

B'SHALOM COLUMN
American Association on Mental Retardation
Religion and Spirituality Division

The Miracle Of Todd's Bar Mitzvah

In my job, I attend many bar and bat mitzvahs of children with special needs and all of them touch me deeply. Recently I attended one which affected me even more. Todd is a handsome 13 year old who is autistic, non-verbal, skinny and gangly...and a bundle of nerves. He seldom sits when he can pace; he squeezes the fingers on one hand to the point of misshaping them; he screams and shrieks and, when most frustrated, spits in the other person's face. In the absence of speech, Todd demands attention in every other way. He uses "facilitated communication" with a small group of adults as well as using a very sophisticated Pegasus laptop computer with voice synthesizer.

Todd attends a self-contained class in middle school during the week; on Sundays, he participates in the special education program at Temple Chai, in Phoenix, Arizona. His teacher Arleen has a class of half a dozen students whose disabilities include autism, Down Syndrome, developmental and physical disabilities. Half of the students are non-verbal, yet Arleen has taught them about Jewish holidays, Shabbat (the Sabbath), mitzvot ("good deeds") and tzedakah (acts of charity). Using constant repetition for reinforcement and a multisensory approach which includes baking challah (egg bread) for Shabbat, decorating Seder plates for Passover, learning the blessings as they eat their snacks and much more, these children who everyone assumed could never participate in their religious activities have embraced the rituals of their families.

But could these severely impaired students who had little or no English vocabulary learn to read or write or speak Hebrew, the language of Jewish prayers and study? Undaunted by the challenge, Arleen introduced the chanting of prayers within the structure of her weekly class. She recognized in Todd an eagerness to learn more, and so Arleen taught him the Hebrew alphabet. Soon Todd could point to letters she picked at random! Arleen taught Todd words in Hebrew; again, he could pick them out of a page of written Hebrew. Todd worked his way up to phrases and sentences of the traditional prayers. And so they began to prepare for his bar mitzvah...

Having known Todd most of his life, my greatest concern was his inability to sit or stand still for any period of time. Even when he was watching his favorite videotapes, Todd bounced and rocked and paced with an overabundance of energy. When he attended Shabbat or holiday services at the synagogue, he rarely stayed more than 20 or 30 minutes before his noise became too disruptive. My other concern was that Todd might panic and obstinately refuse to "perform" his parts of the bar mitzvah service. His parents, the rabbi and I talked seriously about "alternate plan B" should either of those things occur.

The day of Todd's bar mitzvah arrived. Todd's teacher, therapists and parents had worked for months to prepare him for the 90 minutes ahead of him. The computer had been programmed with prayers and his Torah portion; the volume level for the voice synthesizer was checked and re-checked. Todd looked at himself in his new sportcoat and dress shirt and facilitated to his mother, "I look really good; I hope everyone else dresses up, too!" As the service started, Todd

took his seat on the bimah (stage) next to his teacher. The 140 congregants held their collective breaths to see what Todd would do, and he amazed them all.

Gone were the shrieks and the pacing, the intense nervousness and physical roughness. In their place was a sense of calm and serenity. Todd stood and sat throughout the service, poised to press the screen of his computer for prayers and prepared to carry the small Torah in the procession around the sanctuary. His electronically-generated speech at the end of the service included words of thanks to his teachers and his family and all the friends whose faith and confidence in him brought him to this day. Todd was the very picture of dignity and composure.

The rabbi, like everyone else in attendance, was fighting back tears as he spoke. Rabbi William Berk spoke of Todd's lesson to us all, that there is a mystery in silence, but there is also a message. Todd "spoke" to us through his silence, teaching us that we must respect each and every person regardless of his capability or disability, and we must listen to them in so many different ways. Rabbi Berk praised Todd's teachers and all of the people who helped Todd and his family reach this moment in their lives, and he remarked on how blessed we all were to be allowed to share it.

Miracles do happen, and I think I witnessed one that day. If you are curious about the lasting effects of Todd's restraint and composure, I can share with you the follow-up story. My family attended a celebration at Todd's home that evening. Todd and my son Joel (who also has autism but is able to speak) were in the bedroom, as usual, arguing (in their own manner) over which videotape to watch. Todd was back to pacing and shrieking, squeezing his fingers and fiddling with the TV, eight hours after his bar mitzvah. Oh, but for those magical 90 minutes earlier in the day, Todd was at peace. Shalom.

