

Illuminating the Way for the Jewish Blind

Revolutionary new technology opens up the world of Torah texts to observant blind and low-vision population

It all began with a request from Rabbi G., a *talmid chacham* learning in a Brooklyn *kollel* who had become blind. While his *chavrutot* would read the *gemara*, Rashi and Tosafot to him, Rabbi G. missed the invaluable opportunity to review the difficult passages independently. Then he recalled that a fellow *kollel* member, Rabbi Nachum Lehman, was exceptionally proficient in computer programming. Rabbi G. asked for his help.

Rabbi Lehman designed an innovative program that allowed Rabbi G. to listen to passages in the Gemara and *Chumash* displayed on the computer screen. "He could press a few keys to hear Rashi, Tosafot or the Rosh, which is, of course, impossible with a tape recorder," says Rabbi Lehman. Rabbi Lehman began enlisting the aid of fellow *kollel* members to record entire *masechtot* (tractates of Talmud), which would then be programmed into the computer.

In 1997, Rabbi Lehman's efforts spawned Computer Sciences for the Blind (CSB), an organization dedicated to opening up the world of Torah texts to the observant blind and low-vision population. Currently, CSB's best-selling product is The Metsudah Chumash, Seligsohn Edition, a set of three CDs that encompass the entire *Chumash* with Rashi as well as linear translations of both. Users can simply ask the computer to begin *parashat Balak*, for example, and the program reads the chapter, verse by verse, in a pleasant human voice. Hundreds of users, of all ages, in Australia, England, Holland, Israel and North America currently find the program priceless.

Rabbi Lehman takes particular pride in CSB's refreshable Braille display program. A device with electronic pins, a Braille display attaches to a standard computer and converts the text on the computer screen into Braille. Unfortunately, there was no software that enabled a Braille display to "read" Hebrew text. Harnessing the wealth of Torah sources found in Torah CD library programs, Rabbi Lehman created a program that allows a Braille display to convert Hebrew text on the screen into Braille. This has revolutionized Torah learning for Braille users who were, until recently, forced to contend with the scant Torah literature available in Braille. Thanks to the program, says Rabbi Lehman, one blind *talmid chacham* is able to deliver a daily *shiur*.



Refreshable Braille displays, which attach to standard computers, use hundreds of tiny electronic pins that move up and down to convert computer text into Braille. CSB's software converts Torah CDs into the refreshable Braille format, giving observant blind users instant access to over 500 Torah works including the Talmud, Midrash and even obscure halachic works.

Blind from birth, Rabbi Michael Levy, director of Travel Training at the MTA New York City Transit, marvels at Rabbi Lehman's accomplishments. "To me, the true definition of access is helping a person achieve his potential as a Jew," says Rabbi Levy.

Individuals with severe physical disabilities can also access the CSB system. "Two individuals who are paralyzed and blind can learn *Chumash* by puffing on a straw," says Rabbi Lehman, who designs custom-made tongue and breath switches.

CSB constantly receives phone calls from Jewish blind and visually impaired individuals who are eager to use the programs, which are available to users free of charge. Additionally, children with various learning disabilities are experiencing phenomenal success with products such as The Metsudah Chumash. The *Chumash* enables students with dyslexia, ADHD and other learning difficulties to benefit from a multi-sensory learning experience. They get to see the Hebrew text on one side of the computer screen and the English translation on the other, with the computer highlighting each word as it is read.

CSB, which holds annual conferences for the observant blind community, continues to work on projects that open up the vast world of Torah learning to Jews with disabilities. Rabbi Levy closed a recent CSB conference with poignant words that speak for all the grateful CSB users: "Thank you for increasing my portion in *morashah kehillat Yaakov*, the inheritance of the Jewish people." *All* the Jewish people.

To contact CSB, call 718-234-6476, or visit www.computersciences.org.