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You are in: [Home](#) >

Josh Harris, autism and the ambition to become a rabbi

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writes Andrew Mickel



Autism can severely restrict an individual's ability to communicate with the outside world, and that poses a big problem when it comes to effectively educating someone with the disability. Josh Harris, a young man with autism from the Orthodox Jewish community in Salford, has learnt this the hard way. But having been classified as what his mother describes as 'mentally retarded', he is now enrolled at a Yeshiva, a Jewish school for advanced religious studies, in his community.

His parents are clearly behind him at every step they have helped to find him suitable schools, and his mother has even co-authored articles with him about autism. Josh says he couldn't have managed without this support. "I have lots of pain and hunger which makes me lose focus. My mum and PAs help me by pushing me and making me change my focus."

Josh's mother Carol says the schools in Britain were not able to provide adequate support beyond a statement of special educational needs. "All the information and contacts were gleaned by us by researching and networking other parents. No professional source has ever been productive or positive.

Autistic spectrum

"We found that the schools dealing with the more able end of the autistic spectrum were ambitious and positive. However, those schools dealing with the more challenged and challenging children were more like places of containment, albeit caring, devoid of hope and aspiration. Prospects seemed bleak."

They have tried several methods to try and deal with this, including non-drug treatment from the Handle institute and applied behavioral analysis. That was all tried without official help, but Josh's family did successfully challenge their local education authority to fund a placement at a specialist school in Boston for over five years. While the school could help him, says Josh, the separation from his family was difficult for both sides. "In the special school in America I was not helped in the same way as I am now. I felt like they were treating me in a non-human way. In Yeshiva I have a lot of support from the rabbi in charge - but we are still getting to know each other."

"Faith has affected my approach to autism in that I only see positives"

Instead, he returned to the UK and his parents helped to set up a Jewish education for him. Having decided that a mainstream education would be too difficult, a place was arranged in a local special school, with his own trained teacher.

But according to Carol, it was "an abysmal failure". "His teacher was trained to deliver a special needs education and could not give him the stimulation he needed, and the others resented the one-to-one input he was receiving as they had to cope with one teacher to a large group of students."

Grand learning of Torah

The Yeshiva Josh now studies at it is attended by all the young males in his community. Says Josh: "I want to become a rabbi because I feel mostly sad if religion was not my chosen life. When I complete my training I will begin the grand learning of torah (Jewish Laws) and mitzvot (religious obligations). Faith has affected my approach to autism in that I only see positives.

"Autism has influenced my training so that I just focus on things I am very capable of doing. Because of autism training it is sometimes harder but also much easier in many ways. It is easier because of my intelligence and memory."

But the process can still create problems. Carol says that facilitated communication has been the only effective way to communicate with her son. But the process is controversial, as critics claim that the process allows the facilitator to subconsciously pass on messages themselves. For his part, Josh says that "it means the world to me that I now have a voice".

To overcome criticism of facilitation communication, Josh has tried to publicise the problems that confront those with autism and the benefits of the process through presentations, articles he has co-written, a DVD he has released, and his own website.

With little official support, Carol says the community has made up the shortfall in other ways. "We are relentless in our search for ways to enrich his life and have learnt to take life a day at a time. We try to give him unconditional acceptance. We don't always succeed, but we have what to aim for."



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