



# IN A CLASS OF THEIR OWN.

For the struggling student, these men and women are saviors, and for the gifted *talmid*, they bring excitement to a boring day — although for the most part they sit alone, without the accolades, or the job security, of the popular class *rebbeim*. Yet *menahalim* across the board agree that this is the next frontier in *chinuch*: a functional and vibrant network of private educators

BY **Yisroel Besser**

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PHOTO: NAFTOLI GOLDBERG

**R**abbi Binyamin Barnett was sitting in a far corner of the auditorium, nearly invisible as he watched the graduation proceedings. There was Meir Bernstein, accepting his diploma from the *menahel*. Meir paused near the edge of the stage, looking out to where his proud parents and grandparents were seated, and he smiled, clutching the diploma like a trophy. Then his gaze went to the back rows, to the slight young man in the dark suit.

Their eyes locked. Meir nodded slowly and offered a little salute toward Rabbi Barnett. Then he squared his shoulders and walked down the stairs to join his fellow graduates.

There were no witnesses to the heroic work they'd done, no classmates or rebbeim to see the patience, determination, and creativity that defined their encounters. Meir's parents barely knew the man's name — they just called him the private rebbi, or the tutor, and grumbled that he took more money per hour than an electrician.

But Meir knew. And Rabbi Barnett knew. And in that moment, hundreds of long, lonely, exhausting hours were rewarded.

**Tutors Rebranded** As *chinuch* goals and techniques have evolved along with society's demands and complexities, and parents understand that a child with reading or comprehension issues is at-risk of struggling later on, private rebbeim have become an industry of their own. Yet it's an industry that needs rebranding.

One respected *rav* and *maggid shiur* concedes that the private rebbeim of generations past leave some people with the wrong idea. "I had a *'chavrusa'* when I was about 12 years old, a European survivor, a sofer by profession and terrorist as a side job. He would yell at me like nobody's business as we learned the first *perek* of Bava Metziah. Until today, when I hear the word *'heilach'* I break out in a cold sweat and I have trouble teaching it. What a dent a negative *girsas d'yankusa* can have."

## A generation ago, many tutors were people WHO COULDN'T GET CHINUCH JOBS

—Rabbi Yaakov Bender

It's time to update people's thinking, says Rabbi Yaakov Bender, rosh yeshivah of Darchei Torah in Far Rockaway. "You can't blame parents for hesitating when it comes to arranging a tutor. A generation ago, many tutors were people who couldn't get *chinuch* jobs — tired, unmotivated, without the confidence or dynamism to inspire a child. Of course it was a broken process — you take kids who need a bit more and then lock them up in a room with a lackluster rebbi in a wrinkled shirt — so it often made the situation worse."

Welcome to *chinuch*, 2017.

Even the word "tutor" is out of style, with many schools calling them "private rebbeim/*moros*," "freelance rebbeim," or "supplementary educators." Many dynamic young men and women with ambitions of classroom jobs will start their careers doing private education, a way to break into the industry on the front lines.

# Menahelim will be attracted to someone who dreams of MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN THE LIFE OF A CHILD

—Rabbi Menachem M. Karmel

And some will never leave.

Yet why would someone opt for a career in tutoring over a formal classroom position?

For starters, because the job is available. “If you’re good, there’s always a need. In most cases, it’s the school that recommends it and the *menahelim* have the private rebbeim they prefer to work with,” says Brooklyn private rebbi Rabbi Binyamin Barnett.

But if there’s no formal training, how is a *menahel* to know who’s qualified?

Rabbi Menachem M. Karmel, *menahel* of Montreal’s Yeshiva Gedola elementary school, says it’s a lot about the attitude of the individual tutor. “If someone walks in dressed like a mensch, speaks with confidence, and makes a convincing pitch, then you take him seriously. I can tell you that most *menahelim* won’t feel confident recommending or working with a guy who simply wants the job because he likes the idea of being able to make some extra

money and still stay in a kollel or *chinuch* environment, which is very attractive to some applicants. *Menahelim* will be attracted to someone who dreams of making a difference in the life of a child, who sees himself or herself as capable of providing something that often can’t be given in the classroom.”

Furthermore, many of these private rebbeim possess skills or qualities that allow them to reach a *talmid* with a specific challenge in ways the classroom rebbi may not be able to,” says Rabbi Karmel. “Some of them specialize in auditory processing or *kriah* issues and they’re literally saving lives, giving kids who were on the outside a way to climb back into the system and thrive. At the same time, even those who haven’t formally trained in *kriah* support or other specific areas of learning may have the talent to connect with an unmotivated *talmid*, or to create a non-pressured learning experience for a boy who is struggling to fit the mold.

So often, I see tutors like these make a dramatic impact on a *talmid*’s life, where the classroom rebbi may not have been successful. These tutors, often with specific skill sets, can charge accordingly, and, considering that today’s parents are more attuned as well, they will always have work.”

**Money’s No Object** When it comes to reading issues, tutors who are trained in multiple methodologies are at a tremendous advantage, according to Rabbi Yosef Mashinsky, *menahel* of Bais Dovid in Monsey. “A number of modalities have been introduced over the past ten years or so, and many of them are effective and worthwhile pursuing,” says Rabbi Mashinsky. “But while some of these programs claim to be the one and only fix-all-solution, realities on the ground indicate otherwise, and often what works for one student is totally ineffective for the other. A proficient tutor can identify the correct program for each individual and sometimes adapt a combination of a few programs together to best help the child.”

According to Rabbi Mashinsky, there are three basic categories of students requiring assistance, and a tutor needs different skill sets for each of those groups. “You have students who are lacking basic skills due to mental or physical or learning challenges, students who possess basic skills but lack motivation, and then you have gifted children who are understimulated in the classroom.

“Our first and foremost responsibility is the category-one child,” Rabbi Mashinsky continues. “Though his challenges are due to inherent issues, with proper intervention from early on, much can be done to alleviate these problems. Like a twisted sapling, as long as it’s still soft and pliable, you can insert a stake at its side and straighten it out. So too, it’s incumbent on both the school and the parents to do everything in their power to provide this child with remedial

assistance, where conventional classroom teaching methods haven’t worked. In this case, a qualified tutor who has both the skills and the personality to engage the struggling student and keep him attentive and excited is a must, and should be hired at any cost.”

The second-category child can often be helped by what Rabbi Mashinsky refers to as “a *geshmake yungerman*, a head counselor type, who inspires simply through his engaging and charismatic personality. Of course, he has to be familiar with the subject material and articulate enough to impart and explain it clearly, but no special training or strategies are necessary to help this student. Although its importance shouldn’t be underestimated, this type of remediation should be easier and cheaper to attain.”

The gifted child who needs incentives is certainly a candidate for private tutoring as well — perhaps not on the same emergency level as the first two categories, yet it’s definitely advantageous for him to receive individualized instruction geared to his abilities.

**Getting that Perfect Score** Not only does he have guaranteed work at a handsome rate, the freelance rebbi also gets to set his own hours. “The classroom isn’t for me,” a sought-after private tutor concedes. “I do better without the structure and formality, the commitment and schedule. It’s true that I work more hours in a day than a regular rebbi — I have to, to make ends meet — but I’m still free to make my own schedule. Also, the expectations on me personally aren’t the same as on a rebbi. I’m the type who wants to be able to go to the pizza shop with my wife, or play ball in the park, without hearing whispers. So for me this is perfect.”

If a dynamic young man or woman can always find tutoring work — and be well-compensated and change the world in the process — why isn’t “tutor” up there on

PHOTO: SHALOM SERRAF



**There is no rebbi, no matter how skilled he is, who can reach ALL THE TALMIDIM, AT ALL LEVELS, ALL THE TIME**

—Rabbi Baruch Levine

the list of emerging industries?

“Because it’s not easy,” Rabbi Barnett says. “In fact, it can be very, very hard. For starters, you have to work many more hours a day than a rebbi to make ends meet. A rebbi has the option of telling a story, or letting the boys learn *b’chavrusa* or even go out for extra recess. But in a one-on-one environment, that doesn’t work. You always have to be ‘on.’ And many kids who need private sessions have their issues — learning disabilities, or they’re ADHD. That means that they’re already working much harder than their friends in the classroom. Now, if a regular kid is tired or cranky one day, it’s rough, but if a kid with any sort of disability is off, it’s much worse. So the whole session can

be a downer, not just if he’s tired, also if he’s anxious, thinking about an upcoming simchah or camp or the Yankees. It takes tremendous patience and focus on the rebbi’s end.

“It’s also lonely,” Rabbi Barnett continues, “you don’t have the camaraderie and *pilpul chavirim* of a teachers’ room.”

And there is no real job security. “It changes from year to year, or even during the year. I see it with younger private rebbeim, especially,” he says, “they’re always nervous the parents will decide it’s enough and then they’ll be left hanging.”

Finally, there’s a self-esteem issue. “Let’s be honest. Which *mechutan* is excited to say he was *meshadech* with a tutor? It just

doesn’t have the prestige of rebbi.”

Actually, says Rabbi Mordechai Silber, one of Montreal’s most sought-after tutors, that’s changing as well. “When I tell people what I do for a living, their eyes light up and they say, ‘Wow, it’s never been more important.’ People get it, that this is the new frontier of *chinuch*. The rebbeim are fabulous, but the fact is, they’re teaching large groups and sometimes a child is left with things not being clear. Misunderstandings in learning snowball — the haziness gets worse and worse. I have teenage boys, smart boys, learning with me and suddenly they’ll interrupt, ‘Can you please explain to me the difference between *d’Oraisa* and *d’Rabbanan*? How does a *kal v’chomer*

really work?’ They have these nagging questions in their mind and they feel dumb about asking it in class and it really hinders them. So in a private setting, they can take a step back and relearn how to approach a Gemara, what happens in a Gemara, how the *sugya* is developed.”

Rabbi Baruch Levine, fifth-grade rebbi of Yeshiva K’tana in Waterbury, Connecticut (and well-known singer and composer), agrees. “There is no rebbi, no matter how skilled he is, who can reach all the *talmidim*, at all levels, all the time. Of course the outside help is necessary for some students to achieve their full potential.”

But some classroom rebbeim see tutors as a double-edged sword, since there are *talmidim* that will feel empowered enough by the private sessions to write off the formal *shiur*. It can also be very difficult for the rebbi when the tutor uses a different approach to explain a Gemara or arrives at a different conclusion — and there is almost always a scheduling conflict. But when it does work, there’s no sweeter partnership; they coordinate pace, workload, and point out strengths and weaknesses to each other. When they work in concert, it’s the student who benefits most.

Rabbi Nachman Steger, considered one of Lakewood’s most effective private rebbeim, says there should never be tension between teacher and tutor. “The ultimate goal is the student’s success in the classroom, which means that the tutor is also working for the rebbi or *morah*. I look at it as business partners who swallow differences because the bottom line is to make money — only here, the bottom line is the child’s success.”

But are all these private rebbeis really qualified to measure up to the task they’re empowered with? Often, when a rebbi or *morah* doesn’t seem to be working out in the classroom, they will be “repurposed,” moved into the role as private rebbi. How is it, wonders Rabbi Karmel, that we sometimes take those who aren’t able to

properly teach a class and assign them to those who need a great rebbi the most? “The ones in the class will be okay if the rebbi is decent, yet it’s the ones in the private rooms who need the stars, so why does it make sense? We need to really examine when and if this reassignment is indeed prudent.”

Rabbi Yaakov Bender agrees. “Look, I’ve had rebbeim who needed a break from the classroom and it was Rav Elya Svei who gave me this *nitzah*, to develop them into private rebbeim. But of course, that won’t work if the rebbi is completely burnt out or lacks passion. But sometimes it’s a classroom management issue — you have talented, knowledgeable rebbeim who find it hard to keep control of a large class, and for them, tutoring is perfect.”

**Learn How to Ask** A sweet 13-year-old boy I spoke with, a young man who spends hours each day with a private rebbi, raises an intriguing point. “It’s hard, because in class, it’s okay if you space out for a bit, but here, the pressure is tremendous because you can’t really float away.” And he’s got a solution too: “When there are two boys with the private rebbi, it’s perfect: it’s still private, but it’s much less pressure.”

Rabbi Steger considers the suggestion. “But it’s not so realistic, because generally, a boy whose parents hire a private rebbi has his own issues that justify that — and he needs the rebbi completely focused on him. There are, however, schools that maintain very small classes for that reason, so it’s essentially what this boy wants, a shared private rebbi with a few others.”

In order to avoid the stigma of a student needing private time with a tutor or remedial hours, Rabbi Nosson Muller of Chicago’s Tiferes Tzvi has created a novel program within his school. “We’ve hired young, gifted *talmidei chachamim*, and we set it up that every single *talmid* can have sessions with them. Not just the boys who



are struggling, but even the *metzuyanim*, the ones whose parents complain that the rebbi isn't covering enough. There are boys who are being helped with reading the mishnah and other boys who are doing the *Ketzos* with them, so everyone gains."

Rabbi Henoah Plotnik, an experienced *maggid shiur* at Meor HaTorah in Chicago, also sees the value of professional rebbeim for the gifted bochurim — and admits that often, the rebbi is a better solution than a father. "My rebbi, Rav Elya Svei, was a big proponent of private rebbeim, seeing them capable of having more *hatzlachah*, in most cases, than the boy's father. Over time, I came to realize that many fathers, even the learned ones, do not have what it takes to learn with their own child."

Along with help in learning, it gives the student a mentor, a vibrant relationship with a *talmid chacham* that they can draw on later in life.

"Listen, if you want to change the world with this article," a straightforward, candid *menahel* tells me, "please mention what is definitely one of the unaddressed minor crises in our community — the lack of a rebbi/*talmid* relationship for girls, and

## There's a reason parents cancel mid-year, if they feel their child no longer needs it. IT'S LIKE TAKING A SECOND MORTGAGE

—Rabbi Nosson Muller

the need for mentors for them. Let me explain. A bochur has a rebbi for four, even five hours a day, each year a new rebbi. He develops a real connection with that rebbi, so by the end of his high school, he has four rebbeim to choose from. In beis medrash, he'll be exposed to new *maggidei shiur* and spend long hours speaking with them. By the end of the process, it's inevitable that he'll have at least one whom he's comfortable looking to for guidance and advice. The girls have a slew of teachers for 37 minutes each, a whole merry-go-round, one for each subject. They don't have a *shoel u'meishiv* or a *mashgiach* whose job it is to develop a connection with them, and when they graduate they're off to seminary for one year. Even if they like a teacher in seminary, there are two hundred other girls there and no real time to form a bond. I have no doubt that we see so many issues later in life because of this — the girls aren't trained in speaking over small issues and resolving them before they snowball. My next project is to open a girl's high school with on-staff supplementary teachers, female *mashpios* to build private relationships with girls."

Rabbi Plotnik, from his vantage point as a shul rav, concurs with that point. "You can tell which adult had a rebbi or mentor in their life, and which ones didn't — and there's no doubt that the girls aren't being given enough opportunity. There's a local family in which, I noticed, the daughters themselves would call me with *sh'eilos*, this one had used a milchig knife to slice a fleishig onion, the other one wanted to know about writing while playing a board game on Chol Hamoed. I realized that the parents didn't call themselves because they were teaching their daughters to learn to ask — and now I see that they gave their children the greatest gift, the realization and appreciation that there are guides and mentors out there. The daughters are long married, but they still call for advice and *chizuk*."

**Tossing the Financial Ball** For both boys and girls, it seems that the next frontier in *chinuch* is creating a functional and vibrant network of private rebbeim.

But like every worthwhile project, to do it right takes money. Rebbeim generally rely on Chanukah presents to get by, and will often get help from parents when making a simchah as well. But the tutor generally doesn't have that benefit.

"That's why it's going to take vision," says Rabbi Levine, "and open pockets."

He recalls singing at a *chasunah* in Lakewood when a woman approached him. "I know you're a rebbi," she said, "and my husband and I are looking to invest. We want to help bochurim struggling in Gemara by paying for tutors."

"You have no idea how she literally changed a life. For a relatively small amount of money, she gave that boy exactly what he needed to live a successful life — she bought eternity. Others can and should emulate that."

Until schools are funding these private sessions, the burden falls on the parents — and it can be prohibitively expensive.

A good rebbi or tutor can easily charge

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60 dollars an hour; in Brooklyn or Lakewood, the price can go up to 100 dollars an hour.

“There’s a reason parents cancel mid-year,” says Rabbi Muller, “if they feel their child no longer needs it. It’s like taking a second mortgage. But it’s important to keep perspective, to realize that it’s much better to invest that money now, because if there are bigger issues later on, it will cost much more.”

Because of the overwhelming monetary burden, the financial ball gets tossed back and forth between the responsible parties, explains Rabbi Mashinsky. “This is not because of the lack of understanding or appreciation of the significance of the issue, but simply because of the overwhelming burden that they both carry. The parents can barely make their regular tuition payments, and the institutions have tremendous difficulty covering their operating budgets. If the donors in Klal Yisrael would understand and appreciate what could be accomplished with fully funded remedial programs — and maybe more importantly, which horrific problems could be avoided by doing so — they’d drop their other philanthropic projects and invest their resources in remedial programs.”

**On the Front Lines** Rabbi Plotnik reflects on the role these non-formal rebbeim play. “We have a few *talmidei chachamim* on staff who don’t say *shiur*, but are there to learn, advise, and be *mechazek*. It’s specifically since they are not *maggidei shiur* that they are sort of a buffer between the official administration and the bochurim. This is significant, because often bochurim have issues with authority, so having these free agents around goes a long way. There’s no doubt that the times demand new ideas and approaches. Evolution is not treif in *chinuch* but survival of the fittest is.”

And, he points out, it’s not just the *talmidim* who gain.

“Rabbi Yosef Strassfeld, who stood at the helm of the yeshivah in Engelwood, New Jersey until his untimely *petirah*, actually began as an employee for Agudah and started a homework center in Monsey during evening hours for kids who needed that kind of help. He saw his own *kochos* in *chinuch* and so he began what would become a respected yeshivah.”

Is there a hope of creating a “union” of tutors, providing resources and giving them the *pilpul chavirim* they don’t get now?

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—Rabbi Henoch Plotnik



**Like a twisted sapling, as long as it’s still soft and pliable, YOU CAN INSERT A STAKE AT ITS SIDE AND STRAIGHTEN IT OUT**

—Rabbi Yosef Mashinsky

“We’ve certainly noticed the trend,” says Rabbi Zvi Bloom of Torah Umesorah. “More and more private rebbeim are coming to workshops and conventions. Just as we created specialized groups for different grade-level rebbeim and *moros*, we would be happy to provide specific training and networking groups for this segment as well.”

Rabbi Barnett, as a private rebbi, reacts to this announcement with audible emotion. “You have no idea how badly we need it. My friends come back from these Shabbos conventions for *mechanchim* on such a high, so inspired. I always think, ‘*lama nigora*’ — we don’t need to recharge our batteries too? I think it would be a game-changer: If every tutor who works

a minimum amount of hours would be part of a larger network, the students would gain too.”

Investing in these men and women on the front lines of *chinuch* with the proper resources and respect can be significant. “Once we can fully communicate the life-altering impact proper remedial assistance makes on our students,” Rabbi Mashinsky predicts, “we will be able to rewrite the life stories and destinies of countless children and families.”

For Rabbi Bender, the key word is *l’chatchilah*. “Parents should see this opportunity for their children as *l’chatchilah*, and those who want to make a difference in *chinuch* should see this as *l’chatchilah*. It’s time for the change.” ●