

Seeing Miracles Every Day

Meet the Landys

By Bayla Sheva Brenner



The Landys may very well be the most conspicuous family in Rochester, New York. Anita Landy drives around town in a big white bus, custom made to carry her lively crew of five, in addition to three wheelchairs, a ventilator and a service dog named Magic. Nurses traipse in and out of their home 24/7, and massage, music and art therapists visit regularly. Locals are wont to ask the Landy children: “Aren’t you the kids from that group home on the corner of Bonnie Brae Avenue?” And they always respond: “That’s no group home; that’s our house!” To the area’s Orthodox Jewish community, however, the Landy home is known as a house full of *chesed*.

When Douglas and Anita Landy married in 1984, they each had a daughter from previous marriages. Today, they have seven children between them, five of whom have disabilities and live at home. Three of them—who have spina bifida, a disabling birth defect of the spinal cord—were adopted. The Landys welcomed these three infants into their family with

Bayla Sheva Brenner is senior writer in the OU Communications and Marketing Department.

the sole intention of helping them attain the highest possible quality of life, despite their physical and cognitive challenges. As they dole out a consistent diet of pure love, care and devotion, the Landys are not only achieving success, they are witnessing miracles.

Noah, their first child together, was born prematurely with bronchopulmonary dysplasia, a chronic lung disease that most

cent of his lung capacity and controls his bouts of asthma with medication. His “biggest issue,” according to his mother, was caused by bleeding in his head during his “premature time,” leaving him with Asperger syndrome, a condition marked by impaired social interactions and limited repetitive patterns of behavior.

Four years after Noah’s birth, the Landys decided to have another child. Their second son, Adam, suffered a stroke during birth, leaving him deaf. His hearing returned at age three, and by five, he could speak. He currently wears a hearing aid to improve his audible range. “It took a lot of therapy,” says Anita. “He’s a hard worker.”

Although the Landys wanted to have more children, they hesitated in light of their track record of health issues; they not only had concerns about their future children’s health, but about Anita’s health as well. “I ruptured a disc with each pregnancy and had to undergo surgery,” says Anita. “The doctors advised us not to have more.” It didn’t take much time for the Landys to come up with the next logical course of action—adoption. They realized that

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commonly affects the lungs of premature babies, often necessitating a ventilator to facilitate breathing. He was oxygen dependent for close to nine years. Unable to simultaneously swallow and breathe, Noah received his nourishment through a G-tube, inserted through an incision in his abdomen. Now a young adult, Noah enjoys the use of 50 per

they stood a slim chance of finding and affording a healthy newborn and had no qualms about taking on a Jewish child with some extra challenges. With Douglas a seasoned psychiatrist and Anita a former special education teacher, they figured they were up to the task.

While exploring adoption agencies, the Landys, then living in Traverse City, Michigan, were directed to the Jewish Children's Adoption Network (JCAN) in Denver, an organization that matches Jewish children with disabilities—who have been given up by their biological parents—with adoptive parents. Soon after making contact with the agency, the Landys received a call about a baby with spina bifida who had no movement in her legs, born to a couple in New York City. The Landys boarded a plane. After the doctors put in a shunt to drain the fluid in the baby's head, the Landys took their new daughter, Rachel, home.

Spina bifida results from the failure of the spinal column to close properly during the first month of pregnancy. It can cause varying degrees of weakness of limbs, paralysis, lack of bowel or bladder control, learning problems, hydrocephalus (abnormal accumulation of fluid in the brain), seizures, breathing problems, clubfeet and impaired vision.

Six months after Rachel joined the Landys, Doug and Anita traveled to Detroit, their hometown, to visit family. While there, they received a call from their babysitter telling them of an adoption agency in New York City that was desperately trying to reach them. The agency told them about a couple who wanted the Landys to take their baby who was born with spina bifida. "A nurse currently involved with this couple had been in the unit where Rachel was born and remembered us," says Anita. Struck by the turn of events, the Landys agreed to talk to them. The

Landys tried in vain to convince the couple to keep the baby. Then they made a decision. "We thought: 'With Rachel [then only six months old] it'll be like having twins,'" says Anita. "Okay, let's do it!"

Becky at first seemed stronger and healthier than her older sister, Rachel. However, six weeks after her arrival, her condition worsened. She had Chiari malformation, and because of the way her spine was formed, her brainstem



Although Becky's dog, Magic, is trained to pick up the phone in an emergency, open doors and, if her ventilator tubing comes off, bring it back to her so she can put it back on independently, his primary purpose is social. "Most people are intimidated by all her medical equipment. They would stare and whisper and keep their children away," says Anita. "When we go places with Magic, Becky is suddenly the kid with that really cool dog."

fell. When Becky's skull fused and she stopped breathing, the Landys flew to Detroit for emergency surgery. In the aftermath, Becky suffered vocal chord paralysis and couldn't swallow. "She became the most medically involved of all our children," says Anita. "She has had a few strokes and seven operations to release the pressure on her brainstem; she's ventilator dependent, uses an electric wheelchair and is fed through a tube. She's had close to one hundred surgeries, but we've persevered." Fueled by the power of her parents' devotion and constant giving, Becky developed an indefatigable verve for life. Although the Landys were told that she would never talk, she has, in fact, learned to do

so. "She is aware and interactive and a very happy child," says Anita.

Three years later, after the Landys had moved to Rochester, JCAN called to inform them of a Jewish couple in New York City about to give birth to a baby with spina bifida. The children urged them to take the child. "They pleaded, 'Mom, we have to—she's Jewish!,'" recalls Anita. "Who else will take her if we don't? She'll just end up in the system and she won't be Jewish anymore.' We decided to go get her."

Weighing only four pounds at birth, Stephanie, like many spina bifida babies, needed a shunt. At three years old, she started having seizures and displayed signs of autism. "She's a full-time walker, yet the least aware," says Anita. "She has a poor memory; some days she can read, some days not." Like her brothers and sisters, she is a loved, valued and integral part of the Landy family.

Lessons in Acceptance

With the constant hubbub in their home, Becky's close calls and the need to constantly keep on

top of everyone's medical issues as well as the nurses' schedules, insurance matters and assorted medications and tutors, the Landys truly love their life, a life they have, in fact, chosen. Douglas admits he "never in a million years imagined he'd have a home like this," yet, he says, it feels absolutely right. "It seemed clear to us that this was our responsibility, and I felt prepared for each child," he says. "I look at each of them and feel a sense of awe. For all my faults and failings, I've been given this opportunity. Between Anita and me, we knew we could handle whatever came."

Rochester's *frum* community shares Douglas's awe for his family. When Rabbi Mordechai Hochheimer,

rav of Congregation Beth Hakneses Hachodosh, one of the area's Orthodox synagogues, interviewed for the rabbinic position in 2004, Douglas, the shul president, invited the rabbi, his wife, Shira, and their two-year-old son, Avraham Yeshaya, for Shabbat. "As soon as we walked in, we were greeted by their dog," Rabbi Hochheimer says. "Then we met the two older sons and the three daughters. Rachel, who just had another surgery on her leg; Stephanie, who walks with braces and has autism, and, in the main room, we met Becky, the most severely challenged, smiling happily, with the dog by her side. During the meal, the kids went off to the playroom. Stephanie and Rachel played with Avraham Yeshaya, including him in their game. [I could see] this was a lesson they knew well—that everyone has his own abilities, even a two-year-old, and to deal with each person as he is."

Shira was most impressed with the Landys' composed, almost tranquil disposition in the midst of a very "happening household." She also marveled at their selflessness. "They don't view what they are doing as something optional," says Shira. "I don't think they see these girls in any way other than [as] their daughters. This is what they feel obligated to do for these children. It is *not* a *chesed* project."

The Landys feel beholden to their children for continually enriching *their own* lives. "Becky has taught me so much about life," says Anita. "She has taught me that there doesn't have to be an understandable reason why [certain things happen], but Hashem decides what needs to be, and we have to accept that. Becky is the epitome of that belief and shows [that to] us constantly."

To illustrate the depth of Becky's faith, Anita relates a compelling story. At one point Becky had the use of her legs, but by the time she was six, her spinal cord often became tethered, caus-

ing thick scar tissue to build on her back; the tissue started pulling on her spinal cord and on her already fragile brainstem. The Landys' surgeon consulted with a top neurosurgeon and was informed that if he didn't sever Becky's spinal cord, she would die. "The doctor had never done this [procedure] before and wouldn't leave her bedside until she awoke," Anita recalls. "When [Becky] opened her eyes, she said: 'I can't move my legs.' The surgeon started to cry. I said, 'Becky, you can move your legs.' He looked at me like I was crazy. 'What



The Landys on a museum outing in Rochester, New York. Clockwise from back left: Adam, Noah, Rachel, Stephanie, Anita and Becky.

you have to do is take your arms and move your legs to wherever you want them to go. You'll just have to use your arms to do it now. She looked at me and said, 'Oh, okay.' And she tried it. It worked, and that was it. It *was* okay. And that's Becky. She has lost so many things and yet she has lost nothing."

A Day in the Life of the Landys

Anita starts her day at 5:30, relieving Becky's overnight nurse before her day nurse arrives. "We are Becky's brainstem; we keep her going," says Anita. "We monitor her breathing, carbon monoxide, blood pressure and blood sugar; she just goes about her business and plays. We have to change her set-

ting, her position or whatever it takes to get things back to where they need to be." Becky's bus comes a little after 7:00, and she goes off to school with her nurse. Anita then gets Rachel and Stephanie ready for school, while the boys get ready themselves.

By 8:30, the kids have left for school and Anita takes advantage of the window of time to make important calls and order equipment and various medical supplies. "It's all about coordinating, making sure the doctor appointments are set, the insurance things have gone through," says Anita. "I do the billing to Medicaid for the nurses. I'm running a small business."

Once the calls are completed, Anita "home schools" Noah for his vet tech online distance-learning program. The girls return home between 2:30 and 3:30; Anita employs two nurses for an hour during the transition. She receives a medical update on what needs to be done for Becky and gets everyone prepared for their after-school activities, which include tutoring, music and art therapy and therapeutic massages. In the late afternoons, community members tutor the

children in Hebrew studies. At 7:00 p.m., Anita and Douglas snatch some precious time together over dinner. As the evening progresses, the family gets ready for bed. Stephanie, who has the most difficulty focusing, is assisted first; again, the boys are able to take care of themselves, as is Rachel. By 8:00, it's Becky's turn. And then, the house is quiet. "It's nice," says Anita. "I catch up on my e-mail." Come Shabbat, the Landys, like most families, enjoy the unfettered expanse of time together.

The Landy children continue to blossom within their home and their community, nurtured by the overriding message that their personal challenges are only one part of their lives, something to work with while striving each

day to become the people they are meant to become.

Employed by a nearby veterinarian as a kennel attendant, Noah, now twenty-one, is completing his veterinary technician studies.

Despite a mild learning disability, Adam, seventeen, currently in eleventh grade, consistently scores A's and B's, and plans to study architecture. He also loves to cook. In December 2004, Becky was rushed to a hospital in Buffalo because of a shunt malfunction and a build-up of scar tissue in her brainstem. Due to a series of complications, she remained in the hospital for nearly a year, with Anita faithfully by her side. The Rochester *kehillah* was at the ready, organizing meals for the family. However, Adam insisted on taking over that prized responsibility. "He really enjoys cooking and keeping the house," says Rabbi Hochheimer. "They had to beg the community not to help so much."

Rachel, now twelve, attends public school, as do her sisters. She has some learning disabilities, but excels in her studies. Initially unable to move her legs, she now walks with effort, often opting to use her wheelchair. Known as "Miss Socialite" by her family, she enjoys her friendships, and every Shabbat she wheels herself to Bnos, a girls' Shabbat youth group, to hear *divrei Torah* and bask in *achdut*.

Becky, also twelve, learns in a special education setting, but is mainstreamed for various subjects.

Stephanie, nine, attends a program in a school specifically for children with behavioral issues. After her trying first year of life, which included over a dozen shunt revisions, Stephanie has done well in terms of her spina bifida. However, at three she developed epilepsy as well as a form of autism, which has impeded her ability to learn. Stephanie is working with a psychiatrist to help her with behavioral issues and has met with noticeable success.

The Power of Stick-to-it-ness

While the Landys derive much *nachat* from their children's notable achievements, they view character development as the true measure of success in priming a child for life. Apparently, they seem to be succeeding in that crucial area as well. Although her Bat Mitzvah fell in the spring of 2006, Rachel decided to postpone the celebration until August—knowing full well that her friends would be away at camp and unable to attend—so that she and Becky could celebrate their Bat Mitzvahs together. The Landys erected a big tent in their front yard and welcomed the community to their *simchah*. Rachel, who aspires to be a Jewish studies teacher, spoke about the importance of Shabbat, and Becky displayed a poster she had made, highlighting the ways she helps the family prepare for

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Shabbat including setting the table, putting salt on the table, getting the challah ready and handing out the grape juice. "There wasn't a dry eye in the place," says Shira. "It was a time to acknowledge what they had accomplished."

"It was Rachel's upbringing that [primed her] to postpone her own celebration so that her sister could participate," Shira adds.

Douglas credits his children's admirable *middot* to his wife's sterling example and her tireless efforts at encouraging "stick-to-it-ness" while bringing out the best in them. "One time Becky was cutting papers with a pair of scissors," he says. "The nurse

came over to adjust something on her chair, and Becky leaned over and cut a chunk of her hair. Fortunately, it wasn't very noticeable. The nurse told Becky that she had to apologize. She refused. Then she started crying [and said] that she didn't want to. Anita turned off the wheelchair and said: 'You are going to sit here until you apologize.' For forty-five minutes, Anita did not let the issue rest. Becky finally apologized. Yes, they have difficulties, but they still have to be *menschen*."

The way that Anita and Douglas readily welcomed Rachel, Becky and Stephanie into their lives, their penchant for nonstop giving and the family's faith-based approach to life's bumps have made a significant impact on their community. When Noya Rackovsky, now a close friend of the Landys', first heard about the special family moving into the neighborhood she didn't expect to meet just regular people. "But, that is what they are," she says. "Clearly not many can do what they are doing. [Actually], it is the whole family that is doing this. It is a sacrifice on the part of the [older] children as well. While they are normal teenagers, one can see [there is] tremendous dedication to one another."

It is natural for parents to wonder about their children's futures and hope that they'll live happy, productive lives. The Landys are no different; they just need to live a lot closer to the moment. "We take each day as a gift," says Anita. "If we didn't have these kids, I don't know if we would understand how wonderful it is that they can do all they are able to do. Every person enjoys watching his children take their first steps, but when one's child had to learn [to walk] through physical therapy and finally is able to do it—when one's child can't talk and then one day he can—it's a miracle. I see so much in life that others don't get a chance to see. Miracles are happening in homes every day, but people don't recognize them. [Because of my children] I see miracles every day." 