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Entering Nes Gadol – Entering the Great Miracle at Vista Del Mar

Rabbi Jackie Redner

From the morning Shacharit service:
Modeh Ani – I am thankful...

I am thankful before You,
Eternal Living Ruler,
That in Compassion,
You have returned my soul to me –
Great is Your faithfulness.

What is the *soul*?

My teachers taught me this:

"It is my heart."

"It is a piece of G-d"

"It is Love."

"It is an Eternal Light that never goes out."

Prior to my work with Vista Del Mar's *Nes Gadol* program*, I never would have believed that these were the responses that I would receive from children with Autism. Would most typical children ages 12 – 13 answer this question with such serious attention, wisdom, and depth?

Upon walking into Vista Del Mar's social hall to visit *Nes Gadol* for the first time, I noticed a boy sitting on the floor. He was vocalizing, reaching for everything within arms length, and making biting motions with his teeth. His aide was trying to help him calm his body. I breathed deeply and sat near this boy on the floor wanting to discover who he was. I had seen him in the congregation when as Vista Del Mar's rabbi, I officiated at the first of the *Nes Gadol* B'nei Mitzvah. He had sat between his parents rocking back and forth and making excited sounds.

It was this boy who typed the response, "It is Love," when asked "What is the soul?" That first day during my visit, this boy managed with tremendous effort to type for me, "Will you help me to prepare for my Bar Mitzvah?" and "Thank you for your patience." As I sat with him that day, something new in me was born.

I reflected on my past. How many times had I, like most people, walked by someone on the street who looked or acted in some way mentally disabled and thought, "There is no one home in there." I did all the right things. I smiled and said, "Hello." I did not look away... I have always known that each and every person born into this life brings gifts and is holy. Yet, I assumed that the gifts from such a person would be the patience and compassion his parents and others would learn during their time spent working with him or raising him.

I never understood in such a deep and all encompassing way that a full and complete human was before me. And not only this, but perhaps this human was actually a teacher for me. I could assist this boy to prepare for his Bar Mitzvah, but he would help me to understand the *perfection* that is each of G-d's creations. And because of what he, with great effort, has shared with me and our class, my heart has been expanded and I am forever changed.

I didn't know it as I entered *Nes Gadol* that first day, but I needed to be shown where my vision was limited. I needed to see where I was "off" in my ability to understand... because of lack of exposure, and simple human fear. Through my students and program director Elaine Hall, I have learned that Autism has many faces but that extreme sensitivity seems to be a common experience for all of our students. This sensitivity brings with it both great suffering and exquisite gifts - both of which need understanding and acknowledgement. And though much of the literature about Autism would have us think otherwise, each and every one of our *Nes Gadol* students is yearning for deep connection with another. As the student I spoke about earlier typed in his Bar Mitzvah speech:

"Everybody desires a way to reach somebody."

Nes Gadol's B'nei Mitzvah program and Elaine Hall's vision of *profound inclusion*, provides a space where the importance of labels like "Autistic," "Asperger's," or "Cerebral Palsy," melt away.

*And then our students,
In the generosity of this space,
And each in his/her own unique way,
Enter the adult community of the Jewish people,
Amidst great joy and celebration,
And perform the rite of Bar/Bat Mitzvah.*

It is a privilege and honor to work with, and learn with, these beautiful children and their families.

We in the rabbinate, because of our position, have the extraordinary opportunity to provide support for families with special needs by creating an atmosphere of "welcome," by educating our congregants and community, and by celebrating children of *all* abilities... simply for being alive.

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**Nes Gadol began as a B'nei Mitzvah program in 2006 and has expanded to include a Life Long Learning Confirmation Class, a 6 - 8 year old program, and special family programming throughout the year. Nes Gadol is part of the Vista Inspire Program and is directed by Elaine Hall, Founder of "The Miracle Project", featured in the award winning documentary film, Autism: The Musical. Nes Gadol began due to the generosity of The Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation and continues through the guidance and generosity of The Jewish Community Foundation and partnerships with HaMercaz and The Jewish Federation.*