It’s the STUDENT!

by ELI KANNAI

It is 7:15 am in the Cohen family residence. Rabbi Cohen checks his email and takes a look at the morning news while sipping his coffee. His tablet on his lap, he smiles at his wife as she looks up from her tablet after checking the weather. His son, Chanoch, takes out his iPhone headphones while texting a friend and joins them at the table. They all shut down and store their personal devices, which are forbidden at the school they attend, and continue chatting around the kitchen table before heading to school. Rabbi Cohen is a math teacher, his wife, Sarah, teaches Mishnah, and Chanoch, their youngest, is in Tenth Grade.

At first glance, the school would appear to be a technologically advanced Jewish day school. Rabbi Levy, head of the school, is proud of the systems he has acquired. A 62-inch plasma screen greets the students with the day’s announcements, followed by a verse from Tanach: “Educate a child in his own path and even when he is old, he will not depart from it.” (Proverbs, 22:6) Computers can be found in most classrooms, Smart Boards in many of them, and the school has a laptop cart. And yet, despite the schools technology, personal tablets and smartphones are forbidden on school property.

Is this school taking full advantage of educational technology? Obviously, this depends on how the faculty uses the technology they have for instruction. But even if the schools teachers make use of the Smart Boards for interactive teaching and not merely to display text and visual materials, even if they find creative ways to use the computers in the classroom, there might be something lacking. Integrating technology in education does not need to remain at the class or even section level. It can, and should, be directed towards personalized, individualized learning.

Over the last few years, we have witnessed how the Internet changes various industries. First it was the travel industry. We no longer need travel agents to book a flight. Newspapers were next. In some of these industries, the product itself became digital, which made the changes more radical.

Throughout, the move has been towards the individual. The consumer is able to self-serve and make more choices, and the middlemen are cut out of the equation.

The notion of student-centered education — known by the aphorism that the teacher must shift from “a sage on the stage” to “a guide on the side” — is not new. What is new is that with today’s technology, the student really can be at the center. This can happen in two forms: blended learning, in which a teacher integrates online learning into a classroom setting, and exclusively online learning, for which there is no in-school teacher. Blended learning is currently used as early as in Kindergarten, although it is more mainstream in Third Grade and up. Taking an online course requires self-discipline and a level of maturity usually found in middle school and up.

Blended learning enables students to learn individually via computers, with their performances tracked and reported to the teachers. A teacher can then address groups of students struggling with a common challenge while other students continue to learn new material on their computers. Online learning allows students to take courses not offered in their schools (or offered at times that do not meet their schedules) and to take credit recovery classes in the summer. There are various models for a blended-learning educational environment. For an in-depth analysis, see the Innosight Institute report, “Classifying K-12 Blended Learning” (on the web, go to tinyurl.com/7vvosto). In Arizona, the Carpe Diem schools, a Sixth-through-Twelfth-Grade program which consists of on-site teacher/facilitators and computer-assisted instruction, produced a brief video to help explain their system (tinyurl.com/6ovscuc). Students study within learning cubicles with computers; teachers walk around and help students based on performance assessment indicators augmented by the learning management system. Students also participate in group practice sessions with teachers as needed.

Online learning is more like the way many of us learn as adults in order to stay up to date: self-paced, individualized and often project-focused. In his book The Global Achievement Gap (Basic Books, 2008), Tony Wagner lists seven survival skills for today’s teens, and many of them lend themselves well to online learning. Both online and blended learning fit well with the new and evolving area of education known as 21st Century Learning, and day schools are beginning to join in.

While individualization has the potential to personalize and therefore improve day-school education, it may also result in significant financial benefits. First, it may increase enrollment by offering a more attractive range of courses that meets the needs of a wider range of learners, including both gifted and challenged students who sometimes choose non day-school options because of their differences. Second, there could be cost savings: some remedial sections in math and language can be eliminated as the students in these sections are mainstreamed into larger groups, taking advantage of blended learning mechanisms. Ultimately, we may see a different human-resources structure in these schools: perhaps fewer teachers, more part-time experts (sometimes called master teachers) and some proctors. Since HR is the largest line item in a school budget, these changes may have a significant impact on schools’ bottom lines and allow a reduction in tuition.

In the short term, if Rabbi Levy wants his school to begin experimenting with online or blended learning, he may not need to invest in new technology costs. One possibility is to permit students and teachers to bring their own devices to school. It is a shame that families like the Cohens power off before school and power on at home. At the high-school level and increasingly at the middle-school level, most teachers and students already have a computer, perhaps in the form of a smartphone or tablet. As long as the device connects to the school servers, it can be used for education. So as not to encourage barriers based on means, schools might lend devices to those students who do not yet have, or cannot afford, their own. After all, just like a pen or a notebook, an individual device is the key for individualized learning. “Educate a child in his own path and even when he is old, he will not depart from it.” His or her own personalized path is better education in the long run, and is more cost effective to boot.