



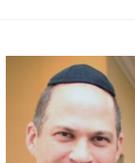
REFLECTIONS:

Some Positive News in Turbulent Times

Virtually overnight, our educational landscape has changed. When we first encountered this reality two short weeks ago, it was difficult to imagine how a sudden shift to distance learning would play out for children with special needs -- children who typically thrive on individualization, consistency and predictability, and who often shut down in the face of change. Change, however, brings both challenges *and* opportunities, so with a bit of experience now under our belt, we invite you to join us as we pause, for just a moment, to reflect on early experiences in our sudden and unexpected journey into the world of distance learning during these turbulent times.

"A Little Bit of Light Pushes Away a Lot of Darkness"
-Jewish Proverb

AVI VOGEL, Board President



Dear Friends,

It's hard to believe that it's only been two weeks since schools were closed and all learning became distance learning. Truthfully, if even one month ago you had told me that all classes in all SINAI schools would, virtually overnight, shift to online learning, I would have said it's not possible.

Thankfully, I would have been wrong. We are incredibly proud of our teachers who are successfully working through this transition while continuing to attend to the highly individualized needs of their students. We are also proud of our students who have remained enthusiastic and open to learning, despite the upheaval of the past few weeks.

But it hasn't been easy. SINAI is renowned for providing a Uniquely Special Education for children with special needs, so it is not hard to imagine why we are facing unique challenges as we work to adapt to an entirely new educational landscape.

Our purpose in publishing this newsletter, therefore, is to provide a window into this strange new world. As such, within you will find reflections of our Dean, Rabbi Dr. Yisrael Rothwachs; Ms. Ilana Picker, a SINAI teacher (SINAI @ Ma'ayanot); and Mrs. Jill Friedbauer, a SINAI parent. Also included is a description of some of the creative programming we are implementing to support our teachers and parents as they tirelessly work to help our children through these unprecedented times.

May you and your loved ones stay healthy and strong!

Avi Vogel, President SINAI Board of Directors

RABBI DR. YISRAEL ROTHWACHS, Dean



The last few weeks have been extremely challenging, particularly as we try to balance the needs of those who rely on us, personally and professionally, while managing our own feelings. This is especially true for our teachers, who currently bear the difficult burden of simultaneously acclimating themselves and their students to distance learning.

As I reflect on this new educational landscape, I find myself in awe of our staff who are working day and night to ensure that our students are successfully engaging on online platforms such as Zoom. In addition to 'classroom' learning, davening and morning meetings are taking place every day to maintain a sense of community and structure, and a full range of therapists, including OT, PT, speech, mental health, music and art, are working with students in creative ways to meet their therapeutic needs.

Interestingly, as our teachers and therapists are laser-focused on the educational and emotional well-being of our students, I find myself and my administrative team hyper-focused on the well-being of our parents and teachers.

While a sudden shift to distance learning is challenging for all teachers, it is exponentially more complicated for teachers of students with special needs. Not only must our teachers quickly master the technological tools and educational techniques needed to make online learning possible, but they must do so while accounting for the highly individualized learning and emotional needs of our students. This takes hours of preparation and mounds of creativity. To prevent burnout and ensure long-term sustainability, therefore, we are in the process of developing creative programming aimed at alleviating staff stress and providing professional development opportunities to make the transition to distance learning more manageable. Learn more about these efforts in the final section of this newsletter.

Finally, families of children with special needs also face unique challenges, which are often exacerbated in times of stress. As such, our administrators and therapists are in daily contact with parents and are spending much of their time strategizing how to alleviate some of their unique stressors. Learn more about these efforts in the final section of this newsletter.

I encourage the reader to stop for a moment to consider how much creativity and flexibility is needed to accomplish all of the above within the context of a virtual special education classroom. Now reflect on the fact that our staff has achieved this high degree of success within the very first weeks of being forced, without advance notice, to embrace distance learning. As I reflect, I can assure you that I have never been as proud of our amazingly collaborative, talented and dedicated team as I am at this moment.

Rabbi Dr. Yisrael Rothwachs, Dean

JILL FRIEDBAUER, Parent

Dear Rabbi Rothwachs,

Just wanted to reach out and send my hakarat hatov for the amazing zoom sessions today. I recognize this was not easy to coordinate so quickly for so many reasons and just want to say thank you. We have always had so much gratitude for all of the teachers and staff that have increased Racheli's confidence, happiness, social skills, love of Torah and mitzvot, do Math, read English and Hebrew and so much more. However, to see it in action today throughout the day was incredibly emotional.....and I shed many tears of happiness today. The day started with such genuine love and joy from the teachers, you could feel it through the screen. While most of the day Racheli had her headphones on, hearing her in action in class answering questions, saying hi to her friends, and signing along with the davening gave me such nachas, I can't even put it into words. I just want to make sure you all know how much gratitude we have to all the teachers and staff for everything you do each and everyday for Racheli.

May everyone please G-d stay healthy and with G-d's help, may we all get through this time together....socially distanced.

Jill Friedbauer, SINAI Parent

(Letter and picture included with the consent of Jill Friedbauer)



Rachel Friedbauer

ILANA PICKER, Teacher (SINAI @ Ma'ayanot)



Last Thursday, the SINAI Staff at Ma'ayanot were told that our school was being shut down and that in order to meet our students' needs, we would all need to adapt digital learning as a new teaching strategy. At the time, I could not help but wonder: How am I going to reach my students, both intellectually and emotionally? How are my students going to manage this transition? How will I prevent chaos and disorganization? One week later I am prepared to share my observations on how life has unfolded for my students and myself.

First and foremost, our new teaching reality forced me to embrace technology as I never have before. I am pleased to report that it was easier than I thought it would be and I quickly learned to appreciate the myriad of opportunities available as a result of Zoom technology. I've learned about break-out rooms, sharing documents, muting and unmuting, and co-hosting. I've also learned that with a bit of ingenuity, it is possible to practice mindfulness on Zoom, lead group yoga, work with individual students on reading and decoding, and manage morning meetings.

As for my students -- I am impressed and overjoyed to see them pop up on my screen, eager and ready to face each lesson and challenge. I am acutely aware of the steps and toll it takes on some families to make sure that their children have access to a computer and are ready to learn. I am in awe of our families' positive energy, commitment to learning, and constant support. And I am thrilled that my fear of chaos and disorganization was mostly unfounded. Overall, I am delighted to report that our transition to technology-based learning has been largely smooth and successful.

Of course, the transition is not without challenges, but I have mostly used these occurrences as teachable moments for my students. When they express concerns, I speak with them about their fears, uncertainties, and changes in family dynamics. When they tell me that they miss one another and face-to-face contact, we talk about how to best manage these feelings. When they express confusion about how to use their free time, we talk about how to structure the unstructured time.

The truth is, I could not be prouder of my students and of how quickly they have adapted to our new normal. As we continue to navigate these stressful and turbulent times, I thank everyone involved, from SINAI leadership, to tech support, to the families themselves, for making this week's learning so powerful and meaningful.

Wishing you all health and safety.

Ilana Picker, Teacher (SINAI @ Ma'ayanot)

SINAI OFFERS A HELPING HAND

As noted throughout this newsletter, we are incredibly proud of how our students, parents, teachers, and therapists are adjusting to our new difficult reality. To alleviate stress and to make the transition to our new learning environment as manageable as possible, SINAI has created and is pleased to offer the following programs and initiatives.

Thank you to Tzvi and Erica Solomon for sponsoring many of these programs in memory of Tzvi's grandfather, Rabbi Dr. Col. Victor Solomon, and in honor of the SINAI staff.

FOR PARENTS AND STUDENTS

In partnership with NCSY, SINAI is pleased to announce the creation of ZOOMMATES, a big brother/big sister program through which over 100 NCSY teens from all over the country have signed up to ZOOMMEET and hang out with SINAI students during the witching hours of 4PM – 8PM.

FOR PARENTS AND THE COMMUNITY

Supporting Ourselves and Our Children Through Challenging Times: A three-part series offered by prominent psychologist and SINAI parent, Rabbi Dr. Alex Mondrow.

Managing Stress in Stressful Times: On Thursday, March 26th, Dr. Stephen Glicksman, Developmental Psychologist at Makor Disability Services, will provide a Zoom presentation with survival tips for parents of children with special needs during this difficult time.

FOR STAFF

VIRTUAL PAINT NIGHT! Aimed at alleviating stress and providing an enjoyable 'night out,' SINAI staff members are invited to a virtual paint night with SINAI's art therapist, Sarah Tarzik.

Mindfulness Coping Strategies for Educators During These Trying Times -- Mindfulness training sessions led by popular mindfulness coach Nancy Siegel.

Taking Care of the Caretakers -- A Zoom session offered to SINAI staff by Rabbi Dr. Alex Mondrow.

Visit the [SINAI website](https://www.sinaischools.org) to keep current on additional programming and resources, as they become available.

Donate

For more information, contact Pam Ennis, Director of Development,
at pamennis@sinaischools.org or 201-921-7513.



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