



Imparting Torah to the Visually Impaired

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The Rambam tells us that every Jewish man is obligated to study Torah, whether he is rich or poor, healthy or infirm, young or old (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Talmud Torah 1:8). For the blind and visually impaired as well as the physically disabled, this commandment was formerly often impossible to carry out. It may have been difficult to obtain the sefer a blind person needed, and even if he did get it, it might have been difficult for him to turn the pages or see the text clearly, if at all. In recent years, however, these obstacles have been removed thanks to the extraordinary work of Rabbi Nachum Lehman and the organization he founded and directs, Computer Sciences for the Blind—Computer Assisted Reading for Education (CSB-CARE).

BY YOSEF GESSER

The Beginning

The project was born in 1997 when Rabbi Lehman began to invest a great deal of time and energy to custom-design audio Torah software that would allow his visually-impaired clients to learn independently, as they had before they became blind. The next innovation was Braille display software, allowing access to hundreds of *sefarim* on CD.

Later, he was able to supply them with an MP3 player with audio menus so that they could navigate shiurim on the entire Shas. By pressing the keyboard, they could locate any place in the text, have it read aloud faster or slower, advance or backtrack, repeat words, or press a button for one of the Talmudic commentaries that had been recorded specially for them.

These individuals were like fish back in water as they were able to persevere in their learning despite their vision impairment.

Eventually, the Braille display software was redesigned, with more features and a higher degree of sophistication, allowing for navigation of texts with still greater ease and even those who wished to write *chiddushei Torah*. Thanks to this technology, these *lomdei Torah* have made great strides in their learning.

Word of these remarkable developments quickly spread, and requests from still more visually impaired people started to pour in. Within two years, two hundred people were using the program. A need clearly existed for these Yidden to be able to gain access to Torah works. For the past fourteen years, CSB-CARE has been providing services to the blind, those with low vision, and members of other special-needs communities, including people with physical challenges. The organization continues to add to the impressive array of tools in its arsenal, enabling these heroic individuals to satisfy their thirst for *Toras Hashem*.

Harnessing Technology For Torah

The auditory software designed by Rabbi Lehman and his staff is often the sole source of Torah knowledge for hundreds of vision-impaired people. The organization's first product to be distributed professionally was The Jerry and Sandy Seligsohn Audio Visual Metsudah Chumash — including Rashi with interlinear translation — that was the result of hundreds of hours of recording, reviewing and editing, and took four years to complete. The Stanley and Ellen Wasserman Torah Touch System evolved from adapting the DBS Torah CD so that it would interface with an electronic Braille display.

The result is that these Yidden, no matter what their level of scholarship, have at their fingertips the entire *Tanach* and *Shas* with *Rishonim* and *Acharonim*, *Mishnayos*, *Shulchan Aruch*, *Mishnah Berurah*, and hundreds of other *sefarim*.

The organization provides services, training and support in learning to master the system.

I had the opportunity to witness this technology firsthand when I visited the CSB-CARE offices in Brooklyn and Rabbi Lehman demonstrated for me how a user could search for a word, phrase, chapter, page or any location in any *sefer* in the system by verbally prompting the audiovisual *Chumash* software (utilizing the text of the well-known *Metsudah Chumash*).

This software, which is available for *Gemara* and *Mishnayos* as well, has also been proven very effective in helping sighted children who have dyslexia or other reading disorders because the software allows for multisensory reading; the children both see and hear the words, enabling them to develop reading fluency through sight-word acquisition.

Approximately 1,500 individuals, the majority of them school-age children in grades three to twelve, have used this software. The organization updates these learning aids constantly as they receive requests from special educators.

Another amazing offering is the ScanView System, a tablet PC that incorporates software developed by CSB to accommodate students with fluctuating low vision. They write their assignments on the tablet, which scans them and makes them available in any size.

CSB has also addressed challenges facing physically disabled people who were unable to operate a keyboard. The organization integrated an entire system enabling these individuals to communicate with their computers through specially designed accessibility interfaces, which grant access to the audiovisual software for those who don't have use of some part of the body. This system serves victims of stroke, cerebral palsy and ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, often referred to as Lou Gehrig's disease, a degenerative neuromuscular condition).

The interfaces include voice recognition, which converts words or sounds into electrical signals, a common cell-phone feature; sip-and-puff systems, which allows those who don't have use of their hands to activate or deactivate a switch by sipping or puffing into an electronic straw; tilt switches, which are attached to the user's hand and are activated when he rotates or picks up the hand; and a head mouse, which enables the user to control the cursor on a computer screen by moving his head.

Rabbi Lehman told me he recently devised programming suitable for a girl who only has control of her head and left elbow; he did so with the help of the Helen Hayes Hospital in upstate New York, a leading facility in rehabilitation medicine and research.

The communication software for ALS patients, who eventually lose all muscle control except for their eyes, enables them to control a computer via a camera that tracks their eye movements, prompting the mouse to follow keyboard-related commands. Rabbi Lehman showed me a communication board whose letters are similarly activated when the user rests his eyes on them, enabling him to compose text. Rabbi Lehman regularly receives emails composed by these clients. A client in Monsey recently completed *Shas* using this software — a monumental achievement for anyone but especially for him — and his community celebrated with him at a grand *siyum*. Software is available for both English- and Yiddish language users.

One particular CSB project that has benefited the Jewish community in the United States and Canada is the *zmanim* hotline (718-331-TIME). This was instituted in response to the requests of several blind clients who had no way to find out the earliest and latest times for keeping *mitzvos* such as *Krias Shema*, *davening* and Shabbos candlelighting. The hotline receives 1.3 million calls a year from Jews of all backgrounds and abilities.

Torah in Braille

CSB's patrons not only gain Torah knowledge and inspiration through computer technology, but the organization has initiated many projects on behalf of those who require Braille and large-print books. Rabbi Arye Shuter is the director of its Braille and Large-Print Services division, which offers Hebrew Braille volumes of the *Chumash* and *Gemara*, with some very innovative features. It also provides combination Braille-and-print volumes, which enable visually impaired students in mainstream schools to indicate to a teacher a passage in the text on which they have a question.

On request, any *sefer* can be custom designed in the size the reader needs depending on his or her visual capabilities.

A blind teacher in a girls' school uses these volumes to match the line and page numbers of the books used by her sighted students as she conducts a lesson. ArtScroll and Feldheim publishers generously provide CSB with digital texts of books that the organization wants to issue in Braille or large print.

Interestingly, some of these are Braille books with pictures that blind mothers read to their children who can see! Even the captions appear in Braille so that the parent can describe the picture to the child. Rabbi Lehman told us that the captioning of the pictures for these books is done by one of his ALS clients, who can only move her eyes.

Also available are Braille-and-print editions that feature print below the Braille, which allows sighted parents and teachers to work with blind children and students.

Changing People's Lives

The projects undertaken by CSB-CARE have affected countless lives. Space allows for mention of just a few.

Daniel,* is a gifted writer and speaker, and serves on CSB-CARE's board of directors. Although he was born blind, he was not deterred from learning Torah with the limited number of Braille texts available to him. In time, as the technology developed, he acquired not only numerous Braille volumes that were previously unavailable, but eventually the entire *Chumash* on CD, a specially developed MP3 player loaded with the entire *Mishnayos*, and a laptop and Braille display that provided him with access to many *sefarim*.

Leah,* who is blind from birth, earned a master's degree as a teacher of the blind and visually impaired. She is a successful resource-room teacher for children with reading disabilities. The Torah Touch Braille System and a computer loaded with an extensive library of texts enable her to prepare lessons and to read along with her students using the CSB-CARE audiovisual *Chumash*. During the lessons her sighted students use a multisensory *Chumash* while she uses the auditory edition.

Chaim,* eleven years old, lost his vision around the age of five. He lives in Yerushalayim, where he learns in a mainstream yeshivah. Rabbi Lehman reports that when Chaim received his Braille *Chumash*, his class was learning *Parashas Lech Lecha*. A few days later he asked his mother a question about *Akeidas Yitzchak*, which appears at the end of the following *parashah*, *Vayeira*. She was shocked to learn that he had finished *Lech Lecha* and simply continued learning since the *Chumash* was the only Braille volume he had at the time.

Eventually, he received the Torah Touch Braille System, which he uses extensively.

The Israeli government agency that provides services to Chaim wanted to send him to another yeshivah, even though he was succeeding where he was and had friends. When the agency staff was apprised of how much he was achieving in school using the cutting-edge computer technology and Braille texts from CSBCARE in the United States, they agreed that he should stay where he was.

Parents and educators alike have hailed the efforts of CSB-CARE. The remedial director of a girls' school in one of the large Chassidic *kehillos* wrote Rabbi Lehman about a student who would panic when her class was given reading or writing lessons, "whose utter helplessness manifested itself in disruptive behavior, low self-esteem, and a sense of general failure." Using a program the organization custom-designed for her, "she now has the tools to thrive in the classroom in her very own way" and is "delighted to actively participate in the lesson."

Rabbi Lehman emphasizes that the true heroes in this endeavor are the individuals he and his staff assist; the technology merely gives these clients the tools to overcome their challenges and further their productivity.

Rabbi Nachum Lehman and his organization have played a remarkable role in enabling their clients to transcend their limitations and lead independent and fulfilling lives, and will continue to do so with *siyatta diShmaya* until Moshiach's arrival, when all handicaps will vanish — may that time arrive speedily.

**Names have been changed*