



## **"Parenting Your Jewish Child with Special Needs"**

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A *Devar Torah* delivered by Rabbi Mark S. Diamond

Executive Vice President

The Board of Rabbis of Southern California

I am here today because of some remarkable young people I have worked with in my career as a rabbi. In 1979, I began to work as a staff member at Camp Ramah in New England, one of the seven Ramah camps operated by the Conservative movement. Over five hundred youngsters attend this camp each summer. But 42 of those young people are quite special. They are campers in the Tikvah program, a unique camp-within-a-camp for Jewish children with a wide variety of physical, mental and emotional disabilities.

Though I had not been hired as a staff member of the Tikvah program, I soon fell in love with these young men and women. I became the unofficial "rabbi" of the Tikvah unit. As an aside, let me tell you that Lois and I are among the few couples I know who celebrated two Jewish wedding ceremonies--the first in Washington, DC, and the second a month later when we recreated our Jewish wedding for the Tikvah campers and staff. That was surely a wedding I shall never forget!

During the three summers I spent at Camp Ramah, I was privileged to work with some of the most precious young people in the world. One of my favorite campers was Rina. Several weeks after she was born, her parents learned that she had Down's Syndrome. The family's friends and doctors advised them to put Rina in an institution, but her parents refused to heed their advice.

As a survivor of Auschwitz, Rina's mother knew all too well the value of life. And her father, a rabbi, echoed his wife's feelings. A congregant once asked him: "Rabbi, how could this happen to someone like you, you who are so close to God?" He replied: "Nobody is exempt from accident...nobody is privileged. Rina is not God's punishment...she is God's child!"

Thus it was that Rina grew up in a loving, caring home. Her parents and two older brothers gave her an abundance of affection, admiration and encouragement. They treated her, as much as possible, as a normal child. Much to her family's delight, Rina's growth and development exceeded everyone's expectations. Rina learned to choose her own clothes, perform basic household chores, dance and swim. She even found a part-time job in a local flower shop.

At the age of twelve, Rina declared to her parents that she should be getting ready for her Bat Mitzvah, just like other girls her age. In addition to regular lessons at the synagogue, her father tutored Rina in the prayers. Everything was carefully memorized, since she could not read the Hebrew alphabet. On the night of her Bat Mitzvah, more than 500 people crowded into the sanctuary. Word had spread of the miracle that was about to unfold.

Rina calmly and softly chanted the prayers, and then addressed the congregation. "Thank you for coming to my Bat Mitzvah," she said. "My father read with me stories of the Torah. The Torah says that we should love God and everybody. I thank all the people who love me and teach me. My brothers studied the Torah. I hope that I will also study. My mother told me never to give up. Dear God: Make me strong, healthy and happy. Let there be peace in Israel and everywhere. Amen." As Rina and her family walked down the aisle of the Sanctuary, the entire congregation stood in respect, many of them openly crying.

Another one of the campers I worked with was a teenager named David. David is a highly motivated young man. He prides himself on two things--his daily regime of jogging several miles, and his love of Jewish books. David runs regularly in marathons and, during his spare time, he reads the Torah. What sets David apart from his peers, and what makes these activities extraordinary achievements, is the fact that he is legally blind.

I mention David today not only as a model of human courage. One summer, the Tikvah campers were asked to write notes to be placed in the kotel, the Western Wall in Jerusalem. David's note read: "Dear God: I want to be a better runner. I do try hard. At least I think I do. God, as you know, this spring I broke my wrist. Please help me straighten my arm. This year I studied the Torah. I read the whole thing. I love you, my Lord. We are the chosen." And then, in parentheses, David adds: ("God, excuse me for getting off the subject, but I must get ready for bed.) I hope you can read my writing. Stay healthy. Sincerely, your friend, David."

For me, the Tikvah Program was a rare and exciting opportunity to work with some of the most wonderful youngsters imaginable. It is always a great joy to watch children grow up and mature, and to teach them about their Jewish heritage. It is an even greater joy to work with these children, and to help them become, slowly but surely, knowledgeable young Jews.

The highlight of my association with Tikvah was a visit by fourteen of the campers to a nearby Jewish home for the aged. Most of these children grow accustomed to having everything done for them. They are normally on the receiving end of a mitzvah. So it was a novel experience for them to perform a mitzvah for others.

After a tremendous amount of hard work, the kids put together a program of songs and dances for the elderly residents. The activity concluded with a highly emotional rendition of Hatikvah, played on the violin by one of the campers. I can assure you that there weren't many dry eyes in the room, at least among the adults. The day was best summed up by Shlomo, one of the campers, who wrote afterwards: "I liked the trip. I liked the songs and dances. I felt good; we made a mitzvah!"

My work with the Tikvah Program instilled within me a greater appreciation of all that can and must be done for Jewish children with special needs. That is why I am here today—for the Rinas, Davids and Shlomos of our community, and for their parents, grandparents and siblings.

Thank you for being here today. You bring joy, dignity and hope to children and families who need our care and concern. In doing this work, in supporting one another, we gain an added appreciation of the precious and sacred nature of each human life. I pray, as Rina did at her Bat Mitzvah, that God may make our children, and all of us, strong, healthy and happy. Amen.