



AGE: 40s
LIVES: Lakewood, NJ
CHILDREN: 5
OCCUPATION: Motivational speaker and director of a day care center

This picture is for illustration purposes

Women to Know

THIS WEEK WITH

Rachel Rappaport

“We were ready to do whatever it took to make our son happy.”
—Rachel Rappaport

On my last flight back to Israel from the United States, I was busy entertaining a small human being whose definition of fun was crawling into our seatmate’s lap when my supply of reading materials went dry. I gestured to the *frum*-looking middle-aged woman sitting across the aisle and asked, “Would you by any chance have something for me to read?” The book that landed on my lap hit me by surprise—and a very pleasant one at that. Instead of spending the remainder of the flight in the company of some insipid novel, I had the privilege of delving into the world of motivational speaker and author Jack Canfield, which I especially appreciated as a therapist. Impressed by the contents of the book, I

turned to my new friend and asked where I’d be able to obtain a copy. That’s when I learned that she had actually been trained by him and is a certified proponent of his methods.

In fact, Rachel Rappaport, a Lakewood mother of five, is the *only* Orthodox Jewish trainee of Canfield’s, but that is only one facet of this ambitious woman who lives by the motto, “Be the change you want to see in the world.” The founder of an innovative preschool and, more recently, a *yeshivah* for gifted boys, Rachel doesn’t wait for things to happen. Ever the proactive innovator, she forges ahead onto the road not taken in order to make this world a better place, one confident step at a time.

“I was born right here, in Eretz Yisrael,” Rachel begins when I meet her several days later in my Jerusalem office. As an older single girl living in Bnei Brak, Rachel had

a flourishing career as the cofounder and director of the Savyon Center for Jewish Education, an interactive museum that attracts 10,000 visitors a year. As part of her work, she created a training program to teach secular teachers how to impart lessons about *Yiddishkeit*. “I felt like I was really making a difference, which made it hard for me to leave,” she reminisces. But heeding the call of Rebbetzin Rishel Kotler, *a”h*, a second cousin of her late father who was with him in Shanghai during the war, she crossed the ocean and settled in Lakewood. “The Rebbetzin invited me to stay at her house. She felt it was time for me to do my *bishtadlus* in America, as at that point I already knew about all the eligible young men in Eretz Yisrael,” she says with a smile.

“The Rebbetzin was an incredible dating coach. She taught me things I carry around with me till today. We’d stay up until four in the morning talking about life, marriage and *emunah*. One of her dating tips was that if I observed something in a young man that impressed me, I should tell him. ‘Don’t let it sit in your head!’ she advised me. Before going on my very first date in America I asked her, ‘What is the one thing I should have in mind?’ Do you know what she said? ‘Rochela, just go and have a good time.’ She taught me to just *be*.

“In the end, Rav Malkiel, *shlita*, was our *shadchan*. My English teacher must have danced in the streets when she heard about my *shidduch*, because while I’d always excelled in math, I slacked off in English, and here I was marrying an American boy and setting up my home in Lakewood.”

When Rachel’s children were ready for preschool, two aspects of the American system concerned her. “I was surprised at the level of preschool education in America compared to Israel, and there was no real solution for full-time working mothers.” Rachel and her husband asked a *sheilah* of Rav Reuven Feinstein, who advised them to open a daycare center.

Rachel then proceeded to turn the concept of childcare in Lakewood on its ear.

She tells me with pride. “We introduced the option of starting earlier and ending later, catering to the *yeshivah* schedule and enabling *yungeleit* to arrive to their *seder* on time and relax *bein basedarim*, and even stay for *Minchah* with *menuchas hanefesh*.” Rachel and her staff devised a curriculum emphasizing the set of 44 skills each child should attain by 18 months, as well as the 99 skills to be mastered by the age of four. “In the beginning I was up to my neck with work, but I eventually learned to delegate. I’m still very involved in the training of our staff. I also loved being in the same building as my children while they were growing up. It was like I was in the kitchen and they were in the living room. I’d go over to their classrooms every so often to give them a hug and a kiss, and I liked knowing exactly what they were learning.”

It was after a difficult chapter in her life dealing with the loss of several close family members that Rachel attended Canfield’s seminar. When she returned home and realized how the sense of empowerment she had gotten from it was impacting her life, she dreamed of spreading Canfield’s message to the *frum* community. At that point, however, she and her husband were still in debt, and the training program cost a hefty \$20,000. A year and half later, they were thankfully debt-free.

It was time for Rachel to take the “Train the Trainer” course and become a certified “human potential trainer” with the credentials to “empower audiences and changes lives. I wanted to transmit these messages to our community. My first goal was to come to Israel and empower the women here. There is so much poverty, and many people have no energy. The security situation only compounds the need. I wanted to tell these women that there’s a way out. Last year I went to Eretz Yisrael five times.”

In fact, my meeting with Rachel takes

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place between two of her group workshops.

“Is your family supportive?” I want to know.

“While my husband and I agreed that attending Canfield’s seminar was the right move, at first we thought that perhaps it would be better to postpone it for a few years, until the children were a little older. So we went to ask Rav Reuven Feinstein, as we always do, and he said, ‘No, you have the fire now. Go and do it.’ My children do miss me,” Rachel admits, pulling out an envelope containing a letter filled with her son’s childish scrawls, “but when I think about why I’m doing what I’m doing and that I have rabbinical *haskamah*, I know I need to continue. It’s the transformation I see in these women that keeps me coming back. A lot of people feel stuck and want to accomplish more. Their relationships become deeper and richer.”

Of course, Rachel applies her skills in her own home as well. Last year, when one of her young sons was exhibiting rough behavior, she and her husband consulted with several *rabbanim* and therapists, desperate to figure out where they’d gone wrong. “We were ready to do whatever it took to make our son happy. My husband, who’s in *kollel* all day, works with kids-at-risk as a volunteer, so he’s very much in tune with children’s needs. He realized that our son’s extreme responses were not in proportion to the triggers. For example, even a simple request had the potential to cause an

intense flare-up. Neither of us could figure out what was bothering our son.

“I spoke to a *rebbetzin* with whom I am close who said, ‘This is your opportunity to see what you can fix in your home. Is it your *shalom bayis*? Your approach to *chinuch*?’ We spent hundreds of hours and tons of money trying to get to the bottom of his bitterness. We were ultimately told that the problem wasn’t coming from the home, it was coming from the school, or more accurately, the school system. It was not geared for a child like him.”

“But wasn’t that a relief?” I wonder aloud, thinking how much I’d appreciate official approval of my home and parenting style!

“Of course, but we were still at a loss,” she explains.

Because Rachel and her husband wanted to get to the bottom of their son’s problem, they pulled him out of school and hired two private *mechanchim* to learn with him. Before they began, however, they filled them in on the boy’s history, explaining that he had been diagnosed with ADHD and that he couldn’t sit still in class. What happened next was revelatory.

“We asked them to give him a break after every half hour of learning. One of the tutors was actually a former *talmid* of my husband. On his first day with our son, he texted my husband after one hour, ‘STILL LEARNING,’ then again after two hours, ‘STILL LEARNING.’ They ended up sitting together the entire

morning.

“The afternoon was spent doing various activities, and in the evening our son learned with a different *yungerman*. After three days of this my husband pointed out, ‘Look how calm and relaxed he is! Where’s the ADHD?’ We realized that our son had been *pasbut* hungry for knowledge. Just as a baby cries and cries until you feed him, our gifted child’s mind was begging to be nourished.”

Once the Rappaports came to this conclusion and understood how miserable their son must have been, it occurred to them that there must be many more like him out there. They then went to various *rabbanim* including Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky, Rav Moshe Feigelstock, *zt”l*, Rav Yaakov Bender, and of course, Rav Kotler and Rav Feinstein. “When we consulted with Rav Yehuda Jacobs, he told us that if even half a percentage point of Lakewood children were in that category, we’d still have enough students to create a school for high-achievers. Armed with *daas Torah*, we decided it was time. We understood that if a child doesn’t feel fulfilled he’ll always be searching.”

In their effort to get the project off the ground, the Rappaports hired master *mechanech* Rav Asher Rottenstreich, who has 30 years of experience in *chinuch*, to serve as the principal of the school, which they named the Mechinah. Next, they handpicked the *rebbeim* for their program, one of whom was a principal for many years. They also created a top-notch

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English syllabus, which they purposely instituted in the early afternoon in order to start and finish the school day with Torah. They are able to house the *yeshivah* in a building they own and the boys bring their own food.

Indeed, the boys in this *yeshivah* are flourishing in its empowering, highly stimulating environment. “Rabbi Rotenstreich doesn’t accept boys into the program so quickly, so it’s still very small. He wants to make sure that every student is motivated and capable of keeping up with the fast-paced program to make sure that everyone can reap the optimal benefits.” The acceptance process involves several interviews with the parents and child to determine the potential student’s exact capabilities. “We try to verify that the child is having issues in school because he’s gifted, and not because of more complicated problems that the school isn’t equipped to handle. We want to make sure that the child is in a good place with regard to *Yiddishkeit* and sincerely wants to learn.”

Since the school’s opening this past September, the results have been astounding. Rachel tells me that one of the mothers recently confided that her son told her, “Mommy, every day that I’m at the Mechinah heals me.” Other parents have related how their sons have changed, leaving for school in the morning with anticipation and excitement and returning energized instead of deflated. One father described how he’d recently arrived five minutes early to pick up his son from *cheder* but couldn’t bring himself to interrupt the class. The kids were so engaged, he said, that it brought him *nachas* just listening to them.

I ask Rachel, “How do you feel about everything you’ve accomplished?”

“I’m the kind of person who thinks that if I need something for myself, I’m not the only one who needs it,” she answers simply. ■



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