

## Communicating Through Touch

Without the benefit of sight, the sense by which most of the students at Keren Or experience the world around them is touch. Keren Or utilizes the importance of touch in a number of ways.

To enhance communication, Keren Or teachers create tactile boards, sections of the wall of a classroom with adhesive backing, featuring unique symbols that communicate an activity, a special time, or a feeling. Students walk up to the board and feel the objects on the wall, encountering ones that they know and then learning to associate them with a process. For example, a student may feel a spoon and realize that

this indicates mealtime, a tambourine indicates music therapy, and a piece of towel indicates that the next activity is a session in the hydrotherapy pool.

Tactile boards allow two-way communication: students can find the spoon on the wall to show that they are hungry, and teachers can place objects there to show the schedule of what is happening next. These augmentative communication tools are important for students who do not have language skills; the boards help them to know what is happening around them, what to expect, and to express their desires.

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*A child interacts with a tactile mobile*

## Putting the Mitzvah in Bat Mitzvah

A Bar/Bat Mitzvah is a major milestone in a Jewish life, but Rebecca Meller, of New Rochelle NY, took it all in stride. Not only did she recently become Bat Mitzvah, but she also dedicated her time to benefit children with multiple disabilities. Rebecca was touched by Keren Or's mission and decided to raise money for Keren Or as a Mitzvah Project. When the Mellers visited Keren Or on a family trip to Israel shortly before her Bat Mitzvah, Rebecca found herself even more moved by the incredible work of the therapists and the bright smiles of the students at Keren Or.

Rebecca and a handful of friends, with the support of their parents, planned a swim-a-thon where they gathered monetary pledges for every lap of the pool that they swam. When Rebecca and her friends emerged from the water, nearly \$1,500 had been

raised! Her creativity, and the support of her family and friends allowed her to spread awareness of the challenges facing children with multiple disabilities and raise money to support Keren Or's work in caring for them. We thank Rebecca for her commitment to Keren Or.

Just as with Rebecca, we work with many Bar/Bat Mitzvah students and their families to help them meaningfully integrate a tzedakah contribution to Keren Or as part of their ceremonies. We have a number of ways to make Keren Or a part of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process, such as making a tactile board to use in a presentation, including information

about Keren Or in the invitations, or doing something new and creative. To begin planning your Mitzvah Project with Keren Or, please contact Avi Smolen at [avi@keren-or.org](mailto:avi@keren-or.org).



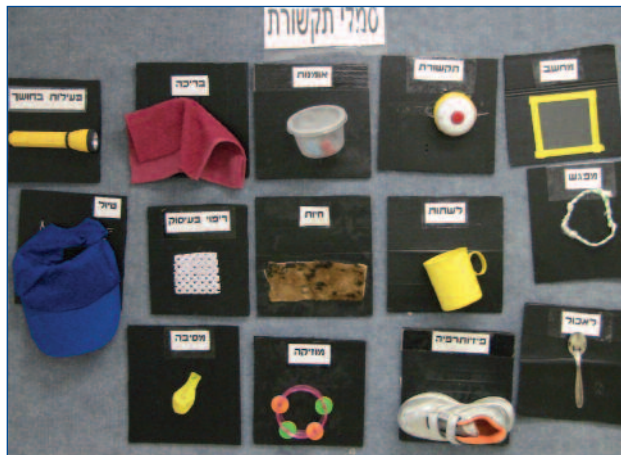
*Rebecca Meller and friends gather for a group photo after completing the swim-a-thon*

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There is also a toy board or hanging toy mobile, which allows students to understand the relationship of cause and effect; when you squeeze a toy, it makes noise, and when you pull on a coil, you can feel the tension. A hanging mobile allows for accidental learning—when a child reaches out, he will touch something and try to understand what he feels. These tools are also very colorful because some students at Keren Or, though legally blind, are able to distinguish between different colors.

Lastly, animal therapy is an activity that allows students to pet and interact with rabbits, hamsters, and other small ani-



A classroom tactile board featuring commonly used items

mals. No matter how many times a student engages in this unique therapy, it is always an enjoyable experience. The reactive behavior of the animals to the student's touch provides tactile and kinetic feedback and is a beneficial learning experience. These touch-focused communication techniques are low-tech, but incredibly effective. They are a perfect complement to Keren Or's high-tech computer games and other learning methods, and the students love them. The smiles on their faces when they recognize a familiar symbol is unparalleled and the learning that these tools help to facilitate is unmatched.

## New Tax Benefits for Planned Giving

New tax regulations, as set by Congress in December 2010, have made it easier for Americans to give charitable donations tax-free! One of the best ways to support Keren Or is through making planned gifts as a long-term commitment to the important work of caring for Israel's blind, multi-disabled young people. For more information on planned giving or how to put Keren Or in your estate plans, please contact Sarah Kochav, Executive Director, at 212-279-0534 or Sarah@keren-or.org.

## Save the Date: Women's Division Gala Luncheon

Honoring **Rose Scharf & Melodie Scharf** for their outstanding leadership and service

**Wednesday, May 11, 2011**

Park Avenue Synagogue  
50 East 87th Street  
New York, NY

For more details, call 212-279-4070  
or e-mail [info@keren-or.org](mailto:info@keren-or.org).



Women's Division Board Members Marilyn Lauer, Judy Levine, Debra Parkoff, Linda Rothschild, and Nicole Appleman at the 2010 Luncheon

## Profile: Avital Akman

Last summer, while on a summer trip to Israel, Avital Akman spent two weeks volunteering with the children and young adults at Keren Or's Center in Jerusalem. Now a participant in the Nativ Israel program where she is currently studying at The Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Avital reflects on her experience at Keren Or.

### What were you able to do with the children?

I would come with a few other volunteers every morning to serve as additional counselors, working with children in their classes. Each day we spent five hours at Keren Or, and we were there for a total of ten days. We were each paired with one or two children and we were able to help them with their projects and assist the main teacher in the room.

### What were your impressions after the first day?

The first day, I was just crying. I had never spent time with severely disabled children and I couldn't believe how happy they were, even though they were so limited in what they could do. At first I felt like they should be with their families at home, but then I realized how incredible the staff is and that they help the children learn and grow so much, it is unbelievable.

### Were you able to visit the new Hydrotherapy Center?

Yes, it is very high-tech. There are machines that help the kids into the water, which is important because many of them cannot walk by themselves. When they are in the water, the looks on their faces are amazing. The same children who can barely walk in the classroom find themselves walking with just a little support in the water. The therapists were always nearby to help them, and the kids absolutely loved playing games and having fun.

### How did volunteering at Keren Or affect you?

The children at Keren Or were the happiest kids I had ever met! They greeted me whenever I walked into the room; they are blind, but they knew who I was. I was so touched by meeting the kids and forming relationships with them that I tell everyone I can about Keren Or. The care that the children get at the Center is truly amazing—it opened my eyes. Since volunteering at Keren Or, I pray for the children there every single day before I go to bed. It changed my life.



Avital Akman

## Temple Emanu-El Mitzvah Day

One way that Keren Or involves synagogues in our work is to participate in Mitzvah Days. Recently, Temple Emanu-El in New York City held their annual Mitzvah Day, which allowed children and adults of all ages to learn about and to do something for different organizations.

Keren Or had a table where attendees could make tactile boards, special learning surfaces that can be custom-made with objects and toys of different sizes and textures. Keren Or students cannot rely on their eyes, so they use their sense of touch to "see" the different types of objects on the board. At Temple Emanu-El, kitchen racks and simple plastic toys were available that older children and adults could assemble into boards. Younger children could

decorate stress balls and bean bags for the students.

Many Hebrew School students and their families participated, and the adults became just as involved as the children in making the tactile boards! After the tactile boards were put together, they were immediately boxed, labeled, and sent to Jerusalem to be used at Keren Or. We are so grateful to all the congregants at Temple Emanu-El who made it such a success. It was truly impressive how the event engaged people of all ages, and especially children, in the true meaning of mitzvah. If you would like to organize a Mitzvah Day at your synagogue and would like to include Keren Or, please contact Avi Smolen at [avi@keren-or.org](mailto:avi@keren-or.org).



Jodi Isman and her daughter Maddy, assemble a tactile board



Jerusalem Center for Blind Children with Multiple Disabilities

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To Make a Donation, visit [www.keren-or.org](http://www.keren-or.org)

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