For most kids, graduating from high school marks both an end and a beginning. But what opportunities are there for special-needs high school graduates who also want to have a year in Israel — and a fulfilling life after that? Enter Darkaynu, which is opening up new worlds for special-needs teens through its innovative programs.

A Year of Their Own

By Braha Bender
It’s hard to describe the feeling when a teen like Peryl casually drops the phrase, “I’m a shanah alef girl.”

We’re sitting in the small, cozy office of Mrs. Elana Goldscheider, menahel of Midreshet Darkaynu. Located in Talpiot, in the same building as Midreshet Lindenbaum, Midreshet Darkaynu welcomes 15 special-needs girls between the ages of 18 and 24 every year.

In a classroom down the hall the girls are excitedly chatting about “the lady who will write an article about us in a magazine” and Peryl has just walked in to see what all the commotion is about. Now, while Mrs. Goldscheider goes to check on something outside, Peryl plunks herself down on the menahel’s large swivel chair behind the desk, grins widely, and tells me about her day.

“I love Darkaynu. People here are really, really nice! I love our teachers. It’s a great place to be.”

Peryl’s guileless charisma glows all over her friendly face. This is the first time that I’m having a real conversation with a special-needs girl, and to my surprise I’m discovering that I’m enjoying it.

I ask Peryl about her job. After morning classes, every Midreshet Darkaynu student spends several hours a day at a volunteer job where she can develop life skills and feel contributive. Peryl bubbles over with enthusiasm about what she does.

“I work in a petting zoo cleaning cages! Today two hamsters almost escaped. Also, I fed a mouse to a snake. Do you know how fast a snake moves when it’s hungry?”

I didn’t.

“I’ve loved animals since I was a little kid. I have a cat at home. He’s named Koby.”

It is sometimes difficult for me to understand her slurred speech. Nonetheless, our common language is the simple truth of human life: Peryl has interests. Peryl has goals, accomplishments, relationships. She is glad to tell me about them, and there is nothing cool, calm, and collected about Peryl when she does so. She doesn’t have the same walls the rest of us do. Her emotions are close to the surface, effervescent. Her smiles are genuine. It’s terrifically refreshing to spend time with someone so inspired.
Talya, shanah beaut, joins us to talk about her job as a kindergarten teacher's assistant. "The kids sit in my lap. Some follow me around. They won't leave me alone," she complains with a broad smile. "I love it!"

The daughter of a Los Angeles rabbi, Talya also tells me how much she loves davening and learning Torah. "On our trip to Meuras HaMachpeilah I davened for my buddy. She's in Shamayim. I davened that she's still okay, and that she's still with my grandpa and her siblings. My brother never got to learn in Israel but I did!" Like with Peryl, there isn't a single false note in anything Talya says. The enthusiasm, the emotions are all genuine.

Darkaynu, which will celebrate its tenth anniversary in 2012, is the umbrella organization for both Midreshet Darkaynu and Yeshivat Darkaynu, where boys with a similar range of disabilities learn in Israel for a year alongside the mainstream talmidim of Yeshivat Har Etzion in Alon Shvut. After their daily volunteer work, Darkaynu boys and girls learn b'chavrusa with volunteer students from the yeshivah's and midrashim's mainstream schools.

Chana, a Pittsburgh teen with Down syndrome, laps shyly to me, "Sunday, Wednesday, and Thursday nights I have Amanda Zimmerman. We do reading and things with the parshah. I love my new friends." Again, that piercingly genuine smile.

What those opportunities mean to the Darkaynu boys and girls is not something that the average teenager can relate to. Their appreciation, their joy, their authenticity go way beyond the carefully guarded emotions that most kids that age are willing to display.

Later Elana Goldscheider tells me a story about a flight that broke out earlier in the week between two of her students. One of the girls kept pestering the other, who finally burst out, "I don't like you because you're disabled!"

Hurling childish slurs would be frowned upon in most seminaries and yeshivos, yet the incident demonstrates the unique challenges faced by both Darkaynu's students and staff, and Mrs. Goldscheider sees something positive in the exchange. "I loved that particular incident because it showed how that Darkaynu girl perceives herself now. As far as she is concerned, she's just a regular person like you and me."

If that girl no longer perceives herself as disabled, it is at least partly due to Darkaynu's unique programming, which builds their students' self-esteem and life skills in order to bring them closer toward the functionality and accomplishments that the rest of us take for granted — and which all of us need in order to have a fulfilling, productive life in the post-high school real world.

When the School Bus Drives Away What options do special-needs children have after they complete high school? Until the age of 21, government-funded education gives the lives of special-needs kids a meaningful context. She has a place to go. He has a place to grow. Mainstreaming often places special-needs kids in classrooms alongside their peers in many of our finest elementary and high schools.

But 21 is when the real questions begin. At age 21, high-functioning special-needs kids graduate, celebrate, and lose all state funding for education. Then what? The school bus has driven away, the classrooms are closed, the friends have all gone home.

Teenagers with developmental disabilities see their sisters, brothers, and mainstream classmates go on to seminary and yeshivah in Israel. They see other girls and boys their age begin shidduchim and get married. Special-needs teens like Peryl, Talya, Yona, and Yochanan might need help with everything from managing lunch to Shabbos packing, but that doesn't stop them from dreaming of what their mainstream peers have. They also want to spend a year in Israel, get married, have a job. They have hopes and dreams.

A few years more of support and education could create very different lives for these kids, if they had a place to go.

Darkaynu is that place.

Take Yona for example. Yona, a third-year Darkaynu student, recently completed sefar HaMitzvos and made a siyum for his mother's first yahrzeit.

His mainstream chavrusa, Dovi, says, "Each time a Darkaynu student makes a siyum, let's just say that the word gets around. Basically the whole American part of the yeshivah came. Yona wrote a speech. There was singing and dancing. He accomplished something and we all felt part of the celebration."

How did Yona feel about that? It will remain one of the most cherished moments of his life.

In addition to helping special-needs kids find their place in the beis medrash, Darkaynu tackles an even more basic need: helping these kids on the brink of adulthood manage in a semi-independent home setting. While group-home settings exist, where seven or eight individuals with special needs live together with alternating counselors to care for their needs, there are kids like Yochanan who could achieve more.

The Darkaynu staff has encouraged Yochanan, who has been a student at Darkaynu for four years, to develop his job and social skills so that he can become a candidate for an assisted-living arrangement, which gives developmentally disabled adults far greater independence and life fulfillment. For instance, in assisted-living arrangements, developmentally disabled adults cook their own meals, travel to and from jobs, and manage social calendars. Friendships and accomplishments are possible in entirely new ways. Marriage may also be possible.

Organizations such as Women's League Community Residences and Ohel Bais Ezra both have assisted-living programs for married adults with special needs. It's a different world, and Darkaynu is committed to helping their students get there.

New Household Word While Elana Goldscheider and the entire Darkaynu staff are highly committed to helping their students participate in the mainstream world, the question could be asked: What made Mrs. Goldscheider so interested in the world of special-needs kids?

She explains that it all began when she was a teenager and a friend, Aviva, invited Elana to join her as an advisor for a West Hempstead Shabbaton that paired teenage special-needs kids with their mainstream peers. Aviva, who had a developmentally disabled sister, was used to being around special-needs kids. Elana had never done anything like this before. She hesitated. But she went.

"I walked in and saw about 20 mentally handicapped young adults and 40 regular kids," says Elana. "The first thing I felt was pity. I spent the entire Friday night thinking I would never do anything like
“Helping kids might be tiring, but it feels great. The real challenge of working at Darkaynu is thinking about the kids’ future, after they leave us”

— Avi Ganz
this again. It felt wrong to pity other people. I didn’t want to put myself in that position. I wanted to walk away.”

As the weekend went on, though, Elana began to realize that things were not as one-dimensional as they seemed. “On Shabbos day I saw how happy everyone felt to be there, how proud they were — the special-needs kids and the mainstream kids. I saw everyone singing together, being uplifted. My perspective totally changed. I went from a chesed point of view — that spending time with these people is such a chesed — to a tzedek point of view. This wasn’t a chesed, it was just the right thing to do. It gave something wonderful to everybody.”

Elana Goldscheider, one of those rare personalities who do more for Klal Yisrael than 15 people combined, has not stopped since. By 1987 she was an assistant director at Yachad, the National Jewish Council for Disabilities. After she asked Camp Morasha to build a bunk for special kids in 1999, she runs the camp’s special-needs sleepaway program for seven years, commuting annually from her new home in Israel.

In 2001, Elana met Tikva Juni, a special-needs camper who wanted to go to Israel for a year in seminary but had nowhere to go. Never one to face an obstacle lying down, Elana decided to create a seminary.

Just as she had approached Camp Morasha, Elana approached an English-speaking Jerusalem seminary and proposed a program that would allow “her girls” to have an Israel experience alongside their mainstream peers. The kids would have their own specialized schedule and staff, but still get to enjoy the convivial seminary and yeshivah atmosphere. The term Elana coined for this unique arrangement is “sidestreaming.” She dreams of it becoming a household word.

“I chose Midreshet Lindenbaum for several reasons,” Elana explains. “They have a large, enclosed building to provide a protected environment. They also have a lot going on. Teenagers from English-, Spanish-, and Hebrew-speaking homes all learn here. I wanted my girls to be a part of a diverse, dynamic environment.”

When Elana met with the menahel, Rabbi Shlomo Brown, and Tova Rhein, overseas director of Midreshet Lindenbaum and an old camp acquaintance, to discuss her unusual proposal, the two said yes within ten minutes. It took a little longer to garner support from the Ohr Torah Stone board members for the daring idea — a year, to be exact — since the English-speaking seminary and yeshivah world had never done this before. Today, young women
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— Elana Goldscheider

from a rainbow of backgrounds meet and mix in the large common room, schmoozing, reading, and relaxing. Darkaynu’s students are just as much a part of the warm atmosphere as everybody else.

In 2006, Rabbi Moshe Taragin of Yeshivat Har Etzion wanted his mainstream boys to have the experience of learning with Darkaynu teenagers. Why? Rabbi Taragin allows one of his mainstream talmidim to explain.

“You have to understand, I don’t feel like I’m doing a chesed by learning with Yona,” says 18-year-old Dovi. “He is an important part of my learning experience. Last year we learned Sefer HaMitzvot from seven to nine in the evening, but Yona would come up to me in the beit midrash every hour just to ask, ‘Are we learning today? Are we learning today?’”

Dovi laughs. “He knew that we were learning, but he was just so excited. His excitement made me conscious and excited about my own learning.”

In fact, when Dovi was considering whether to return for a second year of learning, one of the critical factors was his time with Yona. Since Dovi would only be able to arrive after Succos, he had three requests: “I want to room with this friend, I want to be in that rabbi’s shuir, and I want to learn with Yona from Darkaynu.”

Here is the kind of thing that Dovi wanted to return to: One evening last winter, Dovi asked Yona why the Kohain wears white to daven in the Beis HaMikdash. Yona responded that white reminds him of angels, and angels remind him of his mother. He said Kaddish for her three times a day.

“They’re so real, so open with you,” Dovi reflects. “You’ll be going along and then all of a sudden they’ll say something that puts you on your feet. Like, hey, that’s powerful, that caught me off guard. The perspective you get from them is unique. In fact, it puts in perspective why you’re learning at all. You’re learning in order to give to other people. And what you’re getting is such a genuine, beautiful chavruta.”

Shanah “the Rest of Your Life” Of course, life at the seminary and the yeshivah isn’t always a bed of roses. Yeshivat Darkaynu director Avi Ganz comments, though, that it isn’t the daily grind of caring for the kids’ many needs that is difficult. “Helping kids might be tiring, but it feels great. The real challenge of working at Darkaynu is thinking about the kids’ future, after they leave us.”

With spaces in long-term living facilities for the developmentally disabled at a premium, it’s no idle concern. I therefore ask Mrs. Goldscheider what most of her girls do after seminary is over. She tells me that many come back for shanah beit, shanah giramel. One lucky student, the sweet, personable Amy, is in her eighth year with Darkaynu, but Amy is the exception.

“It’s a tough question,” she answers frankly. “Parents want to help their adult kids find jobs, meaningful occupations where they won’t be abused or in danger. They want to find them living facilities that will support them in achieving the most functional lives that they can have. But it’s not easy. There aren’t enough programs. There isn’t enough funding.”

Avi Ganz adds, “All our students go home with something real in their pockets. Another year of their lives has been spent meaningfully and that’s saying something. For about half of our students, their chances for a better future have significantly improved, and that’s saying even more.”

*All Darkaynu students’ names have been changed.