



## Against the Odds: Adopting an Older Child with Disabilities

*Anonymous*

**M**other's Day 2000. This morning I was awakened by my eighteen-year-old son bringing me a half dozen white roses and a home-cooked breakfast.

To most parents, such a gesture would probably bring a smile or even a few tears. But for me, this event was nothing short of miraculous. For this son of mine — now six feet tall and over 200 pounds, sporting a pierced eyebrow and long dyed black hair — had nine years before threatened to kill me with a knife. In fact, over the past fifteen years since we first adopted him, we have committed our son to psychiatric hospitals, sent him away to residential schools, and at one point, even considered relinquishing custody. Never could I have imagined, even as recently as a year ago, that this Mother's Day I would be thanking him for bringing me white roses!

Why had my husband and I taken the risk of adopting our son in the first place? What had made us think that we knew how to parent such a child, who by three and a half years old had already been traumatized by drug addiction and physical and emotional abuse? What did we think it would do to our marriage and our "normal" daughter to bring such a child into our home? Were we naïve, foolish, arrogant, or just too young to know any better?

Over the years, we have asked ourselves these questions countless times. But back in 1985 when our adoption counselor had initially suggested that we adopt an older child from a pool of hard-to-place children, we had barreled ahead with hardly a moment's hesitation. After all, we were highly educated, well-intentioned professionals who could do anything — and besides, we were Jews! By adopting this beautiful little boy, we would be saving a life, performing a great mitzvah!

Little did we know then that this decision would present us with the toughest challenge we had ever undertaken. Little did we understand at that time that our family's well-meaning advice — "Just love him and everything will turn out all right" — would actually handicap us in figuring out how to cope with the chaos this child would bring

into our lives. Little did we recognize then that it was precisely our high expectations as Jewish parents that would doom him and our family to years of broken-hearted struggle.

What did we do wrong? Nothing that any other loving, well-meaning, Jewishly committed parents would not have done. We welcomed him into our home, our synagogue, our extended family, and our community. We read to him, brought him to museums and cultural events, introduced him to a world of his peers.

And then we silently bore our shame as our son failed. His attention deficits prevented him from sitting still, whether at school, synagogue, Shabbat and holiday meals, or birthday parties. His profound learning disabilities blocked him from learning nursery rhymes, Hebrew blessings, his ABCs, even his own phone number. His poor impulse control and organic impairments made him occasionally violent and unpredictable. We didn't understand him. We couldn't control him. And most of the

time, we couldn't even love him.

Could we have handled things differently? Of course. But our shame got in the way. Our social workers could have provided professional help, but we didn't want to admit to them that we couldn't cope on our own. Our families could have asked us for more information about how we were doing, but we couldn't admit that they may have been right to suggest that we were taking on more than we could manage. Our friends could have asked us what we needed from them, but we were too ashamed of our son's failures and our own to appear in need of help.

Luckily, we eventually sought and found the help we needed — from mental health professionals, teachers, special education lawyers, other parents, friends, and family. We have watched our son master his angry demons to become a caring brother, friend, son, and grandson. We have *kvelled* as he has learned to read, become bar mitzvah, mastered the art of conversation, and even

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learned the computer program HTML. We have asked and granted forgiveness for all the harm we did to each other before we understood what we all needed for our family to work. We have learned what God taught Hagar in the desert: to respond to our son "where he is."

Even more important, we have learned to let go and let God. As one of our dear friends told us before we adopted our children: "When God despairs of teaching you what you need to know, God sends you children." Ain't it the truth!

## Risk vs. Reward: Can We Afford to Fund Young People's Innovations?

Brian Gaines

Can young innovators make a difference in today's Jewish community? Is the Jewish community ready for such innovation? Is the community ready to risk its resources to find out? It appears more and more that today's Jewish leaders are increasingly answering these questions with an emphatic "yes!" Here's why.

Twenty- and thirty-year-old American Jews are products of a society dramatically different from that of earlier generations. We came of age in a technologically sophisticated world, grew up among nontraditional families, and yearn for communal and often spiritual connections. No longer faced with the same societal barriers and prejudices as our predecessors and living in an age of diversity and identity politics, we have the choice to view "Jewish" as one of several adjectives describing who we are.

This is not to say that there has been a dearth of talk about how to impact this age group. From targeted marketing to singles events, from young donor groups to leadership training, young Jews have been the focus of much attention. We are rarely, however, included in major decision-making or consulted when the organized Jewish community creates new initiatives.

When one looks below the radar screen of the mainstream Jewish community, a different story emerges. Today, a new generation of Jews across the country are initiating projects, making their marks on Jewish communal organizations, and developing new ideas that hold promise for a more vital Jewish community. These innovators, many of whom work outside mainstream Jewish life, often have difficulty securing necessary resources. If we are to succeed in creating a new generation of organizations and programs, Jewish social entrepreneurs need to be trained, supported, and encouraged.

Many philanthropists have taken this concept to heart and have shown interest in making strategic investments in and grants to these young innovators. By supporting the projects and programs initiated by young people, today's philanthropists are acting as venture capitalists for social change. Let's call them "Jewish social venture capitalists."

A 1998 study, underwritten by the Righteous Persons Foundation, the Walter and Elise Haas Fund, and the Nathan Cummings Foundation, addressed the concerns of this next generation. The study, which included in-depth interviews with several emerging Jewish social entrepreneurs (ages 23-35) found that access to capital, technical assistance in several areas, and mentorship were necessary for the success of these innovators.

Within the last year, several organizations have emerged to promote and support Jewish social entrepreneurship. One such program, *Bikkurim*, is housed in the offices of the United Jewish Communities in New York and has set up an incubator for five projects in the New York metropolitan area. Starting this fall, *Bikkurim* will provide office space and services for individuals forming new programs.

Joshua Venture: A Fellowship for Jewish Social Entrepreneurs, the program I am helping to launch, will initially offer eight fellowships to emerging Jewish social entrepreneurs. It will support and train individuals by providing the assistance they need to transform their visions into action. The two-year national fellowship program provides seed capital, entrepreneurial training, mentorship, technical assistance, and Jewish learning to innovators ages twenty-one to thirty-five.

What sets Joshua Venture apart from other Jewish leadership programs is its focus on entrepreneurship — educating Fellows to use the most