

Understanding the Misunderstood

Helping children with behavioral,
social, and autism spectrum challenges

NOCHUM MONOSOV, MS ED, BCBA



Tzvi's Story: Learning to Focus

In my yeshivah, there is a very big emphasis on the shiur. However, I don't understand my rebbi's shiur. I see other bachurim taking notes and discussing what Rebbi said afterward, but I don't know anything from shiur. I also get bad marks on my tests, so I don't even bother taking them. I had many tutors over the years who tried teaching me Gemara, but it was a waste of time. They couldn't help me because I'm dumb.

Tzvi is a ninth-grade *bachur* who has struggled with Gemara over the years. His *rebbe* thinks he is a smart boy who simply has trouble concentrating. He feels that Tzvi could do better in his learning, but part of his problem is that he gave up and believes he isn't smart.

I set up a time to meet Tzvi and try to figure out what's going on that was making learning so hard for him. (Rob Bernstein trained me to evaluate how a child's mind thinks by looking out for clues and paying close attention to anything unusual that the child does. There are also specific activities that he designed that offer much insight into the way a child thinks.)

When I met Tzvi, I noticed almost immediately that he kept jumping from topic to topic. I started asking him about his ye-

shivah, and he quickly jumped into a discussion about politics, then about vacation, and then he wanted to tell me a funny story. Tzvi's mind seemed to be all over the place. He had trouble focusing and staying on the same topic to finish the discussion.

This provided me with a hypothesis on how his mind worked and why Gemara learning was so difficult for him: Tzvi's mind seemed impulsive and disorganized. He had trouble thinking something through since his mind kept jumping from one thing to the next. The ability to think something through and organize ideas is crucial for learning Gemara. If Tzvi's mind couldn't do that, it made sense that he couldn't learn Gemara.

I showed Tzvi a card trick from Rob Bernstein to test his thinking and problem-solving skills. I had him pick a card from my hands and then I figured out the card he chose. I asked Tzvi, "How did I figure out your card?" and offered to do the trick again to give him another opportunity to discover how the trick worked, but Tzvi just ignored me and went on to discuss another topic.

I tried a few more times, but Tzvi said, "I don't care; let's do something else." Tzvi's refusal to even try to figure out the trick

seemed to back up my hypothesis that he had trouble focusing and using his mental energy to work on figuring something out.

The first step to helping Tzvi was to find something highly motivating that could be used to challenge him to remain focused and organize his thinking. For boys like Tzvi, highly motivating activities are the only way to get them to work through their impulsivity.

I STARTED ASKING HIM ABOUT HIS YESHIVAH, AND HE QUICKLY JUMPED INTO A DISCUSSION ABOUT POLITICS, THEN ABOUT VACATION, AND THEN HE WANTED TO TELL ME A FUNNY STORY

Tzvi has a passion for cars. He knows many car makes and models and loves to talk about them. I discussed with Tzvi finding something related to cars that is productive and would give him a feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction.

Tzvi said, “I want to learn how to fix cars.”

Being handy myself, I said, “Do you want to learn how to do an oil change for a car?”

Tzvi responded excitedly, “Let’s do one right now!”

I said, “Wait, we can’t just do one right now. We need to find someone who needs an oil change.” Tzvi’s mind was jumping straight to doing the oil change; he lacked the patience to think through all the steps needed. This was an opportunity to teach Tzvi to plan and organize his mind.

“We can do an oil change on my father’s car,” Tzvi said.

Challenging Tzvi to think things through, I said, “Well, we first need to learn all the steps of an oil change and get the proper materials and tools.”

Tzvi said, “I know exactly what to do. Let’s just go now and buy the stuff we need.”

“What will happen if you make a mistake?”

“Don’t worry, I won’t make a mistake.”

“Are you willing to risk ruining your father’s car engine?”

This got Tzvi to stop and consider that maybe it is important to plan things. He agreed that we should first research which materials are needed to do the oil change. We then planned to take a trip to the auto parts store and ask one of the staff members there for some guidance.

In the next session, I took Tzvi to the auto parts store. We found a

staff member who seemed willing to help us. Tzvi asked him what we would need for the oil change. I could see that Tzvi wasn’t paying attention to his instructions and was just trying to quickly get the materials needed to purchase.

I said, “You really need to pay close attention to what he is telling you.”

Tzvi protested, “I already know what to do.”

“Do you need to first ruin an engine, before you are ready to make sure you know how to do an oil change properly?” When I saw that Tzvi was not willing to consider what I was saying, I added, “I’m not buying anything from the store until you can pay close attention to the instructions. It doesn’t make any sense to start a project if you aren’t properly prepared.”

This got Tzvi to finally slow down and pay attention to the staff member’s instructions. It was difficult for Tzvi, but using the highly motivating activity, I was able to challenge him to slow down his impulsivity and start paying attention to planning properly for the oil change.

I continued working with Tzvi using similar strategies to get him to plan and organize his thinking. I also discussed with Tzvi how his mind would jump from one thing to the next. Tzvi was able to reflect about himself that this was a challenge for him. This self-awareness was important for Tzvi. He needed to have this in-

sight into how his mind worked so that he could find ways to focus and organize his thinking.

I took my rebbi’s test this week, and I answered a lot of the questions correctly! I don’t think I’m really dumb, I just have a hard time focusing my mind on learning. I still get easily distracted, but I know now that by focusing my mind, I can understand a lot of the learning. ●

Stories in this series are based on real accounts, but details have been altered to protect the subjects’ privacy.



Nochum Monosov, MS ED, BCBA, has provided educational and behavioral therapies for children and adolescents in Lakewood since 2010. Nochum trained extensively under Rob Bernstein, a foremost expert on autism, and uses Rob’s cognitive approach in combination with ABA therapy to treat clients. He can be reached at 732-749-0733 or nochum@realchangeaba.com or via his website www.realchangeaba.com.



Rob Bernstein has developed his cognitive-based approach for more than 30 years and is the author of the award-winning *Uniquely Normal: Tapping the Reservoir of Normalcy to Treat Autism and Uniquely Normal Manual: Using the Bernstein Cognitive Method for Autism*. He also runs the podcast “Uniquely Normal: A Rob Bernstein Podcast.” Rob’s mantra is “Let the child lead, and when they do, be ready to follow.”

MEIRA COHEN LIBRARY

THURS EVE LADIES: 8pm-9pm / MEN: 9pm-10pm
 EREV SHABBOS 9am - 5pm
 MEN: 12:30pm-2:30pm / LADIES: 2:30-4:30pm EVERYONE: 4:30-5pm

655 8TH ST

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO MAKE AN APPOINTMENT
 PLEASE CALL 732-363-6848/732-278-2526
 OR 908-216-8924

2 BEAUTIFUL BRUNETTE
 BRAND NEW SYNTHETIC
 SHAITELS FOR SALE FOR
 A DISCOUNTED PRICE.

PLEASE CALL 732-278-2526