children will never leave. "That's not true," says Dr. Judah Weller, P'TACH's Educational Director. "Children are mainstreamed as soon as they are ready to take on the more uniform pace of a larger class. P'TACH students are always pushed, cajoled and encouraged to meet high expectations."

There has been some positive change in the community. More parents are inquiring sooner, and there appears to be more dialogue and acceptance, but, as Mrs. Serkez notes, "there's still a long way to go."

Why does a child have to suffer?

On a warm July evening, Judie and Chaim Hyman are sitting around the kitchen table in their Marine Park home with their close friends and neighbors Rachel and Yaakov Damoth. The conversation revolves around children with learning differences and the benefits of special programs tailored to their individual needs.

Judie, who works in medical billing, and Chaim, an accounting manager for a large insurance company, have five beautiful children, three of whom attend P'TACH programs in various day schools. Rachel is a long-time educator in both the public and Brooklyn Yeshiva systems.

The group agrees that early diagnosis followed by professional treatment and special education is vital to a child's future success. They wonder what motivates parents to delay seeking help for their children with learning differences.

Rachel asks, "Do you know how much children would benefit if their parents weren't embarrassed?"

Judie responds with her own questions: "Why does it have to be a stigma? Why does a child have to suffer?"

The Hymans' first special needs experience took place immediately after their second child, Benji, was born.

A difficult labor left Benji with both physical and learning disabilities. The prognosis was dire. Sixteen years later, they call him their "miracle child." Benji had a great time hiking in Colorado over the summer.

This year, he continues in a vocational program at Yeshiva



Daniel

Darchei Torah, learning a valuable trade.

Early in his education, Benji was exhausted from long days at school and seeing tutors and therapists well into the evening. He was angry all the time. His special education teacher told Judie about P'TACH.

"I knew I would find a school that wanted my son for who he is," Judie recalls. "Because of the child-centered flexibility of the P'TACH program, Benji had therapy in school in the morning and could come home and be a child after school;

he could go out and play." Benji thrived at P'TACH. He skipped eighth grade and was mainstreamed in ninth grade.

When Judie and Chaim's daughter, Rina, was small, they noticed she wasn't speaking at the level they were expecting. Over time, it became apparent to them that Rina "needed the attention only P'TACH could give."

Now twelve-years-old and in the seventh grade in the P'TACH program at Bais Yaakov D'Rav Meir, "Rina is doing amazing in school," Chaim says. Judie adds, "Rina thanks me every day for sending her to P'TACH. She says 'Thank you, Ema.'"

Daniel Hyman, eleven-years-old, is also very happy in P'TACH at Yeshiva Rabbi Chaim Berlin. His experience is typical. Small



Rina

classes, individual attention and doing well in school has changed him. Before, Daniel was shy and reserved. This summer he went to a new camp and took up baseball without hesitation.

Knowing the children since they were infants, Rachel comments that "Daniel and Rina's social and language skills – and their self-confidence – are very well developed." After educating Yeshiva students for seven years, she knows that "teaching children with learning differences requires special knowledge. That's why P'TACH is vital."

Judie started the first PTA at P'TACH at Chaim Berlin, but to this day she is a group of one. Though she tries to organize fundraising and social activities, most parents seem uninterested or shun involvement.

—
TO BE
A GOOD PARENT,
YOU HAVE
TO ACT.
TO IGNORE
IS NOT TO SOLVE.
—

Chaim seems mystified. "As parents, you should be proud that you're giving your child what they need. And, kids are not fools. They know what's going on. They have a double whammy – their own problem and their parents' problem."

He continues, "A friend said to me, 'You can't send your son to P'TACH, he won't be able to get married.' I said to him, 'What if he can't read? Who will marry him then?' And, should I be worrying about marriage when he's in second grade? My son needed help in the short term."

"G-d gave us our special needs children, he'll protect them," Judie says. "This is our test. To be a good parent, you have to act. To ignore is not to solve." ■

JACQUELINE WELKOWITZ, *P'TACH Program Coordinator, Yeshiva University High School for Girls (YUHS-Girls)*
 MR. HILLEL WEINBERGER, *Co-President, P'TACH*
 RABBI BURTON JAFFA, *National Director, P'TACH*
 SHANI & GIL WINOKUR, *Educator Awardees*

RABBI JOSHUA GINIGER, *Choir Leader*
 P'TACH BOYS CHOIR, *Yeshiva Rabbi Chaim Berlin Elementary*



On March 1, 2009, more than 700 people filled the Grand Ballroom of the New York Grand Hyatt to celebrate P'TACH's accomplishments at its Annual Scholarship Dinner.

Guests of Honor were Dr. Steven and Mrs. Hedy Rubel, who advocate tirelessly for our youngsters with learning differences and have been at the forefront of P'TACH's growth from a grass roots parent group to an internationally recognized organization.

P'TACH bestowed its coveted Educator's Award to Shani and Gil Winokur. For 13 years, Mrs. Winokur has been an outstanding English and writing teacher at the P'TACH program at Yeshiva University High School for Girls.

Amy Gross, Vice-President of Prime Brokerage Clearance at Goldman Sachs, received our Young Leadership Award. She has demonstrated the concept of *Hakarat Hatov* with her long-time commitment to special education.

A special Memorial Tribute was presented to Mrs. Rita Horowitz ר"ע, whose legacy lives on with the "Knit-esteem" program she started at Bais Yaakov D'Rav Meir. The program continues with her daughter Mimi (Horowitz) Srulovich.

The P'TACH Chaim Berlin Elementary choir entertained, and P'TACH students spoke beautifully about their gratitude for the vital help they receive from generous donors.



MR. HILLEL WEINBERGER, *Co-President, P'TACH*
RABBI BURTON JAFFA, *National Director, P'TACH*
AMY GROSS, *Young Leadership Awardee*



MRS. HEDY RUBEL, *Guest of Honor*
MR. HILLEL WEINBERGER, *Co-President, P'TACH*
RABBI BURTON JAFFA, *National Director, P'TACH*
DR. STEVEN RUBEL, *Guest of Honor*
DR. JUDAH WELLER, *Educational Director, P'TACH*



MR. HILLEL WEINBERGER, *Co-President, P'TACH*
RABBI BURTON JAFFA, *National Director, P'TACH*
RABBI HERBERT HOROWITZ accepting award in memory of
RITA HOROWITZ ר"ת,
MRS. MIMI (HOROWITZ) SRULOVICH
MRS. GILA (HOROWITZ) ELBAUM
DR. JOEL ROSENSHEIN, *Founder, P'TACH*

P'TACH Seniors Celebrate Milestone Graduation

The senior class of Mesivta Chaim Berlin celebrated its graduation in June. It's quite a milestone for all of the *bochurim*, but it's especially wonderful for five of the graduates. These five *talmidim* were members of the P'TACH program at the Mesivta and all have learning differences. Yet, they graduated from high school with the rest of the class. For them, the road to success was paved with challenges, tremendous effort, patience and determination.

Based on their academic strengths and weaknesses, P'TACH offers children personalized plans to help them reach their full potential. P'TACH's founders understood that, given a proper education, children with learning differences thrive.

"If only you could have seen these boys four years ago," says Dr. Judah Weller, P'TACH's Educational Director, "then you would fully appreciate the huge change that has taken place."

Without special attention, these boys easily could have become "teens at risk." Instead, they attended the P'TACH program at Yeshivas Rabbi Chaim Berlin, where Rebbeim patiently explain the *sugya*, teachers carefully review homework and the Program Director, Dr. Joel Dickstein, offers plenty of guidance, warmth and understanding.

In addition to addressing life skills, innovative "Senior Seminar" and "Work-Study" programs allow students to voice concerns and ask questions. According to Dr. Dickstein, "In the Senior Seminar, important questions are explored, such as 'Should I tell the college that I have a learning disability?' 'How should I handle *shidduchim* when they eventually come up?' and 'How do I advocate for myself in the work environment?' These are serious young adults having very mature discussions."

Through the Work-Study program, students volunteer two after-
continued on back page

“No fights. Just friends. Perfect for me.”

Moshe Chaim Ben-Abu, twelve-years-old, is the second of eight siblings. In seventh grade and preparing for his Bar Mitzvah, Moshe Chaim is friendly, outgoing and a real *macher*. Last year, he worked at a supermarket gathering carts in the parking lot and helping customers with their groceries. He is a saver – and already has a hefty stash - saving money for a car or any other big ticket items he might need in the future.

Sixth grade was his first year in the P'TACH Program at Yeshiva Rabbi Chaim Berlin Middle School and he loved it. In his previous school, he got picked on and pushed around. He was bullied. At P'TACH, he feels comfortable. “No fights. Just friends. Perfect for me.”

Mrs. Yona Grunfeld, P'TACH Coordinator at Chaim Berlin, networks with local yeshiva principals to familiarize them with the signs of learning differences and to introduce them to P'TACH's program should they encounter a child who would benefit from its expertise.

With twenty-seven children across grades five through eight, parents and educators can be sure that when they send a child to P'TACH, he will receive personal attention and be taught at his own pace. Each classroom has a special education teacher and an assistant, and all children work with a team of professionals, including a speech and language therapist, language arts consultant and psychologist.

P'TACH works closely with parents as well. The focus is on the total child – and that includes his parents, who may have to adjust to their child's needs.

“Parents know that P'TACH is not a miracle cure,” says Mrs. Grunfeld. “Some drink up advice and knowledge. Others need more guidance in modifying their parenting styles to support their children socially and academically.” Collaboration among parents and professionals ensures learning at the highest level and that emotional or behavioral issues are dealt with in a caring way.

“I tell parents, when your child leaves P'TACH at Chaim Berlin, he will be a composed young man who can succeed in whatever

he chooses to do,” Mrs. Grunfeld said. That's because “when students attend P'TACH, big changes occur in confidence level, sense of purpose, direction and responsibility.”

Before P'TACH, every day in school felt new to Moshe Chaim. He wasn't learning, and therefore had no knowledge to bring to the next lesson. In his geometry class, he didn't know how to use a protractor. He tried to follow instructions, but couldn't.

“When I came to P'TACH, I didn't even know the times table and other things that everyone else knew,” Moshe Chaim explained. “Now, I know what I'm doing. Learning is easier; it's slower so I learn better. I learned fractions!”

Moshe Chaim loves math, spelling and vocabulary. He likes long words and enjoys looking them up in the dictionary. With lots of friends and a promotion to mainstream math, Moshe Chaim is truly looking forward to success in seventh grade. ■



Lots of children would like to come to P'TACH

"Kids measure themselves by math skills, always comparing their answers and test scores," Rabbi Moshe Silverberg says with a smile. "They believe math is for the sophisticated student, so we put great focus on sharpening those skills."

Rabbi Silverberg knows well that instilling confidence in a child is the best way to foster learning. "We educate for life, teaching appropriate social behavior and giving praise often during class as we walk down the aisles checking children's schoolwork."

With an education degree from Baruch College and thirteen years teaching at P'TACH at Yeshiva Rabbi Chaim Berlin Elementary School, Rabbi Silverberg knows that he cannot always correct a learning disability, but he can teach children how to manage and bypass their difficulties.

He praises the Jewish Day Schools Attuned Program led by Dr. Judah Weller, P'TACH's Educational Director, which is based on the widely respected Schools Attuned® Program developed at the University of North



WE APPLY THE LATEST
SCIENTIFIC FINDINGS
TO SUPPORT CHILDREN
WITHOUT
LABELING THEM.



Carolina Medical School. The goal is to apply the latest scientific findings to understand and manage individual variations in children's brain function and to support children without labeling them.

Though he has completed the Program, Rabbi Silverberg still attends workshops. "Every year, we're more and more empowered. Our methods improve because we understand the students more," he says. And, of course, students benefit immensely from the latest research and new techniques.

Teachers benefit as well. "P'TACH is so rich and gratifying for the staff," he says. "My favorite thing is meeting graduates on the street. They thank me."

Special education, he remarks, should not be conceived as something bad or the result of failure. "The stigma hasn't changed much. I know there are lots of boys and girls who would like to come to P'TACH, but can't because of the stigma."

P'TACH is an investment in the future, Rabbi Silverberg believes. "The kids are just as smart as their peers. P'TACH is like training wheels on a bicycle. I've seen a lot of success." ■

A Fresh Start



With only three days notice and a quickly arranged going away party in the middle of the school year, Miriam Gellen happily left her fourth grade class in a mainstream-only yeshiva to join P'TACH at Bais Yaakov D'Rav Meir.

“This was a united decision,” her mother Deborah, a software applications consultant, said. “We all agreed, including Miriam, that this is what needed to be done.”

Miriam, now twelve years old, was born prematurely. As a result, she contends with vision-based learning disabilities, such as dyslexia (difficulty with reading and spelling) and dysgraphia (difficulty with writing).

As a small child, Miriam's vision was very farsighted. At five years old and despite occupational, physical and speech therapy, she wasn't keeping up with her peers. In the early grades, Miriam caught up on some tasks, but was still behind in others. She used the school's resource room but, inevitably, Miriam began to spend more time there than in the classroom. Miriam's teachers could no longer help. They couldn't even read her handwriting. Then things fell apart, Deborah said. “In mid-November, the

school's new resource room director looked at the situation with a fresh perspective and called us in to recommend significant changes in Miriam's educational setting. She recommended P'TACH.”

Deborah and her husband Joel, a podiatrist in private practice in Flatbush, didn't know anything about P'TACH, so they called around for references and heard good things. Miriam then sat in on a class and was “captivated,” Deborah said.

Changing schools was not an easy decision. If it didn't work out, there was the risk that Miriam would be even further behind if she had to go back to her previous school. However, Deborah pointed out, “P'TACH had a proven track record and was hosted

by a respected yeshiva, creating social opportunities and the chance that Miriam could be gradually mainstreamed in various subject areas as soon as she was ready."

Were they worried that Miriam would be labeled? "Miriam was stigmatized anyway, going to the resource room so often," Joel explained. "Miriam's learning differences are part of who she is; those differences have an impact on her self-esteem, on her personality. P'TACH is an excellent program, and we had to do what was best for our child."

The transition to P'TACH went pretty smoothly. Deborah established new rules with regard to homework – Miriam had to do homework without Deborah, who had become a crutch. With a more manageable workload, Miriam was happy and the morning headaches and stomachaches she often complained of disappeared. This was a fresh start.

Miriam is learning to type, and accomplishments in knitting and photography classes have been a great boost to her self-confidence. In fact, the mainstream girls envy those P'TACH-only electives.

"It is our obligation to speak favorably about P'TACH. P'TACH is there for our children's benefit," says Joel, "Some parents get their children by and

believe they are doing the best for them. Practically speaking, they are wrong because learning issues will come out anyway. They should help their children succeed as best they can."

Joel continues, "P'TACH is a very good, worthwhile organization to support. It fills a void in our Jewish educational system and allows this population of children to be successful and not dependent on the community."

Miriam's favorite classes are knitting with Mimi and math with Mrs. Hershkovich. She loves Mrs. (Kulik) Serkez, the P'TACH Coordinator, and considers all her classmates friends. When asked about her previous school, Miriam said she "blocked that school out of my memory. I like P'TACH better."

Loved and admired by her parents for her determination and resilience, Miriam has the support of a close-knit family, especially her twin brother Natan and her older sister Avigail.

To all who know her, Miriam is an inspiration. ■

— — — — —
**P'TACH,
HAS A PROVEN
TRACK RECORD
AND CREATED
OPPORTUNITIES
AND POSSIBILITIES
FOR MIRIAM.**
— — — — —

**National Educational
Resource Center at P'TACH**

N · E · R · C

Professional consulting, staff development
and continuing education for K-12 educators in the
Jewish Day School community.

*For 25 years, through workshops and intensive training,
NERC has offered teachers, rabbis and school administrators
the tools and strategies to meet the diverse educational and social
needs of their students. Below is a list of last year's courses.*

*To schedule training in your school or community please call:
Dr. Weller at 718-854-8600, ext. 102.*

2008-2009 Schedule

Presented by **Dr. Joel Dickstein**

June 2009

■ "Teaching Beyond the Middle: Differentiated Instruction"
Hillel Yeshiva High School, Deal, NJ

January 2009

■ "Different Needs, Different Solutions: Effective Teaching Practices"
Bais Yaakov of Passaic, NJ

November 2008

■ "Connecting with Navi in Middle School"
■ "Learning in 'Pictures': Ways to Approach Jewish Text"
■ "Diagnostic-Prescriptive Teaching in Jewish Studies"
New Jersey Association of Jewish Day Schools

September 2008

■ Faculty Development Workshop: "Differentiated Instruction"
This in-school consultation developed school-wide strategies to address the needs of students with learning differences
Siach Yitzchok, Far Rockaway, NY

Presented by **Dr. Judah Weller**

May 2009

■ "Understanding All Kinds of Minds - An Introduction to Neurodevelopmental Variation"
Avi Chai Foundation - Brooklyn, NY

November and December 2008

■ Jewish Day "Schools Attuned" staff development program, 5- day "Core Course"
Hidden Sparks Foundation, Brooklyn, New York

P'TACH Seniors Celebrate

Continued from page 7

noons a week at local offices and rehabilitation centers where they gain invaluable skills and experience. In one office, the boys worked on a database, explored marketing strategies and reviewed software programs.

The boys are so far advanced that even Dr. Dickstein is overwhelmed by their progress. "I passed a classroom and saw all five of them studying together for their upcoming "mainstream" 12th grade economics final," he says. "And not just for a few minutes. It blew me away. These were boys who once had significant attention difficulties."

Azriel and Mendy are intelligent and confident young adults. Their days at P'TACH began with *shacharis* and breakfast with the rest of the Mesivta, followed by learning the *parsha* with Rabbi Schwarzmer, who made sure to include *hashkafa* and point out its relevance to the boys' lives. Every Sunday, the boys were tested on the previous week's material. The class also learned Gemara, Halacha and Mishnayos.

Mendy describes his odyssey. "When I was in ninth grade, I got into a lot of trouble,

failing most of my tests," he says. "In P'TACH, I was motivated by my teachers and Rebbeim, I worked hard and had more confidence. For me, the change started somewhere at the end of tenth grade. That's when it all started coming together." Mendy is now attending Touro College.

Azriel also has big plans. "I'd like to learn for a year," he says, "and then go into law or maybe business." Clearly, this is a young man who feels that the sky's the limit!

The P'TACH graduates become wistful as they think back upon the past four years. They are looking towards the future, but will miss the security and camaraderie of the Yeshiva.

Where will Azriel and Mendy be five years from now? Ten years?

Judging by their progress and positive outlook, chances are they will be starting families, pursuing careers and studying Torah. They are proof positive that students with learning differences succeed under the right circumstances given the right opportunities.

The people of P'TACH are proud of their accomplishments. It's up to our community to understand that every child deserves to celebrate. ■

by Malkie Lowinger

EVERY
CHILD
DESERVES
TO
CELEBRATE

P'TACH Scholarship Fund Raffle

Tickets are:

one for \$54 two for \$100
four for \$180 ten for \$360

Call 718-854-8600 or email PTACHMAIN@aol.com to pledge your support.

What is more exciting than a raffle?!!

Think of the final countdown, when every heart skips a beat as the raffle numbers are read out loud!

The only thing more exciting than the raffle itself is the feeling you get when you purchase the tickets, knowing that you are already a winner for supporting the education of Jewish children with learning disabilities.

The more tickets you buy, the better your chances of winning the \$10,000 CASH GRAND PRIZE, or the SECOND PRIZE \$1,000 gift certificate to ARTSCROLL BOOKS!!

Drawing at the Annual Scholarship Dinner, February 21, 2010.


PTACH
PARENTS FOR TORAH FOR ALL CHILDREN
1428 36th Street, Suite 211
Brooklyn, NY 11218

Educating Children for Life

Non Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Permit No. 2903
Brooklyn, NY