

# ‘Everybody Gets A Turn’

by Andrew Goldsmith  
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All parents dream for their children. We worry, plan, plot, guide and sometimes kick our kids towards happy independent lives full of meaning, purpose and value. While there is disappointment, pain and setback (offset by occasional moments of glory and pride) parenting is the most fulfilling part of our lives. And while we all struggle with the emotional and financial challenges, we are comforted by the fact that the investment that will reap dividends of joy as our children excel.

That’s most parents, and, until a few years ago, me too until my wife and I joined the elite club of “parents with a special needs child” — the hardcore “thank god that’s not my kid” and “it’s not polite to stare” type

of disability. We fought it (and still do) kicking and screaming, but a nursery school teacher’s call home that my son wasn’t playing with the other children brought us, six months later, to a diagnosis of autism.

Three and half years into the battle, it’s still touch and go, and despite monumental amounts of therapy and expense, autism is ahead. It’s an extraordinarily cruel disability; those stricken usually have normal or above average intelligence but lack the ability to communicate — that part of the brain is simply set to off. While the essential human need to socialize is there, the tools to do so simply aren’t.

The experts said a typical school environment provides my son the best chance of success — a chance to “rewire himself” as one doctor put it. We found a Chabad nursery school that, although bursting at the seams, embraced my son. From there to a yeshiva that, in boldly fighting a long-standing prejudice toward special needs children, bravely welcomes special children with all disabilities to attend school alongside their typical peers. It’s very hard on my son — every day is a real struggle.

What emerges, though, is the growing realization that he probably won’t ever be typical. He may not ever be able to have a meaningful relationship, feel love, raise his own family or experience all the beauty our world contains. No matter what our affiliation, we Jews define our value in this world by service to God, the Creator of all (and autism too), whether through acts of kindness, study of Torah, or the living of wholesome meaningful lives.

What possible meaning can the life of my son who lacks the ability to communicate offer? I have the privilege of working at a university that excels in teaching our students to strive for excellence within the framework of Judaism. What type of excellence can my son, or any special needs child, be capable of? What contribution beyond serving as an object of pity?

About a month after I wallowed in these thoughts, my son’s teacher quite innocently relayed a playground incident. Yeshiva Darchei Torah is filled with excellent educators but tight on funding so there’s apparently only one toy car that all the boys like to play with during recess. They line up (or form some semblance of a line anyway) and each child gets a turn to play in the

car. My son (Shimmy) can't express his desire verbally but, wanting to be part of the action, waits in line.

Comes his turn and some other boy from another class pushes him out of the way yelling, "You don't get a turn," knowing full well there's not much he can do about it. A split second later, two of Shimmy's classmates (may their children inherit the earth), yell back "Everybody gets a turn!" and help my son into the car, where, with a broad grin, he gets his turn. In fact, they gave him three turns — his own and theirs.

It's been argued in these pages that we need to include special needs children in the fabric of our Jewish community because it's chesed (kindness) and the Jewish thing to do — that our spiritual DNA demands it. That's true but I'd submit a much more powerful and persuasive argument — that typical children gain far more from having my son Shimmy in the class than he ever will. Shimmy's classmates develop personal principles, the ability to assume an advocacy role for a friend with disabilities and a reduced fear of human differences. Shimmy empowers classmates to do the right thing, not by being told to by a teacher's instruction but by instinct borne of watching him struggle to succeed. Every day my son is in class he teaches those around him (and his father) great life lessons in tolerance, understanding and patience. It's true for him and every special needs or disabled child and adult that fights for inclusion within our Jewish community.

So what's his purpose in life? One could do far worse.

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