



"Hey! I want an *aliya* to the Torah too!" exclaimed Michael, a sweet 14-and-a-half year old blonde-haired boy with a heart-breaking smile. "But you already celebrated your Bar Mitzvah!" I answered. "Yes, but I didn't have an *aliya* and I want one!" "You didn't? Then of course you can have an *aliya* with us. We only planned on Natanel having an *aliya* this year, but you can also go up to the Torah."



Michael and Natanel live in Beit Eden, a group home for developmentally-challenged children and young adults. Michael is a recent arrival – only a year in the home – while Natanel has been there since age seven – the minimum age for residency. At 21, the children will be transferred to another institution, suitable for adults. Until then, Michael and Natanel reside in this closed community of sixty children who all have developmental delays of varying severities.



In 2002, *Kehillat YOZMA* volunteered to adopt the Beit Eden group home. Since then a dedicated group of volunteers have successfully integrated these beloved children into the YOZMA community, providing them the love and warmth they so desperately need. Activities range from the weekly *Kabbalat Shabbat* service that YOZMA volunteers hold at Beit Eden to hosting the children at YOZMA holiday events, on through the group bar / bat mitzvah celebrations held for those Beit Eden residents who come of age.

Thursday, May 7th, 2009 finally arrives and the excitement in Beit Eden is palpable. At 7:30 AM the bus that will take Natanel, Michael and 25 other Beit Eden residents and staff to the Western Wall in Jerusalem arrives. The first stop on the journey is Modi'in – to pick up the YOZMA rabbis and volunteers who will spend this most meaningful, activity-filled day with the children. The last stop is the Western Wall in Jerusalem where we meet the children's families.

The children chant the blessings: "בְּרַכּוּ אֶת אֲדֹנָי הַמְּבֹרָךְ"



The crowd responds in turn:...."בְּרוּךְ אֲדֹנָי הַמְּבֹרָךְ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד"

As we stand on the original steps leading to the Temple courtyard, and hear the boys chant these blessings, emotions run high and many of us find ourselves shedding a tear. "Who would have believed that my son would have an *aliya* to the Torah" whispers Sarah, Natanel's mother. YOZMA's Rabbi Kinneret Shiryon reads from the Torah portion as Natanel and Michael follow along.



"בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה אֲדֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לָנוּ תּוֹרַת אֱמֶת וְחַיִּי עוֹלָם נָטַע בְּתוֹכֵנוּ. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה אֲדֹנָי נוֹתֵן הַתּוֹרָה."



יהדות זמננו מורשת העם יזמ"ה

המרכז ליהדות מתקדמת במודיעין



What joy and celebration! The boys chant the blessings perfectly! Everyone present was overjoyed – the children, the families and the YOZMA volunteers. "We are privileged to have been able to give two more children this wonderful experience," gushes Daphna – one of the YOZMA volunteers. "Now we need to get back to Modi'in and prepare for the party!"

On the way back to Modi'in and to Beit Eden, the volunteers are already starting to get organized. While the children rest in preparation for the big celebration awaiting them that evening, the YOZMA volunteers have no such luxury. At 2PM, tens of YOZMA volunteers stream into Modi'in's City Hall where the bar mitzvah party will begin in only three more hours. Over 200 guests are expected – among them Modi'in's mayor, YOZMA's rabbis Kinneret Shiryon and Nir Barkin, students in YOZMA's third grade class (year-round participants in the adoption of the Beit Eden home) and YOZMA members and volunteers. Time is short and there is much to do to set the tables, decorate the hall and organize the catering and music for the event.

This year YOZMA received extra help from teens who are voluntarily serving a pre-army year with TELEM (the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism's youth group). The group is led by Noam, a YOZMA member, who has been volunteering in the Beit Eden adoption project since he was in 10th grade.

"The children are here! The children are here! Quick – put on your costumes and come out to greet them!" called Noam as he put on his Mickey Mouse costume and together with the other volunteers went out to greet the Beit Eden residents as they arrived at the party. The Beit Eden staff had taken special care to dress the children up in their finest clothes – no easy task. All are clean and well-dressed and most-importantly happy and excited to be at the party.

After everyone settles down and finds their seats, we all enjoy a special performance by Avraham Matzliach. Then Avi, our emcee for the five years that we have held this event, opens the festivities. A few short speeches are followed by the YOZMA children singing a song while the Beit Eden children dance. Avi invites four volunteers to spread a *tallit* over the bar mitzvah boys while Rabbi Shiryon blesses them. Talia and Ronen – two children who are of bar/bat mitzvah age but who were not able to say the Torah blessings – join Natanel under the *tallit*. Rabbi Shiryon addresses each child with a personalized blessing. At the conclusion, the crowd throws candies and breaks into "*Siman Tova U'Mazel Tov*".



After the blessings, Avi leads the *bnai mitzvah* children and their families, Beit Eden's residents and staff, as well as YOZMA volunteers, in a traditional candle-lighting ceremony. YOZMA volunteers then serve as waiters – bringing the catered meals to the Beit Eden children. Finally, all partake of the amazing cake – donated each year by Anatoush caterers. While the children enjoy their dessert, we all kick up our



heels on the dance floor.



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המרכז ליהדות מתקדמת במודיעין



But alas, all too soon the event is over. The children return back to Beit Eden. I feel that my batteries have been recharged for another year's worth of activities. After cleaning up the hall, all that remains is to thank the content cadre of volunteers – who help out every week, on special occasions or once-a-year. And to thank the various organizations who donate their goods and services – the Modi'in municipality, the caterers, bakers, florists, equipment rentals and all those who gave of their time and services.



And of course, we also need to thank all those who help support YOZMA – locally and abroad.

I offer to you my personal and communal thank you!

One final thought – the most important component of the Beit Eden adoption project is the warmth and love that we give to the home's young residents. That is why we need more volunteers who will be able to dedicate a few hours weekly, bi-weekly or even monthly. We also need continued financial support in order to maintain and expand on our activities at Beit Eden. Every contribution – any amount is generous– will help us continue this important work.

Shalom and thank you!

Yuval Newman

Founder "Beit Eden Project" at YOZMA.