

DIAL-A-REBBI

SHOSHANA GROSS

Mishpacha

**DON'T UNDERSTAND THE RASHI?
STUMPED BY A GEMARA WORKSHEET?
TRYING TO FIGURE OUT A LASHON HARA
SH'EILAH?**

**TODAY, DIAL-A-REBBI IS A PROGRAM
WHERE BOYS AND GIRLS FROM ALL OVER
THE WORLD CAN CONNECT TO A REBBI OR
MORAH WITH ONE PHONE CALL.
TODAY, TREEO IS SPEAKING TO RABBI
YAAKOV RESNICK, FOUNDER OF THIS
AMAZING ORGANIZATION.**

HOW DID DIAL-A-REBBI START?

About five years ago, when I was teaching a halachah *shiur* in Cleveland, one student would call me every night with questions because his father wasn't available. I realized there were so many other kids out there who don't have anyone to answer their homework questions. Maybe they don't have parents, their parents aren't around, their parents don't know how to help, or they need extra support. A mother told us her husband came home every night at 9:30 p.m., but her son needed help earlier. This boy started calling Dial-a-Rebbi for his worksheets, and it changed his whole year!

WHAT WAS DIAL-A-REBBI LIKE IN THE BEGINNING?

We started with one rebbi. A few people helped me plan and collect money for the phone system and payment, and we took the plunge! That first rebbi worked half an hour each night. In the beginning, we were getting fewer than 50 calls a month, but people were interested, calls became more frequent, and we received amazing feedback.

HOW DID DIAL-A-REBBI GROW?

Initially, it was just homework help, but soon kids started asking things like, "How should I deal with _____?" or "What's the right thing to do when _____?"

Because we're anonymous, kids feel comfortable asking hashkafic questions. We've even gotten questions from girls about going to seminary in Eretz Yisrael, or which job sounds better! To accommodate these questions, we added a menu to the hotline: press one for halachah/learning sh'eilos, press two for hashkafah questions.

As more calls came in, we hired more rebbeim and rabbonim. Now the program runs from 6 a.m. to 2 a.m. (although official hours are from 5:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m. on the East Coast of the US), Sunday through Thursday, and Motzaei Shabbos in the winter. We even have a special Yiddish line. We also have a separate line for girls called Dial-a-Morah. Today, we receive about 1,800 calls each month, which works out to around 100 calls per night!

HOW DO YOU MANAGE FUNDING AND SUPPORT?

Funding was a huge challenge at first. At one point, I thought we would have to close the program. But one supporter covered the budget for the first two years. "If I'd had this as a child, I would be a different person today," he told us. Today, our annual budget is about \$180,000, and we rely on monthly sponsorships. This year, I had no sponsors for Kislev. We were on the way to the Torah Umesorah Convention, and that day, we found out we were finalists for a \$10,000 grant through an elevator pitch. That's where organizations have a few minutes to 'pitch' their idea to wealthy businessmen who might decide to fund it. Baruch Hashem, we were chosen.

WHO CALLS DIAL-A-REBBI?

Our callers are mostly kids between fifth and eighth grade, though some are younger (we can usually hear, "Tell the rebbi your question, tzaddik," prompts in the background). Interestingly, the Yiddish line tends to have older callers, while the English line is mostly younger. Some callers are very shy. One boy hung up because he was so nervous. His father told us later that the rebbi called back, helped the boy figure out the answer to his question, and encouraged him to call anytime. The boy felt like a million dollars!

And sometimes, people call because they have nowhere else to turn. A woman once called and said, "I don't have a rav, and my mother was just *niftar*. What should I do?" The rebbi guided her to the right people and made sure she had help.

THAT SOUNDS INCREDIBLE. CAN YOU SHARE MORE MEMORABLE CALLS?

One boy called around 11:30 p.m., worried because he was out late, eating cholent with friends. "I don't want my mother to worry, but I'm not sure I should call her. What if I wake her up?" (The rebbi told him to call his mother!)

One rebbi offered \$5 to anyone who gave the correct answer to a very hard question. When a boy came back with the answer, the rebbi asked how he got it.

"I called Dial-a-Rebbi, of course!"

Another bochur called after asking his whole beis medrash a *kashah* that no one could answer. Within minutes, he got the solution through Dial-a-Rebbi, and he was so excited.

Girls also call a lot, especially around midterms and finals.

We hire extra staff around that time to deal with the overflow of callers, and a lot of the girls leave messages thanking us when exams are over.

WHERE DO YOU FIND THE REBBEIM, RABONIM, AND MORAHs, AND HOW DOES THE SYSTEM WORK?

Many reach out on their own because they want to help. Others are recommended by people who call us and say, "Rabbi/Morah X would be really good for Dial-a-Rebbi." Obviously, a rebbi/morah has to be smart, knowledgeable, patient, and know how to interact well with kids.

WE HAVE OVER 50 PEOPLE ANSWERING THE DIAL-A-REBBI HOTLINE NOW.

At any given time, there might be eight or nine rebbeim answering calls, and we cover multiple time zones.

Our first rebbi is in Eretz Yisroel, and he logs in at 6 a.m. (you wouldn't believe how many panicky I-didn't-do-my-homework-last-night calls we get before school!). The last rebbi lives on the West Coast and is available until 2 a.m. East Coast time. We also have rebbeim in Lakewood, Brooklyn, Monsey, Cleveland, Los Angeles, Portland, and London. (There's a *morah* in England, Mrs. Bodner, who is popular with the girls because of her English accent!)

When a child calls, there's a number one rebbi on call. If that rebbi is busy, the call goes to several 'backup' rebbeim. If all the backups are busy, the child can schedule a callback time.

HOW DO THE REBBEIM ANSWER ALL THOSE QUESTIONS?

It isn't easy — rebbeim never know what's coming. One seasoned *talmid chacham* called it his "hardest job!" Many rebbeim have a lot of resources to help them. For example, we have Otzar Hachachmah available and a group text to share complex *sh'eilos*.

Our rebbeim and *morahs* try to guide each child to figure things out themselves. And they also need to know when a question needs a professional. We're in touch with other organizations to make sure every child gets the support they need.

WHAT CHALLENGES DO YOU FACE, AND WHAT KEEPS YOU GOING?

One challenge is prank calls. Our rebbeim handle it professionally and explain that pranks take up valuable learning time for other children. If a kid persists, his number will be blocked by the program — but baruch Hashem, that's not common.

What keeps us going is the incredible feedback. Boys calling to say thank you, and girls calling after finals, telling us, "My whole class did well on our test because of you!"

We recently had a single mother call. "Organizations help us with food, clothes, and money," she cried. "But Dial-a-Rebbi gives my children help every day with their homework. Thank you!"

Moments like that show us that we're making a difference. ■