

# Zoom, Masks, Safe Distances... What About Homeschooling? – An Interview with Mrs. Rebecca Masinter

By **Elliot Resnick** - 4 Heshvan 5781 – October 21, 2020

Photo Credit: courtesy



Rebecca Masinter

Homeschool your child? In an ordinary year, most *frum* parents likely wouldn't even consider it. But this year isn't exactly ordinary. Due to fear of Covid-19 and government closures of schools, many parents are contemplating homeschooling for the first time.

Last week, The Jewish Press posed commonly-asked questions regarding homeschooling to Rebecca Masinter, who homeschooled all six of her children and who herself was homeschooled as a child from 6<sup>th</sup> grade through 9<sup>th</sup> grade. A daughter of Rabbi Daniel Lapin (who is a great nephew of the famed *mussar* personality, Rav Elyah Lopian), Masinter is an ACT science tutor and the creator of "Toras Imecha," a podcast featuring short inspirational thoughts on parenting.

**The Jewish Press: Some parents would like to homeschool their children but think they're not knowledgeable enough. What would you say to them?**

Masinter: The answer goes back to what the role of a parent is. A parent is there to guide and model their child's growth into adulthood, and there's an awful lot we don't know when we become parents. But we grow into it, and we have a responsibility to do the best we can.

So, when it comes to a subject you don't know, maybe you hire a tutor, maybe you sign your child up for a class, and maybe you go to the library, check out a book, and learn it together with him. There are a myriad of ways to facilitate your child learning something even if you yourself don't know it.

**If you're learning the material along with your child, won't you cover less ground?**

You have to be clear on what your goals are. If your goal is, "I want him to reach X level by X age," then, yes, you'll probably be hiring *rebbeim*. But that doesn't preclude you from also engaging with it.

When my sons were beginning *Mishnayos*, we hired *rebbe*s, but my husband also invested in learning a specific program that we were very excited about to teach *Torah Sheba'al Peh*. He spent hours - we both did actually. You have so many choices when you're homeschooling.

**Kids in school have textbooks, worksheets, etc. Where do homeschooling parents get such material?**

For *limudei kodesh*, there are wonderful resources. One is chinuch.org, which is a terrific free website. But the best thing really is to network - to ask teachers and other homeschool mothers - because there are many resources out there. In my experience, many of the companies that traditionally sell to schools are also more than happy to sell to homeschoolers too.

**What about *limudei chol*?**

In a way, it's easier, but in a way it's harder because it's much more overwhelming [due to the number of options available]. There are millions of homeschoolers in America, and there's an [entire] industry catering to them.

**So essentially there are websites you can go on and buy textbooks, lesson plans, worksheets, etc.?**

Yes, and many of them are written for homeschoolers. So, for example, the math programs we use for my children are intended for students to learn themselves. I don't teach my children math. Homeschool materials are actually very, very impressive.

**Some people who are interested in homeschooling wonder: How in the world can I pull this off if I have a regular job?**

It's a good question. I don't think everyone can or should homeschool. That being said, there are many parents who work and homeschool. I even know single parents who manage to do it. Is that difficult? Extremely. But is it possible? Yes.

But it's definitely not for everybody. Homeschooling is more time- and labor-intensive than most people probably realize.

**One of the biggest objections people have to homeschooling is social. They argue that kids who don't go to school won't have friends and will be socially awkward. How do you respond?**

Right now, with Covid-19, I don't think schools are about socializing either, but in general, I've always felt that I want my children to learn how to interact with other people from me and their father – not from other six-, seven-, or eight-year-old boys or girls.

I don't think you necessarily learn healthy social skills by being thrown into the pack with everybody. You learn it from a relationship with a parent who can model it and teach it.

That being said, when a family homeschools, they are not sitting at home alone. There are many, many interactions that family is having – whether it's with homeschool groups or museum trips or social activities [with other homeschooling families]. In many ways, I think my children had many more diverse social experiences than children in school.

Also, I notice that when we have homeschool classes or groups, there's a range of ages and they learn to relate to more people. When we would have school friends over occasionally, I would sometimes hear the comment, "Your younger sister can't play with us. She's a baby." I never once, though, heard that type of comment coming out of a homeschooled child in our house.

And that's one of the things I appreciate about homeschooling. My older kids and younger kids have relationships that I think are much stronger than they would have been if they were in their own separate schools and spheres all day long.

**So many homeschool families plan activities together?**

Yes. In fact, it's one of the more time consuming parts of homeschooling. Right now, we have a 39 *melachos* club, but over the years, we've done newspaper clubs with other families, geography clubs, *Chumash* groups, *chagim* groups, music classes, ice skating classes – there's a lot.

**Do you currently homeschool all six of your children?**

Right now, four of them are homeschooled and two of them are in school. I have a 12<sup>th</sup> grader and a 9<sup>th</sup> grader who were homeschooled until high school, and I have a 10<sup>th</sup> grader and three younger children who are homeschooled.

**When your two oldest boys entered high school after 10 years of homeschooling, did they have any difficulties making friends?**

No, *baruch Hashem*, the transition was easy and smooth.

**So they have friends like everyone else?**

Yes. And even more than that. One of them, when he was still homeschooled, would go to the nursing home and visit the elderly people there once or twice a week. It was very regular and he had real friends there. When he was bar mitzvah, there was a [real] *simcha* because he had been *davening* with the men in his *minyán* for a long time. He had relationships with

people of all ages.

And now that he's in school, I believe he's a better friend because he's had experience reaching out and connecting with different types of people.

**Some people see schools almost as a babysitting service and believe they would go crazy if their kids were around them all day. What's your reaction?**

It's a shame. I understand the feeling, but I don't think it's a Torah perspective. Children are a gift, and they are our responsibility to raise, and I don't see homeschooling honestly as anything other than parenting.

Is it challenging? Yes. Do I need to learn to build in time for myself? Yes. But it's a gift. These are my children, and it's my responsibility to do the best I can for them. This life is not about me trying to take it easy.

I think all parents have the responsibility to do what's best for their children. And sometimes that means school and sometimes that means homeschool. It's certainly not for everybody. I don't look down on anybody who says, "I couldn't handle it" or "I need [to send my kids to school] for the babysitting." That's fine. But to me, it's very sad.

**Do you think it makes sense to perhaps homeschool children when they're younger but then send them to school when they're older when they have to start learning material that your average parent may not know?**

It depends very much on the child. I think the thing to remember is that when you have a child who's homeschooled, he's learned how to learn. Children who are homeschooled from a young age take ownership over their education. So when they reach 12, 13, or 14, it's true that the material is harder, but they're engaged in it. They want to learn it.

I actually don't teach my 10<sup>th</sup> grader anything anymore. He's way beyond me in math, science, computer coding. But he knows how to learn, he knows how to access information, he knows how to ask people for help, and he knows how to take courses. I just facilitate his learning at this point. I don't look over his work.

**I'm assuming that's because he's a good student. Presumably you would interfere if he were slacking off.**

I believe *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* created every single child in this world with an insatiable curiosity. We are born wanting to learn. We are born wanting to make sense of the world around us. And unfortunately we sometimes kill that in kids. But that doesn't mean they didn't have it. They had it, and we deadened it.

This particular child, actually, would have been a disaster in school. I can tell you that without a doubt. And part of the responsibility of every parent is to help your child learn in the way that's best for him or her. I'll give you an example:

This child is very mathematical. So when we started learning *Chumash*, [the plan was to] teach him Rashi, which is what I did with all my other children. But first of all, Rashi is in a different script and he had difficulty reading. And second of all, it didn't speak to him. But he's mathematical. So we started doing every *Baal HaTurim*, which is full of *gematrias*. And eventually, six or eight months later - I don't remember how long - he was ready and able to learn Rashi.

Now, I could have *chas v'shalom* killed his ability and [desire] to learn *Chumash* by forcing him to do it the way all his other siblings had done it. But I think a parent has a responsibility to help a child engage in learning the way he's ready for.

### **Do you look back fondly on the four years you were homeschooled as a child?**

I loved it – but I loved school also.

### **In *They're Your Kids*, Sam Sorbo argues that one of the advantages of homeschooling is that you avoid the danger of your children adopting their teacher's values over your own.**

I would hope that your readership is in any event choosing a school where the teachers' values reflect those of the parents, but, yes, obviously, the parental role has been eroding over the years, and it's not healthy.

We are supposed to be the ones who convey and model values to our children. One of the biggest *berachos* of homeschooling is that we have a sense of family and a family culture. We know who we are. When we prepare for Shabbos or *yom tov* or for guests, or we do *chesed*, we're all in it together.

### **You've been involved in an annual Orthodox homeschooling conference. How would you describe it?**

I've been involved off and on. There was one this year, but it was virtual. It's called the Torah Home Education Conference. It's an opportunity to learn from other mothers and network. We also have Torah vendors who come to show their materials. Around 100 people come.

So much now, though, has shifted to the digital world instead of in-person conferences. There are Orthodox Jewish homeschool listservs, for example.

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