

## FEATURE

# BUILDING BLOCKS

A SPECIAL NEEDS MAGAZINE

BY ITA YANKOVICH

## OJOTC: Helping Frum OT's Network

This year's  
**Annual AOTA  
Conference and Expo**

will take place in  
**Baltimore, MD**  
**Thursday, April 3th**  
though  
**Sunday, April 6th**

Wouldn't it be great if you had a *chavrusa* working with you, guiding and helping you in your work environment? Well, occupational therapists are one of the few professional groups fortunate enough to have a forum of fellow workers to help them navigate the sometimes challenging task of being an observant OT. The mission of OJOTC (Orthodox Jewish Occupational Therapy Chavrusa) mission is to help observant OT's connect and resolve any religious issues they may encounter in school and at work.

One may wonder why this particular field requires a forum. Founder Peggy Gurock explains that many OT's, especially students and recent graduates, can benefit from being in touch with seasoned professionals who can offer advice and possible employment. The network also assists experienced professionals who are dealing with professional issues. "Knowing that one has colleagues who not only have the same professional outlook as you do, but also have the same religious outlook, and who are willing to help you with any issues that occur is very important," says Mrs. Gurock.

Oftentimes, professional and religious requirements clash and this is where having such an organization helps. "An explanation of customs may need to be expressed on a situation to situation basis for those who may not be familiar with a person who is observant and their customs," says Paul Stadler, who has been a member of OJOTC since its inception and maintains his own OT practice.

In fact, OJOTC was instrumental in convincing a number of continuing education providers to specifically schedule some of their programs on days other than *Shabbat*, to meet the needs of *frum* OT's. In particular, one of the most popular continuing education seminars, especially for OT's who are school-based or work in pediatrics, is "Handwriting Without Tears," which are offered all over the country, always on *Shabbat*. OJOTC was successful in lobbying the company behind "Handwriting Without Tears" to offer a non-*Shabbat* course in the New York-New Jersey area. One seminar a year is now offered on a Sunday-Monday schedule each year and it sells out very quickly.

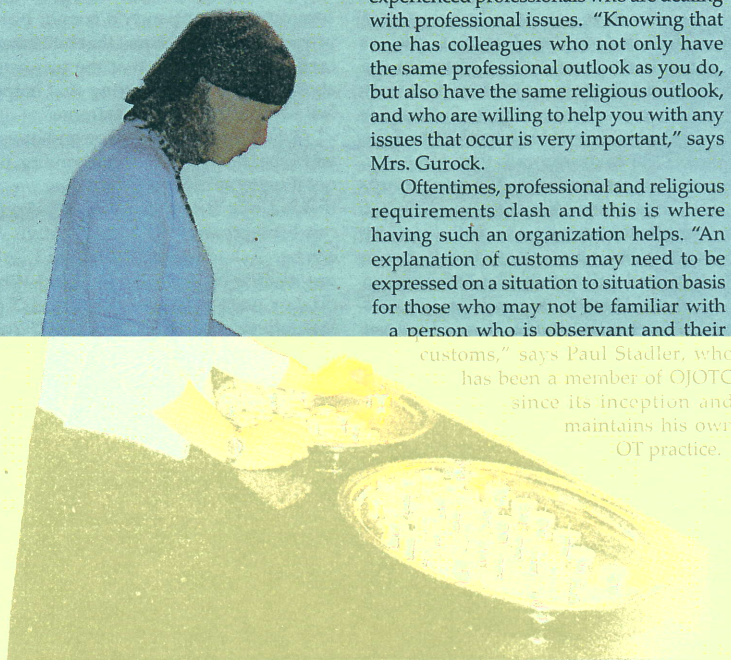
Another area of success is in dealing with AOTA. The American Occupational Therapist Associations holds conferences on *Shabbat* and Yom Tov and OJOTC was able to make arrangements for its members to receive credits for workshops without electronic badges being swiped. When the conferences are held in areas without an *eiruv*, AOTA provides a secure conference room where OJOTC members can leave their conference programs, brochures and other papers. OJOTC has also worked to provide Glatt Kosher lunches during seminars where attendees' registration fees include a meal.

OJOTC came to be during a chance meeting. It was back in 2005 at the AOTA's conference in Long Beach that an OT from New York, Tamar Fromm, just happened to spot a man wearing a yarmulke among the thousands of people roaming the Convention Center's Exposition Hall. It turned out to be the husband of a *frum* OT from New Jersey, Peggy Gurock. Tamar asked Peggy and her husband Noah if they knew a place to buy kosher food for

*Shabbat*. Told that the closest place was in Los Angeles, 30 miles away, she seemed resigned to eating canned tuna in her hotel room, until they invited her to share their *Shabbat* dinner – which they were picking up that night in L.A. – in their hotel room.

An hour later, Noah spotted two other men wearing yarmulkes in the crowd. They, too, were planning to eat in their hotel room. "Why don't we all eat together, and really celebrate *Shabbat*?" they asked each other.

The real question was where to find the space. The answer came from a Front





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Desk Manager at the Courtyard by Marriott Hotel. He offered a "board room" that was scheduled to be vacant that Friday night. As the anticipation of a Shabbat meal together grew, so did the number of Occupational Therapists. By candle

lighting, the number was ten; they came from New York, New Jersey, Maryland and Israel. Somehow these strangers, but not really, found each other. Some brought with them the food they had planned to eat in their rooms. The pot-luck style

dinner lasted two and half hours and by the end of the conference, the Orthodox Jewish Occupational Therapy Chavrusa had been formed and there were plans to meet the following year in Charlotte, North Carolina. This year OJOTC is planning its 10<sup>th</sup> annual Shabbat Program.

The organization boasts 500 members, from 25 American states, Israel and Canada and maintains a web presence at [www.ojotc.org](http://www.ojotc.org). Among the services it provides is a listing of upcoming Shabbat-friendly educational programs, an informational e-newsletter and a 10-year *Yom Tov* calendar for members to give to employers and school administrators so scheduling issues can be avoided.

Its Shabbat Program has grown from the original 10 OT's in San Diego to more than 40 in the past few years. This year's annual AOTA Conference and Expo will take place in Baltimore on April 3-6, and

the OJOTC expects a record turnout. Arrangements have been made for a special meeting room at the Hilton Baltimore for three Shabbat *minyanim* (a *Sefer Torah* will be borrowed from Chabad in Baltimore if necessary) and Dougie's of Baltimore will be catering. Shabbat afternoon will feature special sessions for those not wanting to attend the AOTA sessions on Shabbat (see sidebar for information).

What a world of difference ten years makes.

**For information about  
OJOTC or the  
Baltimore Shabbat Program  
e-mail:  
[OJOTC@hotmail.com](mailto:OJOTC@hotmail.com).**

### THE SHABBAT PROGRAM INCLUDES THE FOLLOWING:

Session A: (2:15 – 3:00 pm)

***Dealing with Discrimination – From a  
Personal, Professional and Legal Perspective \****

Speaker: Past AOTA President Barbara Kornblau, JD, OTR/L, FAOTA

Session B: (3:15 – 4:00 pm)

***Teaching a Person to 'fish' in Their Own way:***

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...and her induction into the AOTA Roster of Fellows.

At 8:14 pm there will be *Ma'ariv* and *Havdallah*