

The blessings of God will take many forms

In Jewish tradition blessings (brachot) have been composed for a variety of occasions. Many people are familiar with the blessings recited before and after meals or the blessings that are specific to holidays. However, there are many other blessings that one can recite before unique occurrences, such as on seeing a rainbow, on encountering a wise man or, for this time of year in particular, upon seeing trees and flowers in bloom for the first time.

Each blessing is designed not only to help us appreciate the beauty around us but also the touch of divine everything about us. These blessings also remind us that the wonders of this world are gifts from God; we may appreciate and enhance the gifts of the creator but wanton and meaningless destruction are forbidden.

As I look out my window and watch the trees begin to bud and leaves start to form I am reminded not only of the blessing for trees but of one written by the Rabbis of old to be recited upon seeing someone with a disability: "Blessed are you, our Lord and God, Ruler of the Universe, who imbued diversity in His creations." How are the two connected?

Every summer I spend a month in the Muskoka region of

Ontario at Camp Ramah coordinating an integrated program called Tikvah (Hope) for adolescents with mental disabilities.

Each July I have the privilege of making and renewing acquaintances with up to twenty young people who may have diagnoses such as mild mental retardation, autism or Down's Syndrome. This past summer I met Jacob for the first time. Jacob is a tall, handsome fifteen-year-old boy who has a lot of difficulty interacting with others. He is very bright but his social skills are limited and awkward. He enjoys solitary activities and his interests are very different from his typical peers. Jacob particularly likes trees. Not living trees, but dead ones. He does not like to just look at them but he thrives on knocking them down with his bare hands.

Jacob's story

When I first interviewed Jacob and his family last spring, I was a little bit wary about enrolling a camper who might at any time disappear into the many woods around camp to look for appropriate specimens to wrestle to the ground. His parents told me not to worry; I should simply tell him that this activity was not allowed in camp. Jacob also told me that he would never think of harming a living tree and that his interest was environmentally friendly.

Despite this reassurance I was still worried what the summer would hold for Jacob, his counselors and the trees at camp.

Within minutes of his arrival at camp Jacob had already sur-

veyed the trees within the immediate vicinity of his cabin.

When I approached to welcome him and deal with any separation problems he might be having, Jacob barely acknowledged my greeting before he started to authoritatively tell me about all the dead trees he had discovered along the entrance way to camp. He then took me on an inspection tour of the trees that needed to come down.

I promised him that I would discuss the issue with the groundkeepers. Periodically during the month he would ask me when these men would finally take care of those trees.

Jacob quickly acclimated to camp. He participated in all activities and seemed to enjoy himself. He did not, however, play or interact very much with his cabin mates or peers. One morning, a few days into the program, Jacob asked to be excused from a sports activity for a few moments to walk among the trees behind the basketball court. I warned him not to go too far - and not to try to knock down any trees.

A few minutes later everyone near the basketball court was stunned into inactivity by a loud crashing sound coming from the woods. I immediately knew what to expect. As people were wondering what happened, Jacob appeared running out the woods, a look of consternation on his face.

He stopped in front of me saying, "I don't know what happened; I was just standing there and suddenly this tree fell down right beside me." The temptation

was obviously too great. So many trees and so little time.

At that point I decided it was important to give Jacob the opportunity to knock down trees on a limited basis with the supervision of his counselors. I felt that he ought to be allowed to spend at least some time doing what he really enjoyed as long as there was no danger to himself, others or the environment.

From that time on when Jacob had some free time, one or both of his counselors would go with him for a stroll in the woods and look for an appropriate specimen for him to attack.

Towards the end of the term, one of Jacob's counselors came to me to tell me about these experiences. He talked about everything he had learned from Jacob including the criteria needed to find just the right tree and the skills involved in rocking the trunk back and forth in just the correct fashion.

His counselor related how soothing and empowering the experience could be. He then described the feelings of pride, joy and satisfaction that overwhelmed him when the large tree finally fell came crashing into the nearly silent woods.

A job done

Jacob and his counselors would then leave the forest together. Their job was done. If part of friendship is the ability to share an experience with another, Jacob, who was so often socially isolated, had made at least several new friends, as well as converts, in the forests of Ontario.

Every morning I thank God for his wonderful creations and for giving me the opportunity to meet and learn from individuals like Jacob.

"Blessed are you, our Lord and God, Ruler of the universe who has withheld nothing from His world and who has created beau-

tiful creatures and beautiful trees for mortals to enjoy."

Dr. Mitch Parker is Director of Special Needs at Hillel Day School of Metropolitan Detroit and Director of the Tikvah Special Needs Program at Camp Ramah in Canada.



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PREVIEW

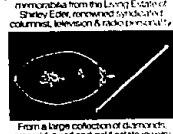
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