

SNS12

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STATE EDITION

TODAY'S FORECAST: Partly sunny and breezy.

7 A.M. 31° | at 2 P.M. 43° | at 7 P.M. 42°
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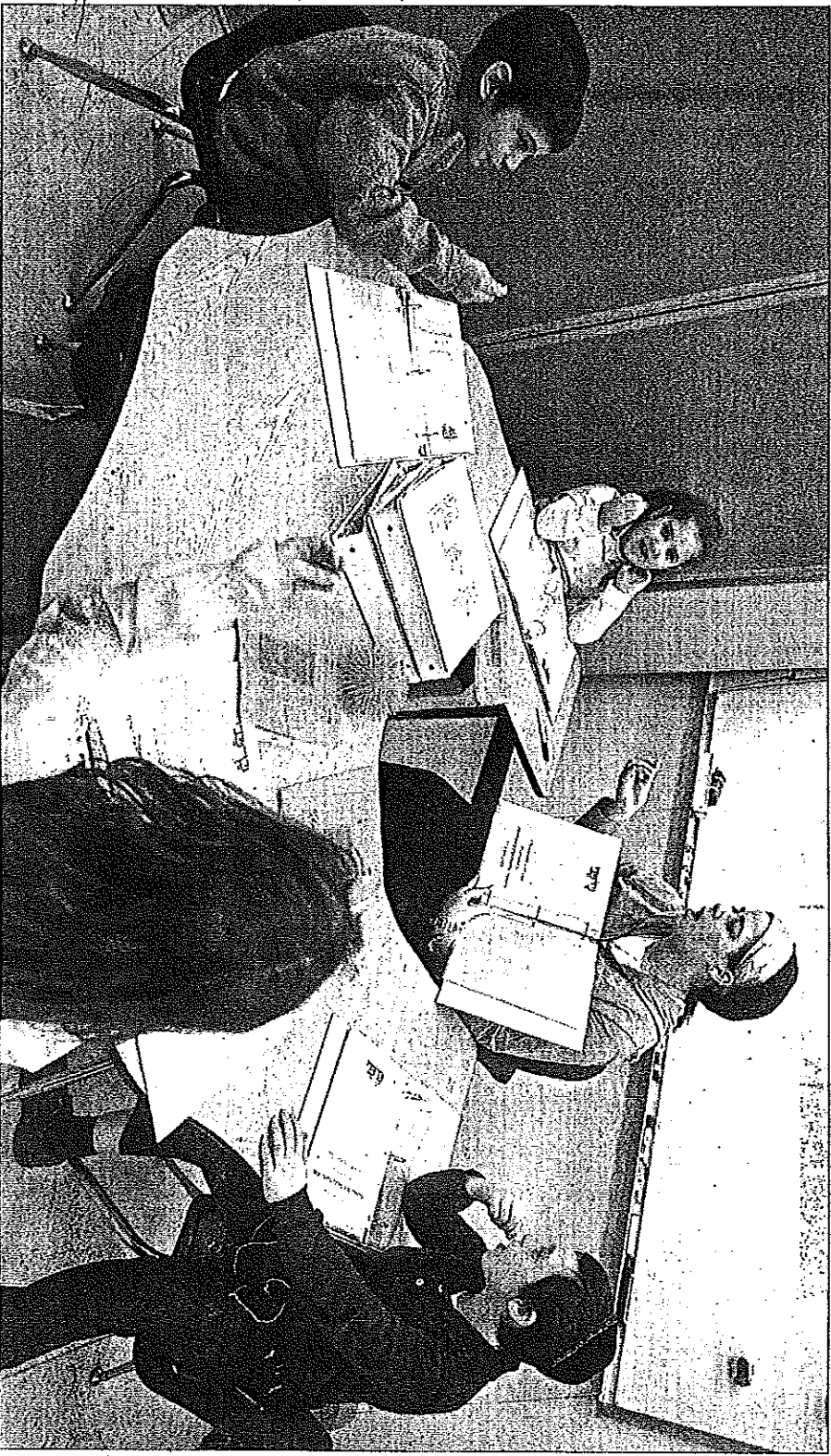
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SPECIAL SCHOOL FOR SPECIAL KIDS



Teacher Miriam Stobezki teaches students in her SINAI School class about Passover during a recent school day. The school for Jewish children with special needs creates individual learning programs for each student.

PHOTOS BY JENNIFER BROWN/THE STAR-JOURNAL

SINAI offers academic and Jewish education

BY ELIZABETH MOORE
STAR-LEADER STAFF

When Hannah Bargad's son attended public school, he did well academically but had social and behavioral problems that made it difficult for him to fit in.

That's because he has Asperger's syndrome, a neurological condition on the autism spectrum, in which children often have above-average intelligence, but difficulty with social and communication skills.

Two years ago, Bargad enrolled her son in the SINAI School, a school for children with learning disabilities housed at the Joseph Kushner Hebrew Academy in Livingston. Since then, she said she's seen a boost in her fifth-grader's self-confidence and said he has become more fully integrated into the Jewish community.

She said Nathaniel has sung at religious services, attended morning prayers with his classmates, and begun to take part actively in his family's Sabbath meal. "He participates at the Shabbos table and at temple. He is able to participate in the community and really shine."

Bargad of West Orange said Nathaniel's previous classmates and teachers weren't always sympa-

The SINAI School began 25 years ago with just three male students, but has since grown to include 51 boy and girl students at Kushner and additional students at Jewish schools in Paramus and Teaneck.

thetic or supportive when he had behavior problems. But the SINAI School had a different approach. "Each child has an individual learning program," she said. "There was a self-contained, small class where he would get constant training in social skills."

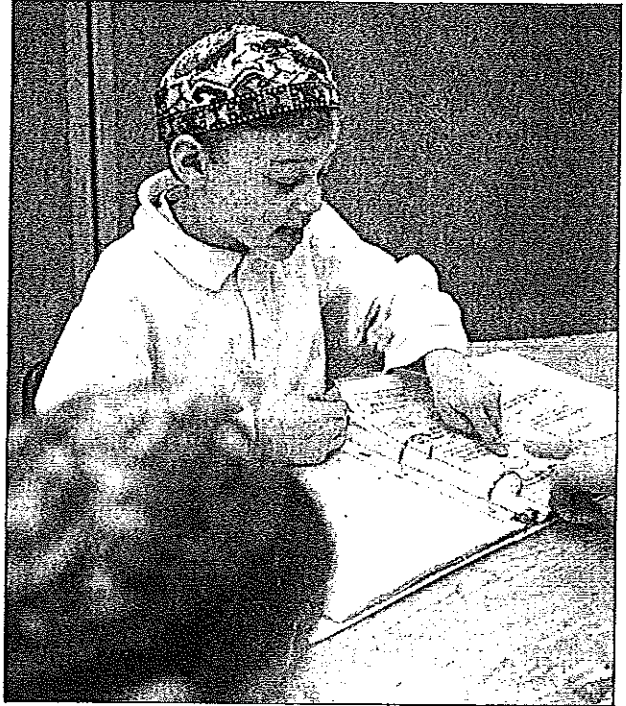
The SINAI School began 25 years ago with just three male students, but has since grown to include 51 boy and girl students at Kushner and additional students at Jewish schools in Paramus and Teaneck. Founders say it was one of the first programs in New Jersey to offer students with learning disabilities an academic experience combined with a Jewish religious education.

"There were few options for families who wanted to keep children in a Jewish day school and had children with emotional and mental disabilities," said Laurette Rothwachs, dean of the SINAI

School, which began in 1982. "They all had learning issues and could not cope with the dual curriculum. We developed individual programs for each of them."

In addition to their daily lessons, students in the SINAI School may receive occupational, physical or speech therapy, and also get help from a school psychologist. Assistant Dean Judy Karp said SINAI teachers attend seminars to share ideas on educating children with special needs and communicate frequently with parents about their child's progress.

In Miriam Stobezki's Judaic Studies class, SINAI students use colorful notebooks with pictures for a lesson about the Passover Seder meal. They get help lining up in the class by standing on a row of footprints pasted on the floor. Students get checkmarks for their good behavior and their positive [See SCHOOL, Page 45]



Jake, 6, one of the SINAI students, uses his notebook during the lesson on Passover. The school, marking its 25th year, is housed at the Joseph Kushner Hebrew Academy in Livingston.

SCHOOL

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actions are constantly reinforced during class.

"I love how you raised your hand," Stobezki tells one student. Another student gets rewarded for his good behavior by getting to squeeze a special toy while other students color with markers at the end of class.

"We use a lot of visuals and pictures and hands-on items," said Stobezki, who teaches second- and third-graders. "I'm in communication with the parents so we can all be on the same page."

For this lesson, the students practice Hebrew words for the special foods eaten during the Passover Seder, they recite prayers and songs, and follow along with their fingers the written Hebrew in their individually-made Haggadahs. Every Haggadah — which recounts the story of Exodus at Passover — is personalized for each child, with photographs and family customs.

"Everyone's family traditions are discussed," said Karp. "They

have to be active participants as Jews. In shul and in family life."

Some of the SINAI students transition into mainstream classrooms, but others go on to high school programs or eventually move into group homes, Rothwachs said. She said graduates of the SINAI program have gone on to college or rabbinical school and have been guest speakers at alumni programs.

"Their challenges don't go away," she said. "But they learn to cope and deal with them in a better way."

Because the SINAI program is offered through Kushner, which is a private school, Bargad pays tuition for her son to attend. She said it has been well worth the cost.

"It gives parents a lot of hope," she said. She added she's seen her son thrive academically and socially. "He has a very, very nice group of friends there. He has sleepovers and play dates. It's a wonderful, wonderful thing."

Elizabeth Moore covers West Essex. She may be reached at (973) 392-1852 or emoore@starledger.com.