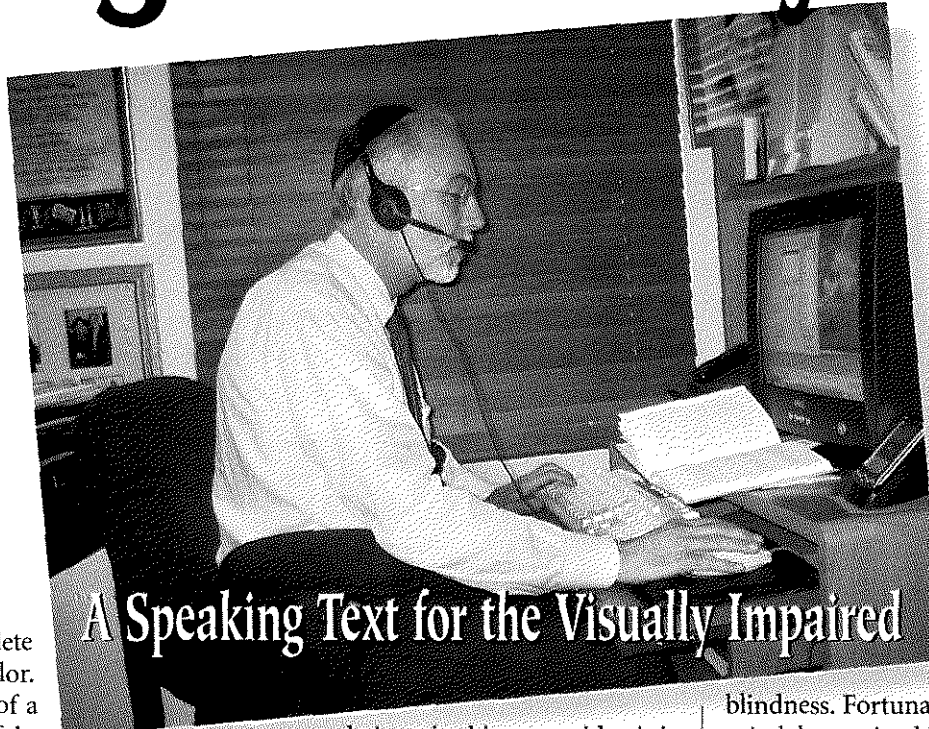


# "Light of the Eyes"



## SPARKS OF TORAH IN A DARK WORLD

The world is replete with vivid color. The deep red of a rose, the bright blue of the sky, and the radiant yellow of a sunflower. But for the blind there are no colors, there is no light. How then is it possible for the "light of Torah" to shine upon their otherwise dark world? Just a few months ago, I merited seeing how the light of Torah penetrates all barriers.

A young man was sitting in front of a computer no larger than a *Mishnayos*. He told the computer "Chumash," and the computer started saying the first verse of the Torah. He then commanded "Rashi," the computer began reciting the *Rashi* on that verse. "English," and, yes, the computer began translating the *Rashi*. "Next Parsha." "Next Aliya." "Previous Perek." "Where am I?" "Read Faster." "Read Slower." "Stop Talking." Whatever the user said, the computer responded faithfully. I thought I was dreaming. For the thousands of visual-

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## A Speaking Text for the Visually Impaired

ly impaired in our midst, it is indeed a dream come true.

The Chofetz Chaim once remarked that the technological advances of his times were for the purpose of increasing Torah study and *avodas Hashem*. Without a doubt, the inventing of the computer and its associated technology has achieved one of its primary purposes in helping bring Torah to people who cannot read with their eyes. Indeed, a shining light has burst into the dark world of the blind with the founding of a truly unique organization called Computer Sciences for the Blind and Visually Impaired (CSB), "*Meor Eynayim*," founded in 1997 by Rabbi Nachum Lehman.

### IT STARTED IN A KOLLEL

It all started several years ago in a small *kollel*. Reb Yitzchok M., a *talmid chacham* and pillar of the *kollel*, was stricken with an incurable eye disease. Day after day, month after month, his eyesight deteriorated. Despite the doctors' best efforts, Reb Yitzchok eventually suffered a complete loss of vision. Reb

Yitzchok heroically overcame the logistical hurdles, as he learned to deal with his

blindness. Fortunate to possess a sharp mind, he retained his learning partners while continuing to be an integral and inspirational part of the *kollel*.

Despite Reb Yitzchok's efforts, though, his level of learning was compromised due to the nature of Torah study and his disability. Although his *chavrusos* would read the *Gemora*, *Rashi* and *Tosafos* aloud, there was no independence and no second chance to review difficult passages. Anybody who has been involved in Torah study knows that it entails much more than recitation of text. The scholar must be able to interpret the nuances of the text and contemplate the meaning of each and every word. Such study requires constant and independent review, an ability Reb Yitzchok was not afforded. Even tapes and telephone *shiurim*, which helped immeasurably, were still no substitute for the text-based learning that allows for contemplation and digestion of the written word of a *sefer*. When limited by the material presented by another person, or on a tape, the interactive factor

Photo: Rabbi Raymond Beyda recording Pirkei Avot for CSB

so integral to successful learning, is lost.

It seemed that the *Hashgacha elyona*, Divine Providence, saw Reb Yitzchok as the appropriate emissary to trigger what can be called, without exaggeration, the beginning of a technological revolution for the visually challenged.

Reb Yitzchok asked one of his *chavrusos*, Reb Nachum Lehman, if he could help and help he did. With his knowledge of computer programming, he spent many months researching the technologies available to the blind community, but was unable to find a workable solution for Reb Yitzchok. Reb Nachum came to the unavoidable conclusion that custom-made software would be necessary to allow Reb Yitzchok to learn freely and naturally. With the help of two professional programmers and several volunteer readers, Reb Nachum commenced the seemingly insurmountable task of giving those unable to read with their eyes, the ability to read with their ears! Through indexed computer recordings of the *Gemora*, *Rashi*, *Tosafos*, several *Rishonim* (early commentators) and *Acharonim* (later commentators), along with custom-made MP3 software, Reb Yitzchok was given the ability to once again learn independently. With the press of a key on the keyboard, Reb Yitzchok could simply access any part of the *Gemora*. He could choose to have it read faster or slower. He could go backwards or forwards, repeat words, or press a button for *Rashi*, *Tosafos*, or one of the many other commentaries that were recorded for him by his peers. Reb Yitzchok was like a fish back in water, as he tackled the *Gemora* with gusto for the first time since he had been struck by blindness.

#### AN EXPANDING INTEREST GROUP

This small, in-house project was just the beginning. Word of this innovation spread quickly and Reb Nachum received several requests to install the system for other visually impaired individuals. At the time, the system was not portable and required hours of work to install on new computer systems. That is when Reb Nachum realized that there was a gen-

eral need for accessible Torah literature, not only for the blind, nor only for scholars like Reb Yitzchok, but also for the many others who could not read conventional texts.

To assess the necessity of the program for the wider public, Reb Nachum ran a small ad in one of the weekly *Chareidi* newspapers. From that single ad, he received more than 70 telephone calls! Besides calls from the visually impaired and learning-disabled, calls come from elderly people whose vision had deteriorated, and parents of young children who were unable to read due to visual or learning disabilities.

He approached *Gedolei Yisroel* for guidance, and was persuaded to expand his program to cater to Jews from all walks of life and all levels of learning. Rabbi Avraham Pam, זצ"ל wrote the following emotional words: "This organization is of utmost importance, and it is impossible to estimate the tremendous *chessed* of it. Praised be those who merit to be a part of this wonderful *mitzva*. A great amount of reward awaits them in This World and in the World to Come."

#### ADDRESSING THE NEEDS

As new requests continued to pour in, volunteer readers were recruited for more advanced scholars who needed large quantities of material, and teachers were enlisted for material being recorded for children. In some venues, entire networks of volunteers were assembled to provide for the recording needs of an individual.

One such area was Baltimore, Maryland, where the *Rosh HaYeshiva* of Ner Yisroel, Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Kulefsky זצ"ל, was legally blind and was saying a daily *shiur* for his *talmidim*! Reb Nachum had received a telephone call from a member of the Baltimore Kollel detailing the *Rosh Yeshiva's* situation, and the need for the CSB system. After meeting with Rabbi Kulefsky and demonstrating the system to him, the *Rosh Yeshiva* was noticeably excited and began listing *sefarim* he needed for the coming semester: "*Gemora, Rashi, Tosafos, Rosh, Rasha, Pnei Yehoshua*, and of course Rabbi Akiva Eiger." A room in the Yeshiva was set aside where a computer system was installed for *bachurim* and *Kollel Yungeleit* to record throughout the day for their beloved *Rosh Yeshiva*. A second computer was placed in the *Rosh Yeshiva's* office for him to use the material.

Reb Nachum recalls that one of the saddest moments in his life was when Rabbi Kulefsky personally asked him for

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Ramban and Ohr Hachaim on the entire Chumash, a tremendous task. He had to explain to the Rosh Yeshiva that it was beyond the means of the organization at the time, but  $\text{הוא}$ , one day, it would be done for him. A few weeks later, Reb Nachum learned that the Rosh Yeshiva had left this world, and that he would never have the opportunity to fulfill his commitment to him.

CSB has since completed its first professionally distributed product: the recording of the entire Metsudah Chumash with Rashi and their linear trans-

lations. This project alone involved hundreds of hours of recording, reviewing and editing, and took over four years to complete. It was sponsored by several generous donors and is distributed free of charge to needy users. It can be installed on any standard computer.

#### SOME OF THE ENTHUSIASTIC RESPONSES

One blind woman who is a special educator to both sighted and blind children writes:

*"One of the subjects that I teach is Chumash. The Metzudah Chumash has been an extremely valuable tool that allows me to better comprehend the Chumash as well as teach it to my students. This Chumash will especially benefit my students who have trouble decoding written text and will enable them to process it and understand it."* The menahel of a yeshiva reports:

*"Two boys in the Yeshiva benefit from your Chumash for the blind and dyslexic that are available in CD format through your office. Our weekly Parsha tests on Chumash and Rashi, a simple task for most, is an arduous one for these boys. This program greatly simplifies the test preparation process for them."*

Here is a letter from a father:

*"My daughter has recently been considered legally blind. The day I received your 'talking Chumash' CD, my daughter was overjoyed. Not only did it enlighten her greatly, but it also motivated her to learn and study Chumash and Rashi with much more enthusiasm. Though she still needs help with other subjects, her difficulties in Chumash have basically been solved, B"H. May Hashem give you much success in helping others who reach out to you."*

It is worth noting that the father who wrote the above letter is blind himself and also benefits from other recordings available from CSB.

Soon after the first version of the Chumash was released, there were several requests from physically disabled users who could not operate a keyboard. That's when Reb Nachum integrated voice recognition system so that anyone, no matter the disability, could learn Chumash by simply speaking to their computer. (Personally, I found it remarkable to witness the system in action.)

Next is Pirkei Avos with English translation, a full English commentary, and the Hebrew commentaries of the Rav, Rashi, Ramban and Rabbeinu Yona. CSB hopes to begin distributing this great work within the next few months.

Numerous Gemora, Mishnayos, and halacha works are already available

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through the years of volunteer work done for the project across the country. These texts are available to all users upon request. Currently, the CSB library contains over 40 chapters of *Mishna Berura* including the *Biur Halacha* and *Shaar Hatzion*, a compilation of 250 hours of recording.

#### ADDING THE VISUAL COMPONENT

CSB is in the process of creating a visual component, whereby the words corresponding to the audio recitation appear on the screen. This will be extremely beneficial to the partially disabled and will be therapeutic for those with language, reading and visual disorders. In addition, many children with dyslexia will be immeasurably empowered by being able to hear the words while simultaneously viewing them on the screen.

In addition, CSB has begun the development of several children's games that will be integrated into the *Chumash* software, as well as into addi-

tional texts to be released. They are working closely with teachers and parents of visually impaired children to create a fun, effective learning experience which will help them overcome their disability and excel in their studies. CSB is also working to expand the library with professional recordings of basic Jewish texts such as *Tehillim*, *Nach*, and *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch*, all with translations and commentaries.

Another important issue being addressed is the issue of pronunciation. The Ashkenazic, Sephardic and Chassidic communities each pronounce words differently. This is especially relevant when learning with small children who may be confused by the different pronunciations. At this point, most of the material available is in the Ashkenazic pronunciation. Rabbi Raymond Beyda, the popular Sephardi Torah lecturer, has agreed to spearhead and actually compose the Sephardic library himself. Material in Chassidic

pronunciation is available on a limited basis and will be expanded in the future.

The users of the current programs and texts range in age from 7 to 90 and reside in such diverse locations as New York, California, Australia, England, Israel, and many places in between.


The stories that come back to Computer Sciences for the Blind make their efforts worthwhile. Here is a letter from a father of four who tragically lost his eyesight:

*"I would like to thank you for creating the Metsudah Chumash talking program. I find it easy to operate. Because of this program, I can now do Chumash homework together with my four children. Their consequence of my vision loss is now much less. I already feel that it is creating new bonds between my children and myself. May the One Above pay you back for your beautiful project, caring and kindness. I really thank you for making a difference and for changing the dark into light."*

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