

CHANNIE REIFER

Sharing The Light

WHAT AN
EYE OPENER

It is my great pleasure to introduce you to Rochel Yenti Bodek. Rochel Yenti is a wife and mother. She has a master's in education with an advanced certification in teaching the visually impaired. She runs a support group called *Insight Beyond Eyesight*, and she loves to swim, exercise, take brisk walks and read and read and read. By the way, did I mention? Rochel Yenti is blind.

Did that catch your attention?
I suggest you get comfortable. Perhaps curl up on your favorite chair while sipping a comforting cup of coffee, as I share this insightful interview with you.

Hello, Rochel Yenti! Please give the readers a brief introduction to yourself. Tell us who you are, and a little bit about your background.

Hello! So I grew up in Monsey amongst *kein ayin hara* many siblings. My father is visually impaired, and my mother is a polio survivor and wheelchair bound (that is a separate story). I have an eye condition called cone-rod dystrophy. My peripheral vision (side to side vision) is stronger than my central vision. Means I can walk around and see the bigger picture. My central vision is weaker, which makes it difficult for me to see detail, color and small print. I was born with this condition, but it didn't significantly affect me until I was about 13 years old. That's when my vision deteriorated. That's when I was pronounced legally blind.

Do you mean you were born able to see perfectly, but it got progressively worse?

My vision was never perfect. But I never dreamed that my condition would affect me [to this extent], although some of my siblings were affected by the same condition, to a greater measure than I was. You know, I was a very happy-go-lucky child. I was the kind of little girl who loved fun and friends and everything else. Reading especially. I taught myself how to read in Pre-1A when we were barely starting to understand how reading works. In second or third grade, I would take my older sister's books, and I would sit and read a lot.

So overall things were pretty good until the age of 13? Is that when things started to go downhill as far as the vision was concerned? Tell me a little about that progression.

It was very difficult. You know, I was completely in denial, at least in the beginning. But there was a reason why they got me to officially get the blind diagnosis. Because of it, I got a special teacher who was trained to teach the visually impaired. By the way, legal status doesn't mean a person is totally blind; it means that your vision is limited enough that they feel you need services. My teacher was supposed to help me with my school studies while I was in the eighth grade. She wasn't a Jewish teacher, so she couldn't help me much, but she tried. She introduced me to using Braille. I was familiar with it from my older sister who was legally blind from a much younger age — and she was primarily a Braille reader.

As of right now, in terms of your vision, what is your legal status?

I am legally blind, but not totally blind.

And that's how it's been since you're a teenager, it has not gotten worse?

I say, as of now, I am sighted to the blind and blind to the sighted. Unfortunately, my sight is getting worse with time. If there are poles or there's any kind of big obstacle, generally, I'll notice it. Especially if there's contrast, like dark on light. Do you know what I'm saying? I have no depth perception. I can't always tell if steps are going down or, actually, going up. Usually, I can see that there are stairs, especially when it's light outside, because I can see the shadows of the stairs.

Time to move on. Can we talk about your husband?

I got married after high school. My husband is a paraplegic. He's been in a wheelchair since he was a toddler. He had cancer in his spine. And he's, *baruch Hashem*, a very capable and independent person.

He is an extraordinary man.

You know my husband!

Yes, I do. Shall we continue with your interview?

Listen, getting married took adjustment, probably more than a typical marriage. You know, there are a lot of challenges. We both have our physical issues and disabilities. But Hashem put us together and we help each other. Sometimes he helps me with things that I need help with. Like checking if things are clean. I can't always notice that and other visual stuff. And then for me, *baruch Hashem*, I'm very energetic and I do a lot of the more energetic things that he can't do, like taking out the garbage or schlepping things.

When did Hashem bless you with your twins?

Almost fifteen years ago. Next week is their birthday.

... I AM SIGHTED TO THE BLIND AND BLIND TO THE SIGHTED.

I'm wondering, do you think your boys are above average in maturity, simply because they are being brought up in your home?

Yes, I think my kids are very mature. Like any teens, they don't like it when you make a fuss about them. I was telling them about this interview and suggested that they should be interviewed. They declined but they didn't mind me being interviewed. They are, *baruch Hashem*, healthy, smart; overall, great kids.

Now, tell me a little bit more. What do you do besides being an exceptional wife and mom?

Let's go back a bit. When I graduated high school, and I got married, I had this idea of going to college and getting a degree in social work so that I could become a social worker and help other people. And I started it. I did my bachelor's in human services. And it was a bit of a challenge. College is not easy for anybody, let alone someone who's visually impaired. You know, they're not always adaptive. Ultimately, I changed paths for a degree to become a teacher for the visually impaired. It took a long, long, long, long time; many, many years. I took some breaks in between as my kids were born. Also in between, I had an almost full-time job. I was a service coordinator for special-needs people. Eventually, about two years ago, I graduated with my degree in teaching the visually impaired. And that's what I currently do. I couldn't find a job locally. That's why I commute to Brooklyn twice a week to work with kids. And also, I do have a very part-time job in Monsey.

I also run a support group called *Insight Beyond Eyesight*. It is my passion. It is a group for families of the visually impaired. We do teleconferences. We just did an event this December 4th at the Jewish Children's Museum. We like to get together [and have fun]. We once did a *Shabbaton*. We support and help

each other; we share resources and ideas.

Is there something outstanding that someone did to help you or someone you know?

Yes. One of my student's teachers taught herself Braille a little while back. Now that a visually impaired student is in her class, the teacher bought a device to write Braille labels which she uses to mark her student's tests as well as to leave personal notes on her student's papers

Let's talk clothing. How do you know what to wear with which top and feel confident that you're not wearing stripes and circles?

I try not to buy clothing that is very similar in color so that I can distinguish between items of clothing. I try to dress fairly simply, I don't have too many matching tops and skirts. I can tell the difference in the way the fabric feels. I don't really love the idea of matching sets, but I shopped with my sister and she thought this was so cute. I listened to her and I bought it. So I changed my wardrobe. And I'm like, "Hey, you're gonna have to remind me what goes to what because I can't tell exactly the difference."

So you go shopping with your sister?

Yes, or my husband, or friends. Whatever. I find people to shop with me.

Okay, now, next question. It's mind boggling to me. How do you manage your kitchen? For example, how do you know that you're opening a can of tomato sauce and not a can of pineapple tidbits?

I don't use that many cans. But let's talk spices for instance. So if I look very, very closely, I can see the

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Ten silly things not to say to blind people

We are using the term "blind" to represent anyone who has vision loss to the extent that they struggle with the scenarios mentioned below. Some people, especially if they have some vision, prefer "visually impaired," "low vision" or "partially sighted." Rochel Y. is not bothered by any term that's used. "What difference does it make? I'm anyway sighted to the blind and blind to the sighted!"

1. While pointing or nodding: "It's over here/there." Be specific and correct when giving directions. Examples: "Your keys are on the tray, on the coffee table." "Walk straight, and then turn left. The door is on your right. It opens to your left." Better to say too much than too little.
2. "Would it help you to imagine what I look like if you touched my face?" That is for plays! Faces don't really feel that different from one person to another. You could offer, "Do you want to feel what my dress/bag/hairstyle/etc., look like?" These may be interesting to the blind person. Blind people enjoy regular conversations — share clues and cues about things that are interesting around you with your blind friend.
3. "I'm sure she can't do it because she can't see. I'll do it for her." Often, blind people can do things you don't think they can, or even they think they can't. Try to think how they could do it with some help. For example, tell and show her where her coat needs to be hung up. Encourage her to do it herself, even if it takes longer or looks funny when she feels around to find the hook. She will become more independent — this could help her for the rest of her life!
4. "Did you *feel* what she just did?" Don't avoid words like "see/look/blind." It generally does not make blind people uncomfortable. You can say, "See you later!" or "Did you watch that play?"
5. "You must have heard/smelled what everyone else couldn't." People think blind people's senses are very strong. If what you are saying is not true, the blind person might feel very uncomfortable or have to pretend that they did hear/smell it. A blind person might not react appropriately to a situation. Why? Maybe they cannot hear properly due to background noise, or they don't see what's making everyone laugh. Try to understand their reactions. Conversely, don't raise your voice when talking to people whose only disability is blindness!
6. "Guess who I am." Don't make a blind person guess your identity. Always say your name when you start talking to your blind friend, unless she shows she knows who you are. Speak

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to a blind person directly, treating them like a regular human being. Remember to say goodbye before leaving so they don't end up having a conversation with themselves!

7. "I once knew a totally blind man who was so skillful, he didn't even use a cane." Walking without a cane takes guts, not skill. A cane: increases a blind person's safety and independence; it's a tool, like glasses; it helps blind people know what's in front of them, to avoid bumping into things, and where there are steps. Via a cane, people can identify someone with a visual impairment and offer help if needed.
8. "You don't look blind." "How much can you see?" "Don't glasses help you see?" There are many kinds of eye conditions; not all are obvious. They may not want to describe their visual impairment, and it's no one's business to judge or question. Have you ever met anyone faking being blind?
9. "I'm so sorry you are blind." "I'll grab your arm so I can walk you." Think twice before making personal comments or doing things you think are helpful. Ask if they need help, and if so, how.
10. "You're amazing!" Visually impaired and blind people learn skills to do everyday tasks, sometimes using special tools. Don't give embarrassing, false praise. You can say, "It's so interesting how you read with your device" or "I admire your courage in persevering to learn a skill."

Compiled by Mrs. Rochel Yenti Bodek, a visually-impaired woman and teacher of the visually impaired. She is co-founder of Insight Beyond Eyesight, an organization for frum people who are visually impaired. You can contact her at insightbeyondeyesight@gmail.com .

PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES CAN BE VERY PRODUCTIVE IF YOU GIVE THEM A CHANCE, AND YOU GIVE THEM THE RIGHT TOOLS.

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letters [on spice bottle labels], especially those with clear, straight fonts, not those curly, curvy fonts. At one point I had some of them labeled in Braille. I don't anymore and probably I should. I'm not a very big cook, though.

I don't know how much you want to focus on technology. But technology is amazing [helpful] for us. When I do get stuck [in what I am doing in the kitchen], and I need to read labels or instructions, there are apps that can be used. There is one called "Be My Eyes," manned by volunteers. Volunteers help by signing in and looking through my phone and they read for me. That's a very interesting, good resource that I use quite often [to help me manage my activity in the kitchen].

That brings me to my next question:

Are you comfortable with knives, and with cooking in general?

Yeah... The only thing on the stove that I don't like to do is frying. Frying is not something that you can just say, okay, bake it for a certain amount of time and it'll be ready. You have to have a very good sense of smell to know if it's ready. I do have blind friends who fry, but I'm telling you I'm not so good in the kitchen. I've done it, but I don't feel that comfortable.

Imagine peeling and grinding potatoes, cracking eggs and pouring a kugel batter into a pan, all while blindfolded! I'm wowed.

Outside of your home, do you appreciate it when people offer you a seat on a bus or train?

I don't like to be treated differently. I guess sometimes it helps, especially if I'm very exhausted. You know, people don't always offer it because people don't always even notice that I'm visually impaired — unless I have my cane with me. Generally, however, I fold my cane up when I get to the bus. When I'm

A photograph of two male scientists in a laboratory. They are wearing white lab coats and safety goggles. The scientist on the right is wearing blue gloves and is using a pipette to transfer liquid from a round-bottom flask into a test tube. The scientist on the left is looking on. In the background, there are various pieces of laboratory equipment, including a rack of test tubes and a bottle.

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walking around the streets, I use my cane. But when I am in a familiar building, it's just a hassle for me. I put it away; I put it in my pocketbook. So I'm not always so noticeably blind. In that case, people won't know to offer. When I'm walking on the street and people notice that I'm using a cane, then I'm always getting offers of being crossed and all kinds of things. You know, I appreciate that it's better that way than not getting help at all.

Do you have any hobbies you can share with us?

I love swimming. I love exercising. I take walks. I like reading — though I don't have that much time for it. On Shabbos I read using Braille, and during the week I do audio because I can get through the reading material much faster.

So Braille is much slower?

For sure! But I don't have another option on Shabbos, so I read that way.

I hope it's okay to ask this question. Do you have dreams? Vivid sights at night?

When you ask it like that, I don't know. I think I do. Sometimes. I can't tell you for sure. You know, I haven't seen detail in many, many years. But I sort of think I do. I do dream a lot that I drive and fly. I fly. I drive. Yeah!

Share with us. What is your greatest fear?

Well, I'm afraid to lose all my vision. I think every bit of vision I have is valuable. But I am sort of, like, also at the same time preparing for it. You know what they say, expect the best and prepare for the worst.

What about your greatest achievement?

My kids, my family and my support group are my proudest achievements.

MY KIDS, MY FAMILY AND MY SUPPORT GROUP ARE MY PROUDEST ACHIEVEMENTS

What is your number-one frustration?

The biggest frustration is when I can't do things myself and I have to rely on other people.

How do you deal with it?

So sometimes I'll just distract myself from the frustrating occurrence, and I'll do things I enjoy. You know, I'll help other people. I'll try to make phone calls, try to take care of things.

And what do you tell yourself on your most happy, glorious day?

That I should keep going! That life is good! That everything is working out well. And "Thank You, Hashem."

Please share three character traits your friends would use to describe you.

Perceptive. Ambitious. Energetic.

Which three words would you use to describe yourself?

The three P's: Proactive. Productive. Perseverant.

Now ask me what I think. Which three words would I use to describe you?

That's an easy one. Courageous, courageous, courageous.

Are there specific people in your life that you want to give a shout out to?

My kids, my parents, our friends, and of course, my husband.

Don't blame you for that. And by the way, is he home? Would he mind answering a question or two?

Let me "see" if he's home. Yes, I can ask him a question or two.

Why did you agree to this interview?

Because you're Mr. Sheya Reifer's mother! He's my husband's close friend.

Just kidding! I would have agreed, anyway.

Okay. Finally, can you share some parting words with *Binah* readers?

I want to spread the word that people with disabilities can be very productive if you give them a chance, and you give them the right tools and skills. For instance, my visually impaired friends, some of them are very capable people. And it's so sad. It's so hard for them to find proper jobs. I wish people would give them the chance to shine. You know, many of them aren't at their fullest potential, and it hurts me so much.

We must focus on people's abilities and not their disabilities.

I think we did pretty well together. What do you say?

I think so, too. Yup! You're a born interviewer!
I'm blushing

To Rochel Yenti's husband: How do you keep the *simchas hachaim* in your home?

I think it's a two-part answer for me. I try to focus on what I can do. When I'm in a place where it seems insurmountable, I look back at all my past successes.

There's no reason to think they're not going to continue. I've been given tremendous gifts, and that empowers me to go forward.

That's beautiful, what an inspiration.

We don't like the word inspiration. I like people to see the practical aspects of life. Don't just be inspired — do something!

What makes your wife so extraordinary?

She's invincible. There is no stopping her.

For once in my life, I have nothing more to say.

May we all merit to see the ultimate nes Chanukah where *Hashem* illuminates the world by revealing *Moshiach Tzidkeinu* speedily in our days. ●

The author wishes to thank Mrs. Reizy Itzkowitz for her help in preparing this article for publication

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