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"When I went to pick up the teacher recommendation form," Mindy Andelman recalls, "the pre-kindergarten teacher said to me, 'Your son can't go to Perelman. Michael won't be able to handle the work. I think he has a learning disability.' "

Displaying the grit and determination that she would soon see in parents of other special-needs kids, Andelman shook off her shock and decided not to accept that teacher's verdict. "I am a Jewish mother," Andelman says. "Don't tell me what my kid can't do."

First, Andelman, who lives in Havertown with her husband, Bennett, and their three children, had to get a psycho-educational evaluation for her son. At age 5, Michael Andelman was diagnosed with expressive perception learning delay, which falls under the auditory processing umbrella.

Ariella Bell received her diagnosis at age 4. Hers was a visual problem; she has difficulty with focusing, tracking and spatial integration. Ariella's visual problems were hampering her ability to learn in her kindergarten class at Politz Hebrew Academy, explains her mother, Sally Bell.

Bell and her husband, Larry, live in Rhawnhurst with their Ave children. They have struggled to find the right academic setting for Ariella. "We wanted her - and all of our children - to be in Jewish day schools. And Beverly Bernstein made it happen."

Beverly Bernstein is the educational director of OROT, a special education program that enables many learning disabled children to attend Jewish day schools. "I have tremendous empathy for parents of special-needs kids who come to me and say that they were told Jewish day schools were not an option," says Bernstein. "I say to them, "We'll just see about that."

Bernstein knows that it is possible. She is not only an educator; she is the parent of special-needs children. Two of her four children have learning disabilities. All were educated in Jewish day schools and went on to successful careers and productive lives.

Bernstein wants the same for other special-needs kids - and there are many of them. During the current academic year, 45 children are in OROT programs in five of the Philadelphia area's K-8 Jewish day schools: Politz Hebrew Academy, Torah Academy of Greater Philadelphia, and the Perelman Jewish Day Schools, which include Stern Center, Forman Center and Robert Saligman Middle School.

In each school, OROT has at least one designated classroom staffed by multiple teachers. Depending on their needs, students spend time in both the OROT room and in mainstream classes. They also participate in most social activities at their schools.

OROT is not included in tuition; parents pay an annual fee. For this academic year, the fee is \$7,200 per child. The fee will rise to \$8,500 per child for the 2011-2012 year.

For parents like the Andelmans and Bells, that is money well spent. Michael Andelman and Ariella Bell are thriving in their respective classes at Perelman and Politz. But an unavoidable problem looms for them, and for all families with specialneeds children in Jewish day schools. Currently, OROT programs are not in Jewish high schools.

By the end of eighth grade, Bernstein says, some kids have internalized OROT strategies to the point that they can go to mainstream high schools. Because Jewish high schools like Jack M. Barrack Hebrew Academy, Kohelet Yeshiva High School and Torah Academy have learning centers with educational support, they are options for some students - but only for some.

"We don't put students in situations in which they won't be successful," says Rabbi Elchanan Weinbach, head of school at Kohelet. "I would estimate - in rough numbers - that 12 to 15 kids every year are lost to Jewish high schools because of specialneeds situations. Many specialneeds students need more help than we can provide."

Steven M. Brown, head of school at Barrack, agrees that there are limits. "We accept students who have learning disabilities, depending on their extent," he says. "But we only accept those students who can succeed in our environment. Barrack is about high academics and training the future leaders of American and Jewish society."

If those statements sound tough, they are also based on experience. Brown and Weinbach are educators - and fathers of special-needs children.

"I am deeply sensitive to the emotional issues that go with realizing what your kid can and can't do," Brown says. "But some LD kids need to go to schools that specialize in meeting their needs, and Barrack isn't one of them."

Which Jewish high schools specialize in educating specialneeds kids? None exist - yet. "It's my dream," Brown says, "for the Jewish day schools of the Philadelphia area to come together to provide a Jewish high school for special-needs kids."

"My father was a high school principal in New York," Weinbach says. "His was the first Jewish high school in the area to have a defined program for learning disabled kids, in the 1980s. It's something that's always been important to our family"

"Would it be Orthodox, Conservative or something else?" Brown asks. "I don't know. But it would be a quiet, nurturing environment with directed programs and excellent teacher-student ratios so that special-needs kids can be taught they way they need to be."

It might be a lot like Woodlynde Academy. "We are a mainstream school with added support to help children who need it," explains Christopher Fulco, head of school at Woodlynde. "Ours is a college prep curriculum taught in ways that special-needs kids can learn it. We have a multisensory approach and a researchbased program in a small classroom setting that enables us to teach kids strategies for learning. Essentially, we've woven the resource room into our curriculum."

Academy In Manayunk (ATM) is another specialized school for children with learning disabilities. The curriculum and teaching methods have worked wonders for Emily

Bovarnick, who is in AIM's third grade class. Her mother, Terry Bovarnick, saw a dramatic change in Emily's academic success and self-confidence. Her studies, in the Hebrew school at Adath Israel in Merion Station, remained a challenge.

"Emily didn't want to go back to Adath because she wasn't keeping up with her class," Bovarnick says. "What changed her mind was Sherrie Klein, the director of the Hebrew school. She went to AIM, learned a few of their techniques, and adapted them for use at Adath. I was so incredibly touched that Sherrie did that, and so was Emily. I hope that it helps other kids with learning disabilities succeed in Hebrew schools."

Could the AIM or Woodlynde models be adapted for Jewish day schools? Bernstein isn't so sure that a self-contained special-needs Jewish high school is a good idea. "I don't know what the answer is," she says. "But I do know that we need to come together to find the answers. OROT was a parent initiative to begin with. Maybe that's what it will take to develop this into the future."

"What I hope will happen," Mindy Andelman says, "is that parents of special-needs kids will join forces to help the Jewish day schools make this a reality."

"Listen," Andelman says? "we're Jewish mothers. Don't tell us what we can't do."

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