

# wistia



## From Challenge to **EMPOWERMENT**

Paving the way to rich,  
meaningful futures



FEATURE

Where Are  
They Now?  
OUR ALUMNI

Knitting Their Way  
to Self-Esteem  
THE FAIR OF THE YEAR

Of Personality,  
Passion & Purpose  
MEET SHANI VERSCHLEISER

# Can we empower our kids?

**Dr. Judah Weller, Ed.D.**  
Educational Director @ PTACH



## Demystification is not just a nice term; it's a process that may spell the difference between a life of empowerment or of pain.

In recent months, our community has seen a growing wave of drug-related tragedies. Each year, substance abuse claims the lives of dozens of adolescents—boys and girls from all kinds of families, deeply beloved teenagers who had so much to offer.

Hearing about these devastating stories that often began years before their end—many of us feel an overwhelming sense of despair.

Is there anything a parent can do to prevent such a horrific downward spiral? Is there anything an educator can do to guide a challenged child onto a path of strength and empowerment?

It's critical to acknowledge that many of these youngsters struggled with learning: their educational experiences were rife with failure, isolation, and shame.

While no two children are alike, we at PTACH believe that the key to building strong and resilient children is to demystify their challenges...then build on their strengths.

If the child isn't enlightened—if they are not made aware of the very specific learning challenges causing this struggle—the resentment and self-loathing start to build. *I'm worthless. I'm a dumbbell. I can't do the stuff that everyone else can.*

Living in a world where everyone else seems to manage effortlessly that which makes you howl in frustration is terribly frightening. And living in a world where everyone else seems assured and accomplished but you—it seems—missed the “talent” distribution and have nothing unique to offer society, is perhaps the darkest and most hopeless state in which a human can ever be.

This is why the heart of our approach is demystification. Demystification is not just another nice term; it's a process that may spell the difference between a life of empowerment and a life of pain. It's about explaining to children why they are struggling—while infusing optimism and hope for the road ahead, in light of their many specific strengths.

A child who struggles to decode text, for example, may have so many swirling questions. Why is this so hard for me? What is WRONG with me? Why am I the only one who feels like crying when Morah asks me to read?

EVERY child has challenges; there is no such thing as a “perfect mind.” Children must be able to articulate their weaknesses and their strengths—and the adults in their life must help them get there. If a learning-disabled child has reached adolescence in a fuzzy haze of confusion and sadness, then we have failed them.

In just a few pages, you'll read a beautiful feature spotlighting some of our alumni. In their stories, you'll notice two things: a refreshingly matter-of-fact candor about their struggles, and an equally confident expression of their strengths.

This is what PTACH is about, and this is what makes us most proud. Come visit and see for yourself!

✉ ptachdrw@aol.com ☎ (718) 854.8600 x102

*Dr. Judah Weller has been the Educational Director of PTACH since 1982. He has also trained over 1000 Jewish educators as a facilitator for the “Jewish Day Schools Attuned” staff development project, focusing on understanding neurodevelopmental variation.*

## WELCOMING



**Rabbi Dovid Teitelbaum, MSW**

PTACH School Counselor & Therapist

Joining us as the newest member of the Chaim Berlin High School faculty is Rabbi Dovid Teitelbaum, MSW, a school counselor and therapist with Torah Umesorah's Counterforce. With years of experience as both a *rebbe* and mental health professional, Rabbi Teitelbaum brings a unique skill set—and abundant warmth—to our team, and has quickly become a go-to address for students and parents alike. In addition to his role as 11th grade *rebbe*, he provides counseling and support to all students in the program.



**Rabbi Simcha Loiterman, M.S.Ed.**

PTACH *Rebbi*

We are excited to welcome Rabbi Simcha Loiterman as the 11th-12th grade *rebbe* at PTACH's MTA program. A passionate *rebbe* and licensed special educator, Rabbi Loiterman has taught at HANC, HAFTR and PTACH Chicago, and draws from over 10 years' experience in special education, general education and Judaic studies.

Known for his ability to bring Torah to life, Rabbi Loiterman keeps his students riveted with exciting and relevant classroom discussions (often drawn from a motley array of sources, including 80's trivia, TED Talks, Malcom Gladwell, The Gobots, and whatever happened to him that morning). He is a regular columnist for the Queens Jewish Link and a published author on Aish.com.

# Torah, Teaching & Tea

—  
A COMMUNITY  
MELAVA MALKA  
IN QUEENS

On Motza'ei Shabbos, January 13, over 100 Queens residents gathered at Congregation Ahavas Yisrael to support PTACH's important work while enjoying delicious refreshments (donated generously by Wasserman's supermarket.)

Prominent community activist, Rabbi Yochanan Bechhofer, greeted attendees at the event. Speaking on behalf of several grateful parents, he pointed out that PTACH—which in Hebrew means “an opening”—is a most fitting name for a program that gives students an opening to discover and express their G-d-given potential.

“At PTACH, every child can learn,” he noted. “For over 40 years, its educators have not only used the most cutting-edge techniques, they’ve worked to develop personal relationships with every student, helping them figure out how they learn best. THIS is true *chanoch lana'ar al pi darko*.”

Special guest speaker Rabbi Moshe Taub, Rav of Young Israel of Holliswood, spoke next. He noted that when Hashem informed Moshe of his imminent leadership role,

Moshe demurred, saying “Who am I? I have a deficit; I am not a man of words.” Moshe recognized that he was different; he didn't feel qualified. Hashem assures him, saying “I will be with you. You will be successful.”

“Ultimately,” Rabbi Taub said, “Moshe—the man of no words—became the quintessential man of words, the man through whom G-d's will was transmitted to an entire nation for eternity.

“This is what PTACH does for its students: they take talented children who are feeling inferior and incapable, and create productive adults who have goals, aspirations—and the abilities to achieve them.”

To illustrate how PTACH accomplishes this, Rabbi Taub shared a story told directly by a parent. A PTACH teacher once asked her students to write a list of all their abilities. Several months later, when a student insisted that she couldn't complete a test, the teacher took out the paper and simply pointed to an item on the list. “Look; you knew you could do it then,” the teacher said. “I know you can do it now.”



**“We must believe every child can become a Moshe Rabbeinu or a Miriam.”**

— RABBI MOSHE TAUB

**“PTACH gives our children a ‘pesach’ - an opening. At PTACH, every child can learn.”**

— RABBI YOCHANAN BECHHOFER



## EXPANDING Educational Frontiers



**Dr. Weller serves as guest presenter for Toronto teacher training**

On Tuesday, January 2, over 50 Toronto educators participated in a workshop given by PTACH educational director Dr. Judah Weller, and sponsored by Yeshiva Yesodei HaTorah. The presentation—titled “Understanding and Managing All Kinds of Minds in the Classroom: A Neurodevelopmental View of Learning”—was geared to the school's rebbeim, but other community educators participated as well.

Dr. Weller introduced the audience to the eight pathways of learning: Attention, Memory, Language, Neuromotor, Social Cognition, Higher Order Cognition, Spatial and Temporal Ordering. Using real-life scenarios, he illustrated how these pathways manifest in different students.

For example, Reuven may have a weakness in processing language at a rapid rate, and Shimon does not preview goals for assignments, which affects the quality of his work. At the same time, Reuven exhibits wonderful creativity, and Shimon is the class socialite, showing excellent social skills.

“Understanding the way students best process information is crucial to helping them succeed in the classroom,” says Rabbi Binyamin Septon, Executive Director at Yesodei HaTorah. “It's especially important when you're teaching kids with learning difficulties, because a solid understanding of their strengths and weaknesses can mean the difference between ‘effective’ and ‘ineffective.’”

Participants appreciated the practical tips and insights, and several who immediately implemented the techniques reported very positive results.

Once, Rabbi Taub shared, a principal asked Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky zt”l if he could install the classrooms mezzuzahs lower down, so students could reach them. Rav Kamenetsky rejected the idea, instructing the principal to keep the mezzuzahs high. “We must bring children up to Torah,” he said. “Children can reach any height imaginable. We must believe every child can become a Moshe Rabbeinu or a Miriam.”

This is what PTACH believes, Rabbi Taub noted, and this is why they are successful. At PTACH, no child can be left behind; every student must thrive and contribute to Klal Yisrael.

Attendees report leaving warmed and inspired by this uplifting event, and PTACH faculty members were moved by the show of support.

Sponsors of the evening included Rabbi and Mrs. Yochanan Bechhofer, Mr. Mark and Mrs. Linda Frankel, Mr. Eli and Mrs. Yitti Glaser, Mr. Sheldon and Mrs. Miriam Greenberg, Mr. Itzi and Mrs. Irene Laub, Mr. Izzy and Mrs. Ruchi Sherman, and Mr. Chaim and Mrs. Chana Wasserman.



SPOTLIGHT ON OUR ALUMNI

# Where Are They Now?

FEATURE



## Chani Lebowitz

GRADUATED: PTACH @ BYDM IN 2009, BRURIAH HIGH SCHOOL, 2013

**What she's up to:** I have my Bachelors, and I have one year left of graduate school to attain my MSW. I've worked in Rachel's Place [a shelter for teens at risk] for almost two years.

**Why she loves her work:** I always wanted to work with teens but wasn't considering social work. When I came back from seminary, I became a mentor at Rachel's Place. Helping teens rebuild their lives was amazing. Suddenly, I realized I wanted to do this full-time. My goal is to go into clinical work, helping girls with trauma and substance abuse.

**How she did it:** I never thought I would be able to graduate high school, let alone college! But PTACH had prepared me for the next

step, and when I went on to Bruriah for high school I was already building on the skills they'd taught me. College was intimidating, grad school even more so. A fifteen-page research paper?! Yet by now, what my learning disability means to me is that it takes me longer to process, and I have to work extra hard. But I can do it.

**Her message:** Don't let a label define you! Just because it'll take you more effort to succeed, doesn't mean you can't accomplish it.

**Her gratitude:** The most important thing PTACH taught me is not to fall back on the "learning disability" label, because it doesn't mean I lack intelligence or capability. I just have to work harder, but it's worth it.

**Her mentors:** The teachers and assistants all went the extra mile. Special shout out to Hedy Rubel, who always believed in me and was a huge advocate, up to offering me an internship recently. We also had a Miss Leiber who used to tell us "Don't use your excuse!" She was terrific.



## Ellie Mermelstein

GRADUATED: PTACH @ MTA IN 1996

**What he's up to:** Married with two daughters, lives in Teaneck. Home builder in Teaneck and surrounding areas.

**Why he loves his work:** I always liked building. Since I was a little kid, I just had to know how houses are made.

**How he did it:** It's been on-the-job training, no schooling. I just went for it and figured it out. I believe you can accomplish anything you put your mind to—if you want it badly enough. Next month I'm taking a training course to qualify as a building inspector, just because I want to gain even more knowledge in this field.

**His message:** In this line of work, maintaining a reputation for hard work and honesty will take you further than anything else.

**His gratitude:** I loved PTACH. All the administrators and teachers believed in me—and made sure I believed in myself. No one ever let me give up. Yes, everybody's different, but nobody really has limitations.

**My mentors:** Rabbi Feder, Dr. Dickstein, and Rabbi Feman. I was very close to them throughout high school and beyond. It's been many years, but we still speak on occasion.



## Jake Benzakein

GRADUATED: PTACH @ MTA IN 2006

**What he's up to:** Married with 2 children; living in Staten Island. Working at River Spring Home Health as a Nurse Care Manger RN.

**Why he loves his work:** I'm there for people when they get home post-diagnosis or post-surgery. I help them transition back into routine and learn how to care for their condition.

**How he did it:** Getting my license was really, really hard. I took the boards multiple times before passing—but I did it, because I knew I could (and because my wife is amazingly supportive!).

**His message:** If you're in special ed, know that you'll be working much harder than anybody else. But don't let anybody tell you no. Just work as hard as you can—you will do it.

**His gratitude:** In high school at MTA, I was mainstreamed for history and math, and a PTACH tutor helped me juggle it all. When I failed my regent, Rabbi Feder pushed me to take it again. It wasn't fun, it was a ton of work, but I passed. This kind of work ethic gave me the chance to flex my learning muscles, ultimately making college—and my dream job—possible.

**My mentors:** Rabbi Wasser and Rabbi Shenker were G-d-sent angels to push me through, answer my questions, and guide me straight out. There's no way in the world I could have done this without them. And if I needed someone to turn to, it would always be them.



## Natan G.

GRADUATED: PTACH @ CHAIM BERLIN IN 2016

**What he's up to:** Learning as a Bais Medrash student in Yeshiva Zichron Aryeh, Far Rockaway.

**Why he loves his learning:** It's challenging, but so worthwhile. Whether it's halacha which will guide me through life, or Gemara, with its valuable thinking training, I really enjoy it.

**How he did it:** I'm not sure! It was definitely tough at the beginning—physically and mentally. I'm very self-motivated, and I have great *chavrusas* helping me along. The *rebbeim* here—some of whom I've known from summer camp—are helping me develop my learning skills.

**His message:** Keep working! It doesn't matter what anyone says about you, because you know your greatness.

**His gratitude:** PTACH helped me individually, working step-by-step through every area of challenge.

**My mentors:** I'm still in touch with most of my PTACH *rebbeim*. Rabbi Reuven Kamin was an inspiration to me, and his words will always stick in my mind—"You can't get me down, because I'll get right back up again."



## Ksenyia Katayev

GRADUATED: PTACH @ CENTRAL IN 2010

**What she's up to:** Graduated Marymount Manhattan College in May 2017. Working as an assistant teacher. Would like to train in pediatric speech language pathology.

**Why she loves her work:** I relate really well to children. I have the patience, the responsibility and the empathy and I just love working with them. A lot of credit goes to the most patient and empathetic role models in my life—my parents.

**How she did it:** Marymount has an outstanding academic access program, with one-on-one coaching for areas of difficulty. I chalk up my perseverance to PTACH and to my parents' encouragement. Our family emigrated from Uzbekistan to the US, so yes, there were challenges! I would have given up many times without their emotional support.

**Her message:** Studying sometimes seems tough and tedious. You need to set up a support system and ask for help.

**Her gratitude:** Mrs. Winokur, my amazing English teacher at PTACH, encouraged my love of writing and showed me how to use resources, which really stood by me when I had to write college papers. Mrs. Winter, Mrs. Friedman, Mrs. Winokur—they were all memorable teachers.

**My mentors:** Mrs. Welkowitz always believed in me. She commended me for being bright and ambitious and having big dreams, and her words have stayed with me.

## What do you get when you mix 47 balls of yarn, 245 days of knitting, & 36 determined PTACH students?

Bais Yaakov D’Rav Meir found out on June 14, 2017, when its entire student body stepped into PTACH’s classrooms and discovered a cornucopia of color and talent: the long-awaited Knitting Fair.

Decorated with balloons, backdrops, and all sorts of attractive paraphernalia, PTACH’s hallways were transformed into a breathtaking extravaganza, complete with exciting activities and delicious refreshments. Students browsed the booths and marveled at the items, their “oohs” and “aahs” reverberating down the hall. How did it all begin?

In the PTACH program hosted in Bais Yaakov D’rav Meir (BYDM), knitting is a regular weekly “subject”—and an all-time favorite. With personality, flair, and endless reserves of patience, Mrs. Mimi Srulovitz—an avid knitter and artist—helps each PTACH student produce remarkable works of art, no matter their age or level.

Aside from the development of fine motor skills, knitting empowers students to hone their abilities in dealing with frustration, following step-by-step directions, and problem-solving. Best of all, our students love every minute: no one is happy when it’s time for Mimi to go!

This year, however, PTACH’s Assistant Coordinator Samantha Tucker and Social Worker Shani Verschleiser took the weekly knitting lessons to a whole new level. For several months, the girls worked feverishly to produce numerous products and accumulate an expansive stock of knitted novelties. Their spectacular creations—an array of headbands, barrettes, fuzzy pens, and keychains—would be displayed and sold to BYDM’s entire student body, and that knowledge fueled them with a powerful determination.

On June 14, the day of the Knitting Fair, the air was charged with vibes of triumph. Barely managing to contain their excitement, our students carefully arranged their handiwork in sophisticated displays—then waited for the magic to start.

Minutes later, waves of BYDM students began pouring into the hall. The awe and wonder were evident; students and teachers stood amazed at the creations, saying things like “Wow!” “This is amazing!” Or “How did you do this?”

Our girls radiated a palpable joy. After months of hard work and persistence, they’d pulled off a masterpiece, showing the world what they could accomplish—but most of all, showing themselves.

The Knitting Fair also enabled PTACH’s students to practice their sales and communications skills. The girls manned a variety of booths, selling food, snack, and novelty items in addition to their knitted creations.

“For girls who struggle daily with feelings of ‘less-than’ or ‘inferior,’ this was a gift,” says Miriam Serkez, Coordinator of PTACH at BYDM. “As they showcased the fruits of their labor, you could see the wheels turning: *I’m capable, I’m talented, I’m worth a lot. I can do things, and I can do them well.*”



## DISCOVER YOUR STRENGTHS. No Strings Attached

Another empowering outlet enjoyed by PTACH’s students at BYDM is guitar, via weekly lessons from seasoned guitarist and speech-language pathologist Mrs. Dina Weller.

In a small group setting—and under expert tutelage—our girls learn to use chords, master melodies, and play popular contemporary songs. After months of training and practice, they perform at our annual guitar recital, debuting their musical feats before friends, teachers, and schoolmates.

“Children who discover their strengths—and feel good about themselves—are highly likely to succeed in life,” Samantha Tucker, Assistant PTACH Coordinator at BYDM, explains. “Our goal in offering knitting classes and guitar lessons is clear: empower our students by providing them with productive outlets that foster self-confidence and growth.”



# What's happening IN PTACH @ CHAIM BERLIN?



Lots. Whether it's at our Affinities Fair or Science Lab, Sports Leagues or Art Studio, outdoor court or Hunter Mountain, our students are using every one of their senses to learn, connect, and grow.



Frog dissections: experiential learning at its best!



Dreidel art — where creativity + fine motor meet



Jr. High Sports Leagues - Teaching socialization through meaningful interaction



Our HS boys, yielding great results on January regents



Rabbi Kamin's affinity: Cheffing for entertainment



Confidently showing his affinity for pythons



Demonstrating his skill and affinity for all types of cooking



Sharing his high-level talent and affinity for music



Student-designed custom jerseys for league games



A peek into our art studio



High school trip to Kaaterskill Falls



Using a multi-modality approach to learn phonics



Puzzles: Fostering teamwork while developing sequencing and problem solving skills



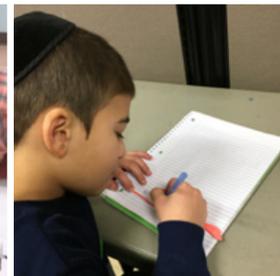
Science: Presenting a displacement experiment



Hats: Making history come alive in an interactive way



Mindfulness: Becoming more aware of emotions and where we feel them



A multi-sensory approach to handwriting, using silly putty



Hike on Hunter Mountain! Real-life grit

STAFF SPOTLIGHT



## Shani Verschleiser

Social Worker @ PTACH  
Bais Yaakov D'rav Meir

Have you ever cared about someone so much that your head hurt? You'll find a kindred spirit in Shani Verschleiser. While the world at large focuses on weaknesses, Shani—a vivacious powerhouse who radiates contagious positive energy—seeks out strengths. In her role as School Social Worker over the past four years, she's partnered with PTACH's staff to ensure the social and emotional well-being of each student. Her goal? "To make every child feel understood and valued. Because that's what will allow them to live productive, meaningful lives."

It starts with looking at the big picture. What is happening in each child's life? "PTACH is a safe space," Shani says. "It's so much more than 'How do we get them to pass this test?' It's the place where our students can pull themselves together and become open to the experience of learning."

If a child gets to school hungry, for example, PTACH's team will make sure they get a decent breakfast and snacks. If a child would benefit enormously from sleep-away camp—but her family can't afford the hefty price tag—PTACH will do whatever it can to make it happen.

"It's about looking at the whole person," Shani explains. "And we're able to do this thanks to intensive collaboration. Every member of the PTACH team—the teachers, reading specialist, OT, SLP, and program coordinators—meets weekly to ensure that every girl's needs are met."

Shani works with students individually and in groups. With younger children,

she focuses heavily on social skills; with 4th to 6th graders she'll focus on recognizing personal challenges and lowering stigmas (now that they've become aware of their differences). With 7th and 8th graders she explores developmental issues and readiness for high school—particularly for kids who will be mainstreamed. "A lot of the work is age-specific," she notes.

**Her goal?  
"To make every child feel understood and valued."**

In Shani's world, there's no place for formulaic, "color-in-the-lines" activities. Inventive and artistic, this mother of three believes in giving kids the freedom to build emotional intelligence—and let their imaginations loose—through interactive groups that involve experiential role playing and multi-sensory activities. For example, she recently explored the mind-body connection using a life-like body image made of various textures.

"When you're anxious, where do you feel it in your body?" she asked the kids, after discussing the meaning of "sensation." They pointed to different parts of the model, suggesting things like "a bad headache," "a tight fist," or "butterflies in my stomach."

"By helping these kids get in touch with their bodies, we can teach them how to regulate their systems when tense or frustrated," she explains. "These are tools for life."

A forward-thinking doer and fearless child advocate, Shani is also at the helm of Magenu, a personal safety organization she co-founded with her husband Eli. The dynamic duo is also active in Our Place, a safe haven for frum kids struggling with substance abuse.

"This is where we see the kids who did not get placed in PTACH," she says candidly. "These are the kids with undiagnosed learning disorders. These are the kids who were put in a classroom where they struggled every second, because it 'pas nisht.' These are the kids who run away the second they can, because their associations with Yiddishkeit are so painful."

If a child requires specialized learning that mainstream schools cannot provide, Shani says, sending them to a supportive haven run by professionals can literally save their life.

"We have to internalize that our children are not an extension of us," she says. "They're their own people, and we have to ask: what will be best for them? It's not about us."

Although big changes happen in small, sometimes imperceptible increments, Shani's belief in the children she touches never wavers. "These children will become the most amazing adults," she predicts. "They have such strengths, and they're going to do great things."



Parents for Torah for All Children  
1689 East 5th Street  
Brooklyn, NY 11230



# Raising the Bar on Reading



PTACH elementary school teachers and learning specialists enjoyed an all-day staff development on September 4, 2017, delivered by noted reading specialist Sara Gross, M.S.Ed. Mrs. Gross is the creator of ReadRight, a highly-structured, multi-sensory reading program that utilizes fundamentals of the Wilson and Orton-Gillingham approaches to reading instruction.

“ReadRight is unique, because results are very measurable,” PTACH coordinator Mrs. Miriam Serkez says. “This is why both students and teachers find it appealing.”

Educational Director Dr. Judah Weller called the program “systematic” and “exciting,” noting that it offers eye-catching, engaging visuals and a structure that allows for continuous progress-tracking.

“PTACH prides itself on being at the forefront of special education,” he says. “We’re continuously upgrading our instructional methods and curriculum based on the latest research, and this program is a valuable addition to our toolkit.”

**Could your child benefit from small classes & individualized learning?**

**Come visit our program & make an informed decision!**

**Bais Yaakov D’Rav Meir**  
85 Parkville Avenue  
Brooklyn, NY 11230  
Mrs. Miriam Serkez, M.A.

**Yeshivas Rabbi Chaim Berlin**  
Elementary School  
1310 Avenue I  
High School  
1593 Coney Island Avenue  
Brooklyn, NY 11230  
Rabbi Reuven Kamin, M.A.

**Yeshiva University High School for Boys**  
2540 Amsterdam Avenue  
New York, NY 10033  
Rabbi Baruch Feder M.S.

**Yeshiva University High School for Girls**  
86-86 Palo Alto Street  
Holliswood, NY 11423  
Mrs. Jacqueline Welkowitz M.S. M. Ed.

[ptach.org](http://ptach.org) (718)854.8600

PTACH Main Office: 1689 East 5th Street | Brooklyn NY 11230

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