

# CHILDREN HELPING CHILDREN

*by Yaakov Astor*

Ahuva, a spunky, top-of-the-class 11-year-old girl from the New York area, was having the time of her life. It was a school trip. She and her friends were free to roam the amusement park and just have fun. With nothing to worry about except which ride to go on next, they talked and laughed and in general acted silly, as responsible girls are wont to do now and then.

When Ahuva came home, she felt unusually tired and nauseous. "Probably from that roller coaster ride," she thought.

The fatigue and nausea persisted, so her parents brought her to a doctor. One test led to another. Finally, the doctor had the results: cancer. The news hit Ahuva and her family like a lightning bolt.

Malky had been diagnosed with a cancerous brain tumor when she was four. Fortunately, the operation to remove the cancer had sent it into remission. Suddenly, at the tender age of six something seemed to be amiss with Malky. Her parents brought her back to the doctor. After some testing, they received the dreaded news. Malky's cancer had returned.

What Ahuva and Malky did not know at the time was that during the upcoming year they would be recipients of a most unique kindness to be initiated by Mrs. Breindy Winter of Monsey, New York. Over the next year, the lives of Ahuva, Malky, and three other girls who were diagnosed with some form of life-threatening disease, would intertwine with the lives of Mrs. Winter and the 28 girls of her seventh grade class. And before the year would be over, all would be touched and rewarded by the experience in a way they could never have imagined.

## THE CLASS

Breindy Winter has been teaching for 20 years. She knows her lesson plans like we know our street address. One summer, on vacation in Upstate New York, she was neighbors with Mrs. Chumie Bodek, founder of "Caring and Sharing," a support group for parents of cancer patients. Mrs. Bodek

lent Mrs. Winter the book, "Times Of Challenge," a collection of true stories of difficult life situations various people had to face. It started the wheels turning.

Mrs. Winter asked her new friend, "Why don't you connect me with some of your sick children? Maybe my seventh graders can do something with them."

Mrs. Bodek responded, and connected her with five seriously ill girls from the Tri State area.

When she began, Mrs. Winter divided her class into five groups, each group responsible for one particular girl. She told them the specific situation and encouraged them to write letters, make telephone calls, and come up with project ideas to give the ill girls hope, friendship, life.

Generally, all the letter writing, phone calls, etc. were done outside of class time, for "homework." Thus, on the average, Mrs. Winter spent no more than 10 or 15 minutes a day of class time on the project, and then only to update her students or give them encouragement by telling them how well received their letters and phone calls were. At the beginning, Mrs. Winter reviewed her students' letters before they were sent. By the end of the year, though, it was unnecessary, for her students had developed the proper sensitivity.

The same was true with making phone calls. "They were guided when to call, how to call, what to say, and what not to say," Mrs. Winter said. "By the end of the year, though, they knew that if a girl had received chemotherapy, they had to wait a day or two before calling."

Mrs. Winter also organized a Tehillim (Psalms) committee for her class and the other seventh grade class, dividing the assignments among the students as well as the teachers. (Counted together, they would recite all 150 Psalms daily.) Tzedakah (charity) was collected to fund gifts and similar needs.

Across the board, from the beginning of the year to the end, her class responded beyond her best imaginings. "They gave these children a life," she stated.

## **AHUVA'S STORY**

"What's the prognosis?" Ahuva's parents, with impossible-to-deny trepidation, asked the doctor. "I think we caught it in time, and if all goes well she should make it. But your daughter will need chemotherapy treatments over the next few months, and it will take everything out of her."

Ahuva was an honors student and looked forward to even greater success in school. Her hopes were dashed, however, when she learned that she was going to miss class time because of the chemotherapy. Then they told her that the chemotherapy was going to make her hair fall out. That devastated her. How would she face her classmates? Ahuva's family, too, was at a loss as how to react. Instead of being in a world full of children, laughter, and a bright daughter's success stories, they found themselves in a world of sterile hospitals, doctors, and social workers.

The therapy started and things went from bad to worse. Ahuva began missing school (she would go for two or three weeks and then be out for six or more). She wore a wig after her hair began falling out, but there was no way to hide the fact that something was seriously wrong. Soon word was out that she had cancer. Unfortunately, her classmates (except for her best friend) virtually disowned her. No one called her. No one came by. Whatever the reason, suddenly it was as if Ahuva had almost no friends.

Sadly, the reaction was no better from the children's parents. Suddenly, acquaintances and friends who always greeted Ahuva's mother inexplicably crossed the street to avoid her. "Should I talk to her? Should I ask her?" they seemed to be struggling with in their minds. Invariably they decided that the only way to react was to deny it. Even a childhood friend of Ahuva's mother would change the subject every time she tried to open up and express her fears.

## **DEEP BOND**

When a child comes down with cancer, she is not the only child in the family who needs uplifting. Ahuva's older married siblings took the news hard, but they had lives of their own. Her 9-year-old sister, however, had to deal with the unbelievable stresses of the upcoming months, including the fact that her parents would hardly be around for her, shuttling back and forth as they were between home and hospital every day. Although Ahuva was the sick one, at least she was getting all this attention.

Heightened jealousy, sibling rivalry, then guilt over having such feelings are natural to the dynamics of a home where a child has a serious illness. Armed with that knowledge, Mrs. Winter had the needs of the entire family in mind.

"If we were going to give gifts Chanukah time, for example, we would buy presents for the girl who was sick as well as for all her young siblings. If a student of mine had a younger sister, she was encouraged to write to her. In fact, my 10-year-old daughter and Ahuva's 9-year-old sister became

best friends."

Mrs. Winter too found herself forming a genuine bond of friendship with the mothers. She found herself calling just to say hello. After the return "hello," their entire day would pour out. All their ups. All their downs. The humorous moments and the fearful ones. And Mrs. Winter listened, not out of obligation but as "family."

Although by early spring everyone felt like close friends, they had never actually met. Then Mrs. Winter invited Ahuva to their Purim play to meet her class face-to-face for the first time. "We were anxious and nervous. Ahuva was anxious and nervous. The moment she walked out of the car she just stood there. We also stood there for a moment."

The emotion was palpable. Then one of the girls approached her and said, "Hi, my name is so and so." Then another said, "Hi, my name is so and so." Intimately familiar with everyone's personality through the letters, it was as if she were being reunited with a long-lost sister. Once she connected the name with the face, she automatically felt a special relationship with this "stranger" standing before her.

Most important of all was that by year's end, Ahuva not only completed her treatments and received a clean bill of health, but she even managed to catch up with her class...

## **MOST REWARDING YEAR**

Can the efforts be measured? Surely not. Looking back over the year, almost all the mothers involved felt their daughters learned and matured in ways they never had before and never could have otherwise. Many of them personally expressed the deepest gratitude to Mrs. Winter. Still, it would be wrong to think that such a project can be taken up without careful consideration. A person might legitimately ask, "Why expose 12-year-olds to this?" Mrs. Winter admits that it is a very delicate subject. And certain people, rightly or wrongly, might have emotional difficulties no matter how well the project is handled. To any who might consider replicating her ideas or who find their younger children involved in such a project, it is not an endeavor to be taken lightly. Parents and teachers have to be very tuned in to the emotional needs of the children helping out.

After all is said and done, though, "it was the most rewarding year I ever had," Mrs. Winter states.

Perhaps, then, the most important consideration to keep in mind is that there is a certain emotional

support that only children can give children. There are some ways in which professionals, parents and even responsible older children cannot affect another child like a peer. And the child who gives is sure to receive at least as much as the child who receives.

Children helping children. Perhaps the greatest kindness an adult can do is set up a situation where children help each other.

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Yaakov Astor is author of "Soul Searching: Seeking Scientific Foundation for the Jewish Tradition of an Afterlife," by Targum Press. You can buy it at [www.targum.com](http://www.targum.com) or your local Jewish bookstore.

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