

# BEST KEPT SECRET IN *LUBAVITCH:* BNOS CHOMESH

Can you imagine your high school age daughter complaining on Succos vacation that she wants to go back to school already? Can you picture students in seminary in Israel calling their high school principal to tell her how much they miss high school? Can you fathom a student writing a letter saying, "I don't want to graduate; I want to come back for another year"? If you can picture all of the above scenarios, then you have a hint of the kind of school Bnos Chomesh is.

*INTERVIEW BY RISHE DEITSCH*

**Rishe Deitsch: Why is there a need for a school with smaller classes? I went to a school with small classes in elementary. When I came to Bais Rivkah for high school, I loved, and thrived in, the energy and dynamics of the large classes.**

**Dena Gorkin:** That was your experience! I attended a large girls' high school and felt lost at times. In 11th grade I transferred to Bais Chana of Worcester, MA, and found small classes and a nurturing environment. It was there that I started developing my talents and leadership skills. In a big school you can hang back and be part of the furniture. Nobody will notice you unless you excel in learning, or... make trouble. In a small school, you really count; you feel valued. If you struggle academically, someone will help you. If you are going through a tough time, someone will notice, and help you through it. If you can carry a tune at all, you will be drafted into the choir. You begin to feel your own worth, which opens up worlds.

**RD: What motivated you to start this school?**

DG: I worked in Bais Rivkah for many years. Often, I would sit in the teachers' room or in the principal's office and we would bemoan the fact that in large classes there were students who needed a more individualized approach, and this just wasn't possible in a school of this size. After a year of being a mechaneches of one such group, I decided it was time to create a small school for these girls. And that's when our administrator Mrs. Nechama Chanin came into the picture... Baruch Hashem we have an incredible team: a talented administrator who creates yesh m'ayin, and a wonderful staff. Thanks to their dedication, Bnos Chomesh is currently in its sixth year.

**RD: It's not very often that you hear girls talking about their school with such love and appreciation. What is the secret of your success? What makes Bnos Chomesh different from other schools?**

DG (choosing her words carefully): Warmth. Caring. Ingenuity. Individual attention. Positivity. I can say these are the hallmarks of the Bnos Chomesh philosophy. We

have a proactive approach to discipline.

We try to make sure that every day there is something positive in school that's practical and memorable. Whether it's hot cocoa waiting for the girls on an unusually cold morning, the secretary posting a joke on the office door, or a surprise snow-tubing trip as a reward for hard work. As we know, a Yid's gashmius is ruchnius.

I wouldn't say we are altogether atypical. We are a NYS Board-of-Regents-approved school with typical academic subjects, gym, art, computer graphics, health class, a yearly production, Shabbatons and trips. A lot of what makes us different is how we show our students that they are cherished.

**Nechama Chanin:** I support Mrs. Gorkin's approach fully. She guides the teachers and teaches the girls life lessons in a positive way. For example, instead of punishing students for improper uniform or coming late or leaving trash around the classroom, we implemented a credit card incentive program. Each girl has a Bnos Chomesh credit card. I



RIGHT] Students learning Chumash with seforim...and iPads.[LEFT] Student cell phone storage station at Bros Chomesh.

arranged an actual working credit card machine for the girls to swipe their cards simply for doing the right thing. If they are wearing the correct uniform or have helped clean the classroom, or did other things that show their sense of responsibility, they swipe their cards. They get points every time they swipe and the points are used to buy privileges, such as a lunch out, a Plus 3 coupon for a test, or a 20 minute late pass.

**DG:** Another example of our positive approach is our program that encourages students to improve in tznus. The girls punch cards indicating that they kept their hachlatah the previous day. At the end of the term, the number of punches on their card is converted to real dollars. Each girl then chooses a mashpia and a check is made out to the mashpia, who goes shopping with that girl for clothing.

**NC** (obviously proud and excited): To encourage students to listen to appropriate music, we introduced Music Month. For an entire month, most girls take upon themselves to listen only to niggunim and inspiring Jewish music. The girls keep a

journal about how their moods, behavior, speech, etc., change accordingly. They get lots of special music-related privileges, like Jewish music artists who perform for us in school, or free tickets to concerts. This year we will have performances by Moshe Hecht and Esther Freeman, both of whom have performed for us in the past and were a huge hit.

**DG:** Another way our school is different: Our teachers are very accessible. If a student is having difficulty with her math homework, she knows she is welcome to call or text her teacher for help. In a crisis, students contact our guidance counselor or me, at any hour. They know that we are their partners on the journey of their education and we are there for them. Even after they graduate.

**NC:** Our grading system is different too. We use an online service called Engrade, for which each student has an account. Teachers enter students' attendance, participation, homework and test marks daily. They can also post assignments and attach documents, so students who missed school can make up their work

right away. Students and their parents can sign in any day to see how they are progressing in every class. Report cards are never a surprise because every student knows where she is holding.

### **RD: You must have an incredible staff.**

**DG:** B"H we do! Mrs. Chaya Levitin, nee Winner, is our assistant principal and she also teaches Navi and Sichos. Miss Chanie Telsner is one of our veteran teachers. She covers Chumash and Tanya. Avigail Gribov is our outstanding resource room teacher.

We have Mrs. Devoiry Levin running weekly group workshops, Mrs. Esti Schneerson doing incredible work with the girls in art, and the talented Shevi Levin is our gym teacher. There are many more teachers, all doing great work with our students.

### **RD: How do you survive financially?**

**NC:** Unfortunately we must put a big burden on the parents. In addition, we have a few wonderful supporters who send us what they can, when they can. We also get a little funding from the Department

of Education for special education teachers and related services. Unfortunately, our current income barely allows us to stay afloat, never mind buying a building or expanding.

**RD: Where do your students typically go after they graduate?**

**DG:** Our students go to seminaries in Tel Aviv, Yerushalayim, Melbourne and Milan. We have an eclectic group and we spend a lot of time with each girl, helping her make a choice that best suits her. Chanale Chanin, our senior class advisor, and Ricki Cohen, our guidance counselor, are both very involved in this process.

**RD: What does the future hold for Bnos Chomesh?**

**DG:** Right now there is a bigger demand for our school than we can accommodate. We are putting in a great effort to expand our programs, and to find a larger space for the coming school year. We are in a very small rental space. Our goal is to expand slowly, to reach our maximum of 60 students over the next three years. Four grades, one class per grade, 15 students per class. Larger than that and we would lose the personal touch. And that's what Bnos Chomesh is all about.

**\*\***On my visit to Bnos Chomesh in February, I approached a group of smiling students gathered in the secretary's crowded

office, animatedly sharing their news and their snacks, and asked them a simple question:

**RD:** How do you feel about Bnos Chomesh?

**Hodaya:** I love this place. Best school ever!

**Batya:** I'm graduating this year. But I don't want to leave.

**Ortal:** Here they let you figure things out for yourself. They inspire you to be better.

**Aviva:** There are no words to describe how much this school has done for me.

**Rivky:** This is my first year in Bnos Chomesh. In my old school I felt unwanted. Here, everybody makes me feel so welcome.

**Fruma:** You know what I like? They let you do things that you want to do but in the right way. In my other school if I wanted to call someone I had to hide my cell phone and sneak off somewhere to use it. Here we put our phones in a special holder [see photo] and we can come to the office and use them during lunch or when something's urgent.

**Faigy:** Even when I come to school late, I get a big warm hello from the secretary or Mrs. Gorkin. It makes me want to be here and show them I can do better.●