

TRANSCRIPT OF A SPECIAL MESSAGE TO PRINCIPALS:

A practical guide for ending the 2020 school year and starting a post-covid-19 year
BY RABBI YOEL KRAMER

Good afternoon, good evening. It is appropriate to thank Torah Umesorah, who has risen to the occasion to help service schools and mechanchim in the country. The title of this session is a practical guide to principals on how to end a Covid תש"פ and starting a post-Covid תשפ"א.

There are a few הנחות (premises) that we must realize. I am speaking now, but you will not be hearing this for another 2 weeks. I will try to be as יסודות'דיג, fundamental, as possible, so it will override time limitations.

Today is not tomorrow and the situation changes rapidly. I am sitting here in the epicenter of this disease. It is heavier here than out of town, and there, they are seeing a relatively different situation. Everyone is trying their best to manage. I was always very inspired throughout my life by the Novominsker Rebbe זצ"ל and by the articles that were written about him. One of the main points that I just loved about his leadership was that he never gave solutions, he always just shared ideas. In my meetings with him, he would share his thoughts and then say, "These are my thoughts, and now you adapt it." I would love to be inspired, to do the same thing and say that these are my thoughts, and now you adapt them to your needs.

One cannot give solutions or directions unless one analyzes what the past and present present to us. Therefore, I want to establish that there are four major challenges that exist today based on our recent past.

We are terribly distant; we are terribly alone. I, personally, self-quarantined, and I have been in the house for seven and a half weeks, with little contact besides the nuclear family. The photographer who is photographing this is the first person to enter our house in seven and a half weeks. There is a terribly alone, distant feeling. Let's remember that.

Whatever we have tried until now was pot luck. There were no clear guidelines to follow. We dealt with uncertainty. We played with cell phones, we played with Zoom. Some were more stringent, some were less. The bottom line is, no one sat down and said that this is what we are going to do, this is what we want to accomplish.

There are gaps from where we want to be. There are gaps in skills, there are gaps in חומר (material). This is all very בדיעבד and it's big holes.

The last of the remaining problems: There is a sluggishness, no matter how much we try. As adults we try; we tried early ותיקון, מגינים, schedules, sedarim, but there is a sluggishness. In the world of the children, there is certainly a sluggishness. The whole מהלך right now is a sluggish, sleepy one. We find that we have in the house two mechanchos and myself, all remotely teaching. And one of the entertainments at every meal and seudas Shabbos is the different comedy scenarios that they are experiencing in their teaching: from children coming in pajamas, one under the desk,

one out in the hammock in the backyard, children talking to each other. And it varies from great levels, to lower more ridiculous levels, to adult levels.

So whatever it is, we have these four major problems. Again:

1. Aloneness
2. No clear goals
3. Gaps
4. Sleepiness / sluggishness

Now let's proceed as best we can with these four handicaps and challenges.

Whatever I present now, we have to divide up into four/five different grade levels. What works for one may not work for the other. Once again, you may be adapting.

1. Preschool through Grade 2
2. Grade 3 to Grade 7
3. Grade 8 by itself
4. Grade 9-11
5. Grade 2 by itself

There are five categories. Let me also mention that there is חנוך הבנות and חנוך הבנים and חנוך התמדה (you cannot compare) high school level to the K-2, which has its kria challenges. And חנוך דומה Grade 8 and Grade 12, who are on the way out - you will not see them again - to the other grades, where you hopefully will see them and have a hand in their chinuch.

Based on this, the major יסוד is: The more kesher, the more תיקון. The more kesher between you, the administrator, and the staff; the more kesher between the staff and the students. We will leave parents out for now, they will fit in later. When I say kesher, I mean one-on-one (it can be virtual). All of you will agree that one-on-one is better than a classroom kesher. I am suggesting that the more one-on-one kesher, the better.

We hope that in the next few weeks, there will be some loosening. I spoke today to my doctor that I have been speaking with for the last two days. He instructed me in the beginning to self-quarantine both myself and my wife because of age and because of medical conditions that are compromised. He said today, "I think you have to begin to loosen - you have to begin to go out of the house, you have to begin to breathe air. You can risk, with gloves and a mask, some kind of store..." The point is, I'm being instructed that we can't lock ourselves in for months as the disease continues.

Taking that approach and applying it to us, I would guess that hopefully in the next weeks - I am sitting with a calendar because this will be a crucial part - in May and June, there will be some opportunity to loosen, and we must use it to break ourselves out of this relative rut.

Next point:

This has been my approach to administration in my own career and when I train principals: June 30th is one day before the opening of school. The summer time is just one long June 30th. The earlier you start to see the first day of school coming, the more productive the meetings will be. The more thought and preparation by you now

as the principal, the better the next weeks, and school's opening, will be. It will be a better end of פ' and better beginning of פ"א. Today, כ"ה עומר, you will begin to think of that day.

See our society as your car with a battery that is dead, with you stuck on a highway. What do we all do? We get a jumpstart. Somebody comes along with a powerful battery - Chaverim or whoever else - and they jumpstart your battery. Is your battery good, then? No. You have to keep riding around. If you turn off the car, you are going to end up with a dead battery again. The point I am making here is that YOU, the administrator, the principal, or the assistant - whatever you call yourself - YOU ARE THE MAJOR JUMPSTART, you are the Chaverim battery. The more you charge in a proactive way, the better chance the battery will have for continued life.

You, the principal, must sit down and think through, "רחל בתך הקטנה," what you want the next couple of weeks to look like.

When I train principals, I say that there are three targets in our functioning:

1. Staff
2. The outside world - the parent body
3. The students

These are the three target groups and what every principal must do is:

1. Understand yourself
2. Know what your priorities are
3. Know what you have a greater pleasure in

Set up these three targets in order of preference.

In my years of being a principal, my first target was staff, second was students, and third was the parents, PR, the outside world, etc. I could spend 10-15 minutes explaining why, but I don't think we have the time, or that this is the time.

I am approaching my guidance to you with this order of preferences. Therefore, I am going to ignore the student, and ignore parents and PR and such. It is there, and it has to be dealt with, but I feel it will flow if you set up the priorities now as priority #1 being staff.

What can I do to jumpstart them (back again to the jumpstarting)?

I am looking at the calendar now, and you probably won't hear this until the third week in May. That leaves us four weeks left. Let me mention now that I don't see any purpose in going deep into June and July in order to make up what we have lost. Based on all that I have said to you now, it is all בדיעבד; it's not working great. At best, it is decent. Let's get out of this מצב and into a new מצב as soon as possible. I'll explain that shortly.

Therefore, we have basically 3 weeks left. We have Shavuot, the week after Shavuot, and the week or two after that, depending on when you are going to end school.

I am suggesting that you, the administrator, sit down and plan three staff conferences on the יסודות that I presented to you now.

Meeting #1 is right after you hear this presentation, it is the week of Shavuot. During *שלושת ימי הגבלה*, you must end up conferring with every one of your staff members. If you have a relatively small school, you can do it yourself. If it is a bigger school, assign your assistants and have group conferencing. *לכתחילה* is one-on-one, and I'll explain a little more later. *בדיעבד* is a bit more people in each conference, but clear conferencing in which you, Mr./Mrs. "Chaverim", come in with your battery and you jumpstart. I feel this meeting must be one-on-one.

Based on what I said before, there is no problem sitting in your office, or, if that is too small, sitting in a larger room at two ends of the table with proper social distancing. Simply their coming in and sitting with you is a *kesher*. It excites them. They are not alone anymore; they're talking to somebody, and you are jumpstarting them - with a specific goal. I would call these Teacher Conference days, and the kids who did have some virtual connection won't have it that day. Whenever the teachers do come in, consider it Teacher Conference Day and let the parents know. It's probably the easiest scheduling of Teacher Conference Day that you are ever going to be able to do, and the teachers are not going to resent it, because they are not teaching that day and they're coming in.

So you need to plan full days. If it can't be done in one day, then do it in two or three days. Before they go into Shavuot, they have to have met with you somewhere, preferably in the building. I like them coming into the building, but *בדיעבד* on the grounds of the building, if the weather allows, but somewhere with proper social distancing.

So Meeting #1 is before Shavuot, Meeting #2 is the week of June 1st, and Meeting #3 is towards the end of when you are closing school.

Another version of this: If you are teaching on a high school level, have grade meetings or subject meetings. In *קודש*, you can have *הלכה*, *חומש*, *ג"ך*, etc. In English studies, you can have social studies, English, math. They will sit together, and there will be a give and take of the same people.

Whatever works, whatever is more personal and more specific, and whatever is possible.

MEETING #1:

There should be a clear agenda in this meeting. What do I mean?

What is the biggest *חסרון* of principals? They are used to talking and being listened to. I want to present, as a major challenge to you, to listen, because they are in the trenches, and what you want to get is feedback from them.

What you probably did, or the administration did, was give them a packet or a charge at the beginning of this whole challenge and tell them what you want to do. You want to find out what worked, what was accomplished, and what didn't work.

Just listen and write. Just like you gave a packet, now you are going to develop a packet. It's simply *כדאי* to sit and listen to them - it hasn't happened in a long time. Give them that opportunity, and watch them get charged, continuing my *משל*.

Then, based on that, together with them, set realistic goals from then until the end of the year.

There are two areas:

1. Skills: What do you want to give these children before the end of the year so that they can enter the next year, in terms of skills?

2. Content: What do you want to be covered, and what can be covered? תפסת ומרובה לא תפסת. That is what we tried up until now, and it is not going. Are there things that need to be covered? They are going to get lost in the wash!

Look at NY State. I don't live in NY State, but my career was there, and I dealt with the Board of Regents. They cancelled the heilige Regents that existed for decades! The State is going to do something, but they are not going to do make-up Regents. Let's just say that this is a tragedy, it got lost in the wash, and let's go on.

Let's review the goals of your meeting again:

1. The עצם is just sitting with them
2. Hearing from them what worked, what didn't work, and what is realistic
3. Setting realistic goals with them for the next three weeks of school

That's the goal, and then send them home, but not before you establish the time of the next meeting, which is immediately after Shavuos. Shavuos is Friday-Shabbos, but they have enough time to come back Monday or Tuesday for Meeting #2.

MEETING #2:

Once again, it should be one-on-one. The agenda of this meeting is this: They're reporting back, verbally and in writing, so that you have it before you, their curricular plans from then until the end of the year. What are their plans in terms of skills? What are the major ones that they want to get across? What חומר do they want to zero in on, and what do they want to ignore and say, "que sera sera"?

You can ask from them that you want it in writing - "I want it planned out." You can construct the dummy calendar with the dates and say to fill this in based on the time that you have. It is only about 15 days, and it is not too much to ask from them that you want a specific daily plan, a unit plan. On the side, they should list the gaps that were not done, what was not accomplished, what skills were ignored.

You want this in writing for your files, and you might want to give this to next year's teacher.

So you are going away with feedback and a specific plan of where they are going from then until the end of the year. And obviously, you have to decide when the end of the year is.

Now let's go off on a very important tangent and then come back.

What is your plan? When do you want to see school be and when not to be?

Let me present to you thoughts on different ideas in terms of the calendar. One idea would be, once again my יסוד here: We are doing the best we can in a בדיעבד, and let's try to get out of this to a new world and a fresh start. That should be our hashkafic

approach both personally and communally: To get out of this and get a fresh start from this נסיון that Hashem is giving us.

I am going to address grades 3-7 or 9-11 and leave the rest, K-2, 8, and 12 until later.

GRADES 3-7 OR 9-11:

Based on my feeling that this is all בדיעבד, for grades 3-7 and 9-11, end as early as possible. Then start early - like on Rosh Chodesh Elul. It is done in the yeshivish circles. It is done in Eretz Yisroel, and in Lakewood. Let's do it, not for the yeshivish reasons, but for the pedagogical reasons. Start August 24th. Why? Because hopefully by then things will be better, and we can have some hope of a face-to-face classroom. הלואי it will be everybody, but if not, then split it. There are six days in the week; maybe three days should be half of the class, and the other three days should be the other half. It's less time, but more quality. There are those who are playing with this virtually and finding it somewhat successful. Either way, start school early.

The major challenge is the camps and the bungalows. I want to present to you now: Schools don't work around camps. Camps should be working around schools. We also have a concept of "כל הקודם כבר". If you decide early enough what you want to do and you tell the camps, the camps will all comply. If you sit back and wait until it happens to you, someone else will tell you what to do. Tell the camps to start their season early. You will end by June 15th, and they will start and end early. We had the evolution of camps that have moved from 8 to 7, from 4 to 3. You can dictate it.

Now a creative idea here: I can see loads of negatives, but what I want to mention to you is to come back to your present class. If you teach Grade 3, come back and teach Grade 3 for two weeks, until after Labor day, and then move on to the פ"א year. I can think of many negatives, and I tried it out on my own kids, who are all in chinuch ב"ה, and they highlighted the negatives, but it is a thought.

Another idea may be to come back to your פ' class and go with it until after Yom Kippur. There are five weeks: Two in August and then the bits in September. Then end the תש"פ class at the end of Yom Kippur and start the פ"א year after Succos. Like this, you have given the פ' year a little more crunch and a good ending. The חסרון is that you are not coming in with a fresh start, but it is a thought to present to you.

I don't like that Labor Day is September 7, just two weeks before Rosh Hashana. Who says it has to be after Labor Day? Labor Day is not תורת משה מסיני, and bungalow colonies, if they exist, will adapt if they know beforehand. The incoming teacher will have a list of gaps, and maybe that can be corrected in a slightly longer school year.

The worst thing would be to end June 15th and come back September 8th. Based on what we see, that is losing both.

Whatever your decision is, make it now. Obviously, we are groping in the dark and don't know what the מצב of the disease will be, but presuming that there will hopefully be some form of improvement, make your decision now, תלוי on whatever happens. Once you know your decision, we can go back to where we left off.

Now we can go back to the June 1st meeting, which is early enough for the teachers to know what it is all about, so that they can make their plans accordingly. Some teachers can be concerned about it being more days, but you can get them to see it and show them that it is not more days. There is PR aspect here - you show them that you are not taking advantage, and June first is early enough to show the camps and bungalows what you are going to do.

Once they know the calendar plan, let's go back to an assessment plan. One of the biggest problems with this virtual education is that there is no assessment at any time. No one knew if the kids were getting it. Were there any tests, any formative tests or summative tests?

You have to think now: Is there anything you can do before June 1st to put the crunch on? My experience is that it's mostly on the high school level where one can do that. One just says summative test and suddenly there is motivation. That kid is not clicking out of the zoom class and coming back 40 minutes later. Once they see that there is an assessment, you have jumpstarted the students as well. The teacher also feels like he has a *chav*, and there is some level of accountability.

Assessments can be in those last weeks of June, or maybe you can be somewhat creative and there can be some sort of summer plan. We all know that summer assignments were never really strong. If summer assignments were sent in every week and not at the end of the summer, then you have more of a *chav*. Let's dream and say that the state decided, instead of having Regents in June, which they couldn't do, they'll have Regents the third week of August, and everybody comes back for that. Suddenly, there is a stronger sense of where we are going and an accountability. Start thinking in that way. Do you want an assessment in June? Do you want an assessment throughout the summer, or later in the summer, when they can hopefully come back into the classroom, albeit spread out? Or do you want that idea of starting the year earlier and doing it then? This way there is that motivation. But you cannot have an assessment plan unless you have that calendar plan and know where you are going.

We should also throw out on June 1st some kind of plan with the teacher in terms of *chesed* to the student. What can you do that will be creative, that will connect you to them, and not only distance? Maybe on zoom, or on a one and one in some way? Many people have played with this drive-by idea. I know this in terms of my children and *einiklach*. As soon as we are finished with this, we are expecting a backyard visit from our *einiklach* and their children. They will play on the outside gym here, and we will serve them pizza on the lawn.

Do some kind of *chesed*. A drive-by. A teacher can think in terms of this. I heard from one of my *einiklach* that in Monsey, the boys were getting their first siddurim. This school decided that they are driving by and giving each child his siddur. Obviously, this is in Monsey and in the suburbs of Monsey, in Haverstraw...They came by, and my *einikle*, who is a *machaneches*, put a big sign outside the house welcoming them. She had a keyboard out on the lawn when the child came out, so here it was even more one-on-one and memorable.

I can use a משל and say that it is the same as chasunas. Those who ended up doing outdoor chasunas said it was far more memorable and geshmak than all the halls and whatever existed before.

Start thinking of some creative way that the teachers can connect with the students, and ask them to plan so that there is closure. Let's get to that word: There has to be some sort of closure. Whenever you say goodbye to them, it should be in a more memorable, perhaps one-on-one or face-to-face, situation.

MEETING #3:

This should be on June 15. This is the end of this plan, and it is a wrap up. They hand in whatever they did accomplish, and whatever gaps still exist are clear to you, clear for that teacher, and for next year's teacher.

You want grades from them. This is a big question. What type of grades? It seems to me not to get into any big עיון grading system; numbers certainly not. If anything, it should be P and F or A, B, C, and it's not going to make much of a difference. That was one of the קרבנות of that year.

You also want to plan with the teacher what type of kesher they are going to do, and also what kind of kesher they want to do with the parents. Any type of PR activity: What do they want to send out to the parents? The more specific, the more personal. The more nuanced it is for each child, the more appreciated it is. The parents really do appreciate these efforts and have shown and continue to show appreciation.

What do you want to do in terms of the students handing things in? They have their books, and there is a cleanup, if that classroom still needs it. There are hand-ins, if there is such a term! There are hand-ins and there are handouts, and you want to plan at that point when they are going to get that done.

You'll also speak to them about their position in the school (I would always have that meeting in May). The general meeting about finishing off the year: The salary, what grade, what size class? Are there any specific requests that they have? What are their summer plans? Where can I reach them? What is their address? In that one meeting, in a very organized fashion, get everything taken care of. So once again, principal or administrator, the more organized you are here, the more the next couple of weeks will flow, and the more will get done.

And this way, you are not spending the summer in the office sweating away, getting minimal accomplished, and nudging the teachers.

GRADES K-2:

It is a separate world there. Your main focus should be on the main skills of those grades. What is בולט the most is kriah, and all teachers of those grades are bemoaning that. Set up a teaching/assessment plan, even if it means bringing in parents or assistants who will work on a child in terms of kriah skills. Analyze if they have it, itemize what the weaknesses are, and then get some sense of an assessment. The more individualized this is, the more successful. You have to plan out the individualization. The K-2 plan has to be with the cohort of parents, evaluators and

tutors. Again, all of this comes out in your evaluative meeting with your teachers earlier.

GRADE 8 AND GRADE 12:

As I mentioned before, these are classes that are leaving. What you want to do is certainly not gaps and evaluations - it has no meaning at this point. What you want to do is set up a nice goodbye. This, of course, triggers the whole question of graduation. Is there graduation, not graduation, how important is it?

Let me mention that there are four target analysts in terms of graduation. There are four sets that have different נגיות.

The primary one is the student. The student wants to feel some sort of nice closure. This is more existent by girls than it is by boys, but it exists all around. Therefore, you want to hear from the students what they want. Once again, you may not be able to do this one-on-one, but I would be שואל their דעת and get some feedback, and then do the planning.

Another target group is parents/grandparents. I must say, being a grandparent and being drained very often by all the einaklach's graduations, which you really don't feel like going to, BUT... Don't get busy with the grandparents. So they'll miss it, like they are missing chasunas and are not crying about it either. Parents, though, even the most sophisticated and understanding, do want it. I have a daughter who is a principal of a girls' high school in Cleveland. I consulted with her in terms of her thoughts here, and she has a graduating daughter from her school, the youngest of her children. I expected her to say whatever, but she said, "You know, it is a memorable moment for me, too!" Here is already the גברא, the menaheles who says, "I need it. I want to see my daughter graduate, and I want to be there!" So parents have to be reckoned with.

The third or fourth target group: The staff. The staff wants to say good bye to the kids. Once again, more girlish than for boys, BUT...

And the fifth group: The lower class - once again more applicable in high school. The ninth, tenth and eleventh grade girls want to say goodbye to their classmates that they worked with throughout high school. In a girls' high school, there is more of an interclass connection. Do seventh grade boys need to say good bye to eighth grade boys? I don't know, but certainly address it.

You have to sit down and say, what can I do that is realistic to satisfy them? My suggestion is to zero in on the students, a little bit on the parents, and then forget all the other. They will come out in the wash. Whatever it is, PLAN IT. I have a report from a research report on how to deal with graduation in 2020. If anybody wants it, you can email rabbijkramer@aol.com and I will be glad to forward it to you . The main thrust here to understand is:

1. Graduation cannot be a regular graduation
2. There is a need for something else, there is a need for closure.
3. Decide what your focus interest is, and once again, I am saying students and parents. Meet and listen, get their feedback and plan for it.

It is a very busy couple of weeks. You may decide that graduation can be a little later, when you have a little bit more time. I remember that graduation was a terrible drain on my כוחות, as I was a High School principal. Maybe you want to schedule it at a much later date? I know from einaklach in boys' high schools out of town that they would have graduations in the middle of the summer. Is that possible? I don't know, but there is nothing wrong with pushing it off.

Think creatively. It can be done outdoors, like the weddings are done outdoors. It can be done in a parent's large backyard, where proper social distancing exists, where parents can sit over there on the periphery.

Another creative idea: I was in a school where we had 100 graduates. We knew that if we talked about each child for a minute, that would be too cumbersome and everyone would want to get out. We therefore scheduled a students' סעודה a week before, where all students came, not in uniform, dressed up in Shabbos clothing. We served very beautifully, and then each student was talked about in front of everybody. We did no awards - forget awards, they are dangerous anyway, and this is not the time for it. We had every staff member take one, two, whatever number of students that was necessary to divide up the class, and they stood up and talked about that student in front of everybody. It was far more successful and precious than any sham of a graduation ceremony. I want to suggest that this might be something that you want to do. Maybe forget the public graduation ceremony and do this kind of venue, which will be more meaningful, more limited, easier and satisfying much of the needs of the people you are dealing with. Either way, you have to decide what you want to do. Decide it now, rather than later.

In closing, there is enormous שכר given for מלמדי תינוקות. If it is לפום צערא אגרא then it is even more so during these trying times. If you feel a sense of frustration and lack of סיפוק, understand that the שכר is ככוכבים and ככוכבים, far more long lasting.