

“Pulled up Short” by Shmuel

BY WILLIAM KOLBRENER



My son, Shmuel, was born four years ago on the tenth of Cheshvan. My wife woke me at 3 A.M.; we were at the hospital a bit after 3:30. Not her first delivery, the labor was quick: by 5:45, she gave birth. So efficient she was, I thought, that there would be time to make it to my regular 7 A.M. minyan in the Bayit Vegan neighborhood of Jerusalem. Our newborn would fit into my schedule—everything according to expectations; everything as planned. I accompanied the baby to the post-delivery room. The doctor, flanked by two nurses, labored over the baby with unexpected focus and intensity. Finally, the doctor emerged: our newborn, he suspected (really, he knew), had Down’s syndrome.

A close friend of ours, a nurse at Shaarei Tzedek (where more babies with Down’s syndrome are born than any place in the world) whispered to my wife, moments after we received the news, that she would be happy to take the baby and foster him—even before my wife would be released from the

hospital. The doctors and hospital staff, who, in the past, had been unswerving in their aversion to early discharge, happily acquiesced to my wife’s request to go home after only one day, relieved that we would, in fact, be taking the baby home. Friends visited: two of them conducted a dispute, in my presence, about whether a father of a child with Down’s syndrome should be wished a congratulatory *mazal tov* (the answer is yes). A rabbinical authority in my neighborhood averred upon hearing the news that the event could only be looked at as a manifestation of unadulterated *din*, Divine judgment; someone else recounted the story of a father of a similar child who had proclaimed at the *Brit Milah* of his son that the birth of such a child was a manifestation of pure *rachamim*, Divine mercy.¹ A neighbor advised that we really should foster the child: raising such a child—though, of course, “a blessing!”—would be too large a burden, not to mention a source of embarrassment to our family. Amidst all of this, the languages of advice, explanation and consolation—and I had hardly noticed—there was an infant, nursing in my wife’s steadfast arms.

The irony, unappreciated then, and for many months, even years after, was that I had devoted much of my per-

sonal and professional energies to understanding conceptions of diversity and difference, first in relation to the works of the Western literary tradition, and then, on a different path, in relation to Torah and the teachings of Chazal. Throughout my career as a professor of English literature, I have been compelled by literary and theoretical meditations on difference; when I entered the realm of the *beit midrash*, I discovered the ways in which Chazal affirm a notion of Divine truth—*emet*—with a multiplicity of different faces. When I was confronted, however with a “child of difference,” not the difference espoused enthusiastically around large oak tables by my teachers in graduate school at Columbia, or even that discussed between the four walls of the *beit midrash*, I was unprepared. All of my adventures in the pursuit of understanding difference, diversity and pluralism in the arcane and academic languages of epistemology and literary hermeneutics, and even in the realm of *limud*, had insufficiently prepared me for Shmuel.

When the world, as Deborah Kerdeman writes, “departs from our expectations and desires,” and thus “refuses to be appropriated by us or subjected to our categories, we are “pulled up short.”² That is, suddenly,

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we encounter a reality that our categories fail to fully assimilate: it is an experience associated with “loss” or failure—the inability of our cognitive equipment to provide a map adequate to “what happens.”³ I had been “pulled up short” by the birth of my son Shmuel, or, more accurately, pulled up short by the initially shattering experience of having an atypical child, a child with Down’s syndrome.

To be sure, the label “atypical,” or the exceptional, has useful diagnostic functions. But the question, I wondered, was in what sense, if any, is there a conception of typicality in the Torah? That is, does the Torah proscribe a notion of typicality, and how does it accommodate conceptions of difference? If the Biblical notion of *tzelem Elokim* (man created in the image of God) affirms a similarity between man and the Divine, with all men created in His image, Chazal in *Sanhedrin* (37a) come to qualify that assertion of similarity with an emphasis on difference: “When a man mints coins with one ‘stamp,’ all [of the coins] are similar to one other, but when the King of Kings mints each man from the ‘stamp’ of Adam Harishon, each one of them is different; therefore it is incumbent upon each person to say, ‘For me the world was created.’” Created from the stamp of the First Man, and traceable to that original source in his similarity, each man also evidences an ineluctable difference. It is this difference which affords him with the experience of both opportunity and responsibility: “For me the world was created.” For it is the image of God which guarantees that all manifestations of difference are linked back first to Adam Harishon, and then to the Divine. As Dr. Rahamim Melamed-Cohen observes in his remarkable book about the exceptional child in the Jewish tradition, there are blessings recited upon seeing difference or exceptionality in the Divine creation, but only the blessing over human exceptionality includes the *shem Hashem*, the Divine name.⁴ Only in

those human differences, though sometimes confounding our expectations and “pulling us up short,” does the Divine image dwell.

Notwithstanding the pervasive attitude of a contemporary Western culture that aggressively advertises its commitment to multiplicity, diversity and pluralism, such a culture does not really encourage the encounter with genuine difference. As a recent *New York Times*



*Shmuel, pictured here with his sister Avital.
Photo: Leslie Kolbrener*

article observed, more and more prospective parents in the United States choose to terminate pregnancies rather than face the prospect of nurturing a difference that has a human face.⁵ The faces of those who are born also sometimes remain invisible—not because their faces lack the ability to make an impression, but rather because the cognitive lenses available fail to afford the refinement of vision that allows such children to be seen. We view the world through a set of categories and expectations; and what doesn’t fall within those categories does not register on our cog-

nitive screens. Vision may be a biological mechanism, but what we, in fact, see is also a function of our perceptual habits and prejudices.

In the days after Shmuel’s birth, after the genetic tests confirmed what the doctors all knew, I found myself consistently trying to place Shmuel within categories: knowing that he surely wasn’t typical, I found myself relying upon the categories supplied by my well-meaning friends: he was “special”; he was “atypical”; he was a manifestation of pure *din*, of pure *rachamim*. It took me several years to realize that he may be some aspects of all of these things, but first and foremost, he was Shmuel.

Immediately after the birth, we were especially susceptible to what I now see as the not-so-well conceived advice of others: my wife and I had decided to conceal Shmuel’s “condition” from our children. Within about an hour of our return home from the hospital, my oldest daughter, Elisheva, then thirteen, inquired quietly and matter of factly, “Does he have Down’s syndrome?” When we answered in the affirmative (we were both relieved that the charade had ended so quickly), Elisheva disappeared mysteriously from the house, only to return fif-

teen minutes later to pick up Shmuel and smother him in kisses. Our second oldest daughter, Avital, then eight, wanted to know: “What is Down’s syndrome anyway?” After explaining what I then understood about the syndrome (which was very little), looking only half satisfied, Avital asked with quiet innocence, “Do I have Down’s syndrome?” As parents we may try to model behavior for our children, but the innocence of seeing without judgment of the latter incident, and the effort to see against habitual categories of the first, provided me with a model for beginning to see Shmuel.

It was at about this time that I came upon a famous story recounted in

the Talmud (*Ta'anit* 20b): the *tanna*, Rabbi Elazar ben Shimon, upon returning from his teacher's house, was "rejoicing greatly" and feeling "proud," since he had "learned much Torah." As the story continues, Rabbi Elazar "chances upon a man," described as "exceedingly ugly." When greeted by the "ugly man," Rabbi Elazar responds: "Empty One! Are all the people of your city perhaps as ugly as you?" To this, the man replies: "I do not know, but go and tell the Craftsman who made me, 'How ugly is that vessel that you made!'" Having realized his transgression, Rabbi Elazar dismounts from his donkey, prostrates himself, and says, "I have spoken out of turn to you; forgive me!" Not until implored by the people of a nearby city does the man agree to forgive Rabbi Elazar—provided, the former stipulates, that "he does not make a habit of doing this." Rabbi Elazar had been guilty of a visual transgression linked to habit—seeing the outer shell of the man, instead of his inner essence (thus the "ugly man" invokes the Craftsman that made him, implicitly arguing for his own connection, despite appearances, to *tzelem Elokim*).⁶ According to some, the ugly man is none other than Elijah the Prophet, who had come to make sure that Rabbi Elazar would not become "*habituated* to such behavior." There are different kinds of bad habits, some of the visual variety: from the framing gesture of the *aggadic* story, it seems that Rabbi Elazar's attitude, his contentedness and "pride" in his learning, had contributed to that perceptual error.

So Rabbi Elazar runs to the nearest house of study and expounds: "A person should always be soft like a reed and not hard like a cedar." He goes on to elaborate the legal consequences of the homily: "For this reason, the reed merited to have quills drawn from it to write Torah scrolls, tefillin and *mezuzot*." A person should demonstrate the softness and flexibility of the reed; to be sure, the Torah provides the categories through which to understand the world, but those categories must themselves be applied with sensitivity, and

not "arrogance."⁷ When one is hard—or inflexible—like a cedar, the story implies, there is a possibility of perceptual transgression like that committed by Rabbi Elazar. Habitual ways of see-

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ing—the wielding of inflexible categories—can lead to arrogance and insulate one from the genuine encounter with difference. The Torah, which can be written with a reed, contains the implicit injunction (this is the reason Rabbi Elazar runs to give a *derash*) that all of our categories, even those which come as the result of much study, must be applied with flexibility.

So I had realized with Shmuel: it was easy to go through life without seeing children who are different—through relegating them, with the simplifying glance of habit, to the categories of the atypical. When Shmuel was born, I didn't see the child, but the diagnostic category, and Shmuel's own inability (as it were) to fulfill my expectations.

Another, perhaps more insidious way of such perceptual avoidance, is through the very label "special." Though it is comforting at times to hear Shmuel referred to as a "*tzaddik*," and that he is incapable of transgression, such labels deprive children of the very possibility of entering into the community of mitzvah observance, and thus deny them the possibility of their particular *chelek*, portion, in Torah.⁸ This *chelek* may be circumscribed, though there may be the possibility that even children like our Shmuel will also be able to say: "The world was created for me."

The phrase "children like Shmuel" may be a more expansive category than I had thought on the day of his birth. Since then, my family and I have been exposed to the exceptionality of differ-

ence, not just as a theoretical construct or as a literary notion, but as part of the texture of everyday life. But more than that, because our own Shmuel so clearly manifests his difference, we have been confided with many other stories of exceptionality from neighbors, friends and colleagues. It turns out that the children who wear the badge of typicality, who seem to fulfill everyone's expectations, may have their own secret—not failings, but differences. The *matmid* who lives in the corner building may have dyslexia, the "Queen of the Class" may have a learning disability. That such revelations come hesitatingly may be a function of a general cultural denial of difference that has made inroads into our own communities. Yet if we are fearful of revealing our imperfections or are reluctant to acknowledge the differences of others, it is not out of fidelity to the demands of Torah.

Quite the contrary, there is a way of seeing that is part of our inheritance of our forefather Yaakov: Unlike his brother Esav who hurries off to Mount Seir to receive his full reward in his experience of the perfection of this world, Yaakov "leads on softly"—accommodating the pace and needs of his "nursing" cattle and "tender" children (Bereishit 33:13). Yaakov slows down to tend to the needs of others, acknowledging, unlike Esav, imperfection as part of the nature of this world. We are mistaken to believe that children with Down's syndrome or other disabilities are the only ones who are "tender." Viewing my children (not just Shmuel, but his brothers and sisters as well) through the unthinking application of fixed categories risks missing the *distinctive* manifestation of *tzelem Elokim* which each of them—not just the diagnostically "special"—represents. This is not to deny that there is a continuum of exceptionality, but Shmuel, like almost all children, confounds categories; indeed, the most typical of children, if we look closely, will show themselves to be atypical.

Calibrating our perceptual mechanisms so that we can see the "tender"

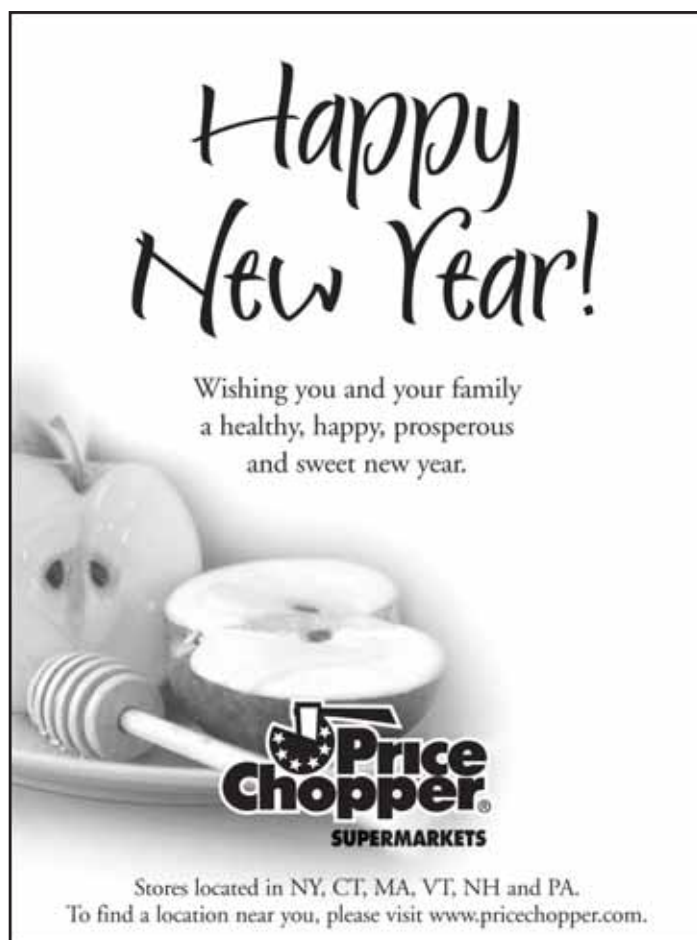
among us is not, however, a one-time affair. Recently, after a *shiur* I gave, a distraught father of a newly born “special” child asked me: “How are you so at peace with your Shmuel?” In explaining my “transformation,” I may have mentioned the stories of Avital or Elisheva, or perhaps the image of Shmuel caressing his own younger brother in the hospital on the day of his birth, or perhaps the memory of Shmuel answering his first *berachah* with “Amen.” The very next Shabbat, however, walking through our neighborhood, my wife and I passed by a couple wheeling a large carriage, to which was attached a respirator—on which the father made painstaking adjustments. I turned to my wife and uttered, “How sad...” Her response was immediate, the rebuke barely camouflaged: “But don’t you see how much he loves his child?”

To the question, “But don’t you see?” very often, the answer is: “No.” Rabbi Elazar was chastened for a perceptual complacency born out of pride; in the face of the new father who had asked my advice, I had evidenced a similar self-contentment. To his question, I should have simply answered: There’s no magical transformation, no singular turning-point, no defining epiphany, but rather the ongoing challenge to be “soft like a reed”—to be flexible in vision.

Seeing the atypicality of Shmuel thus remains both a process and challenge—of acknowledging that difference is not just a theoretical ideal for the seminar room, nor just part of earnest discussions about epistemological pluralism or multiculturalism, or even a conception of *limud* confined to the walls of the *beit midrash*. But rather that difference has a face (like that of the man encountered by Rabbi Elazar), through which the image of the Divine “Craftsman,” if we would only learn how to look properly, can be seen. **JA**

Notes

1. A halachic basis for the former perspective may be found in Rambam, *Hilchot Berachot* 10:12.
2. “Pulled Up Short: Challenging Self-Understanding as a Focus of Teaching and Learning,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 37 (2003): 293–308. The phrase “pulled up short” is a citation of the German philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer.
3. Kerdeman, 295.
4. *The Exceptional Child and Special Education According to Jewish Sources* (Jerusalem, 2002), 172-173.
5. Amy Harmon, “The Problems of an Almost-Perfect Genetic World,” *New York Times*, 20 November 2005. Harmon reports that about 80 percent of women who receive positive results for Down’s syndrome in pre-natal testing chose to terminate their pregnancies.
6. For a different elaboration of the story, see Maharshah and *Ayin Yaakov*.
7. For this characterization of Rabbi Elazar, see Maharshah.
8. Melamed-Cohen, 161-174.

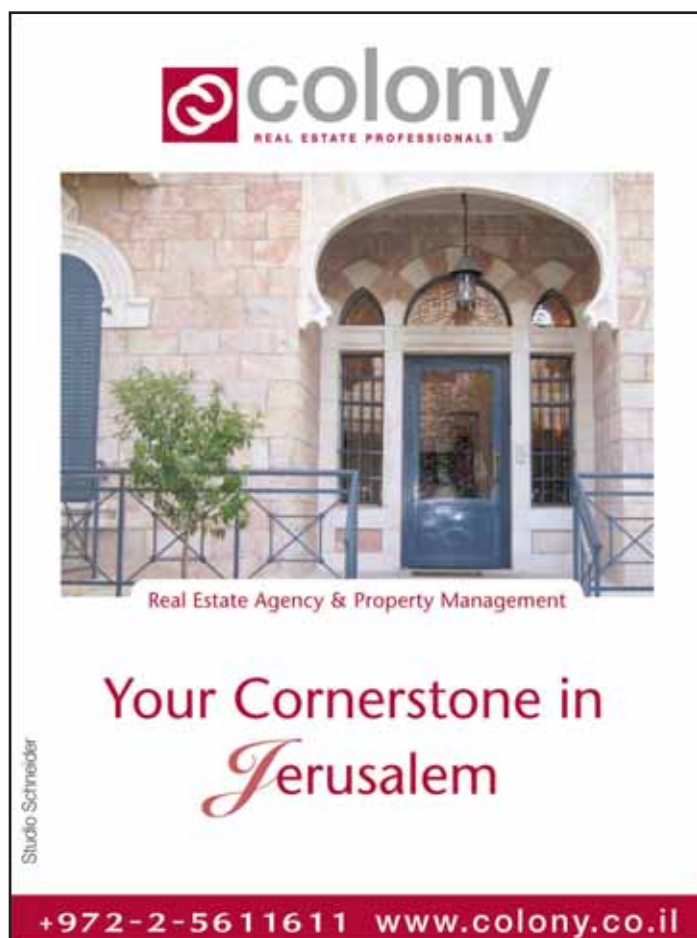


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