Now that we’re nearing the end of this pandemic, B’Ezrat Hashem, we wanted to know: What are some of the things we’ve learned in terms of education? What are some messages we can take with us?

“The challenge of Corona has been an incredible opportunity to teach our children spiritual strength. To teach them how to deal with a long-lasting crisis,” says Rabbi Chagai Londin, a prominent Israeli educator. “We had to learn how to live with Corona for an extended amount of time, just as we need to learn how to move forward in life with our yetzer hara and other weaknesses. This kind of mental attitude that allows us to cope with regressions (which are probably to be expected in the coming months) is not a sharp swing between euphoria and despair, but a smooth glide between the waves of life which naturally include ups and downs. The Talmud describes how Rabbi Akiva survived a shipwreck: ‘I held on to a board, and every wave that came over me, I bowed my head under.’ For every wave that comes our way, we must hold onto a ‘board’ – the Torah, and ‘bow our heads’ – to ride the waves. This is what we must teach our children.”

According to Rabbi Dr. Yonah Goodman, another Israeli expert in education, Corona has taught us that education cannot rely solely on teachers: “Just because a teacher teaches wonderfully doesn’t mean the students learn wonderfully. In too many places, the responsibility of learning was mainly on the teachers. The moment the children were home, far from sight, and for some, with the camera turned off, things fell apart. We learned that we need to invest much more in cultivating children who are thirsty to learn, who feel responsibility toward their own learning, and who know how to do so of their own volition.”

But, he adds, Corona has also taught us to appreciate that “we have incredible teachers, who dedicate themselves completely from a deep responsibility to the education of our children.”

Rabbi Daniel Kaplan, an experienced educator and Torah programs director at World Bnei Akiva, builds upon Rabbi Goodman’s words: “Education should ideally come from the home: שֵׁנַּנְתָּם לְבָנֶיךָ, you shall teach your children. For so many years we’ve outsourced this to

Continued on page 50
different educational bodies, but now we have had the opportunity to be involved in our children’s education directly. This is a message that shouldn’t fade when they go back to school. Of course we trust our schools and educational systems but hopefully after Corona we will play more of a part in educating our children ourselves.”

Rabbi Efrem Goldberg, Senior Rabbi of Boca Raton Synagogue, shares what he believes is the main message we’ve learned from Corona: ר ק ה ר ש י מ – the Torah is as indispensable as the air we breathe.

There is a unique law that the poles placed in the Aron to transport it must always remain in place and not be removed. Rav Hirsch suggests that the perpetual presence of the poles communicates the portability of Torah. The Torah is not designed for one location and isn’t meaningful only for one point in time. The Aron’s permanent poles reflect that Torah was, and is, always ready to travel, to accommodate and conform to what it takes and where it needs to go in order to be transmitted.

Continuing school, class and lessons for our children was incredibly complicated and difficult throughout Corona. Rebbeim and teachers had to learn and discover new skills and talents. Technologies were engaged and deployed to ensure uninterrupted continuity of Torah study. Our children were asked to conform to new rules and realities like distancing, masks, school going from in-person to online, classes forced to quarantine and then to come back. As challenging as this year has been, it has also enabled our educational systems, teachers, students and parents alike, to discover a sense of resiliency and devotion they would likely not have otherwise known we were capable of. Hopefully that lesson will inspire our children and ourselves and last well beyond when this difficult time is over.”

What have we been able to do during this pandemic that we weren’t able to do before?

Avigail Wonder, Head of Secondary School at Leibler Yavneh College in Australia, answers: “As a result of the newfound ease of communication via Zoom, our teachers benefit from professional development from a variety of overseas educators, who we can now seamlessly connect with. Our school ran a weekly Tanach evening shiur for advanced students, taught by Rabbi Menachem Leibtag in Israel. We would never have thought of being able to host giants of Torah Judaism to fly out to teach our students, yet here they were, teaching and discussing and taking questions from people thousands of miles away. These sessions were so powerful and real connections were made between our students and the presenters, despite the distance.”

Online education and distance communication with loved ones during lockdowns showed us the necessity and benefits of modern technology. Is there anything we should be wary of when it comes to online education and social media?

“Technology in general, social media and media apps in particular, are seductive, intoxicating and, for some, addictive,” says Rabbi Goldberg. “Ideas that are both spiritually and socially destructive are readily available and accessible. While rejecting technology entirely is not a viable strategy, neither is embracing it wholesale without boundaries and supervision. The benefits of technology are enormous, but tolerating unbridled and unregulated access for oneself or one’s family is reckless and irresponsible. Car travel is invaluable, but it would be inconceivable for a responsible society to allow everyone, regardless of age or training, to drive anywhere, at any time and in any manner or speed. Non-regulation would be grossly negligent and most certainly result in injuries and worse and the same is true when it comes to the use and abuse of technology.”

“The number one thing I would be wary of with a young person is how much time they are spending online or on their phone,” says Avigail Wonder. “Social media streams to videos, songs, texts and images into the minds and hearts of our young people for hours every day. This media exposes our children to a spectrum of values, cultures and ideologies which they need to face, digest and make sense of – when they are still trying to understand their own values and beliefs. The challenge is compounded by the amount of time our children spend engaging online and not in face-to-face interactions – which can negatively affect their emotional well-being. It’s important for them to have face-to-face connections each day with family members or friends.”

“Our children will acquire the skill of technology itself at school and mostly alone,” says Rabbi Goodman. “Parents’ main task is different. It is to guide our kids to dive into the digital world with a Jewish value-based compass. Anyone who lives near a busy road understands that the road is not the enemy, but it can be dangerous if we don’t teach our children how to behave when using it. The same is true of the digital world.”

Since, as Rabbi Goldberg mentioned, rejecting technology entirely is not a feasible strategy, it seems that our only option is what Rabbi Goodman said: to teach our children to navigate the digital world. Can you offer us some practical tips in terms of how to help our children successfully navigate the internet?
Avodat Hashem involves two different yet complementary elements;_so ur mar'eh u'sh'vah_together – avoiding evil and doing good. We need to have candid discussions with our children, who are both consumers and producers of content on the internet. While they absorb and publish messages and values, they can be mindful and in-control participants on social media. They can approach each piece of media with an enquiring eye; ‘Is what I am presented with in this video in line with my values?’ ‘Is this audio note, text message or video I’m sending, going to be harmful?’ Avoiding negative influences is their_so ur mar'eh_. Standing up for positive values, supporting the vulnerable and reaching out to others with positivity through chats and streaming allow our children to engage in_sh'vah online. Likewise, following influencers who promote positive messages around socialization, body image, wellbeing and Torah, allow adolescents to promote positivity for themselves and others,” says Avigail Wonder.

“The greatest curriculum we can offer is our own behavior,” adds Rabbi Goldberg. “We must model for our children what it means to be responsible digital citizens, how to engage technology judiciously and carefully. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, ‘Your actions speak so loudly, I cannot hear what you are saying.’ If we practice the behavior we preach for them, they will not only hear what we are saying, but learn from what we are doing.”

Rabbi Chagai Londin: “The main thing is control and focus. Institute times for using the internet, say, from 1:00 pm until 2:00 pm, not a minute more. Or, for example, create a family rule that we don’t use our phones during the day, and set a time in the evening for checking WhatsApp messages.”

Rabbi Kaplan recommends installing filters for internet use. “Young children don’t have the ability to navigate the internet in a healthy way on their own. Sometimes even adults lack this ability. Installing a filter system is often a simple and practical solution.” Professional guidance is another thing he recommends. “There are experts in this field who can give real tips to help navigate us on what’s healthy and what’s not, and how to build healthy social media and internet access. I encourage getting some of these professionals to give courses and lecture series in our schools or homes.”

Is there anything within the world of technology/social media which does warrant complete rejection? Or can everything ultimately be utilized for the good?

Rabbi Kaplan answers that there indeed is. “There are some very harmful things on the internet,” he says. “You don’t know who’s lurking around the web and communicating with children. If parents are not on top of their children’s internet use, they may be exposed to things which could really harm them. They may be part of emotionally dangerous groups. All of these are things that parents and educators need to be aware of.”

Rabbi Londin explains that to help discern what can be used for good from what is best to reject, we can turn to our leaders. “That’s why we need Rabbis and Rebbetzins who are aware of modern culture,” he says, “to help guide people in a supervised and correct way within the world of technology.”

“Much of technology and social media apps are like food – they may technically be kosher, but that doesn’t mean they are good for you,” adds Rabbi Goldberg. “We must be very mindful and discerning when engaging technology to constantly evaluate if that particular app, website or device is indeed making us better ovdei Hashem and bringing out our best selves. If not, even if we find them stimulating and enjoyable, we would likely find better use of the time we spend on them.”