

LESSONS FROM JOSH

Sharon Neiss-Arbess, with insights from Josh Arbess

Dedicated to anyone who is able to look beyond an issue and see the bigger picture.

I stand outside Josh's bedroom and watch him sleep. My eyes move to the foot of the bed where his mammoth size 12 feet dangle on the edge. The bed is too small for my six-foot-four son. I wonder: How did this happen?

Sixteen years ago, when I first held Josh in my arms, I had no idea how my perspective on life was destined to change. Oooh boy, this guy was going to teach me a thing or two. Unfortunately, I didn't quite get it on the first try.

The year is 2000. Josh is a one year old and he is the most adorable, chubby, sweet baby I have ever seen.

"Come here, Joshie! Josh! Over here..." I called to him. I really wanted Josh to crawl. He didn't move. He just sat there smiling and responding but not budging. My friends would come over with their toddlers and they would do things like pick up objects, crawl around the house and Josh would just sit there, very content. A panicky feeling rose in my chest every time I called Josh to come crawl towards me. He just looked up at me and smiled.

Finally, at 15 months he was crawling, albeit in an unconventional way. This unique crawl wasn't the neat and adorable wiggle dance you would typically see from a toddler. He would drag his right leg behind him, swing it over and move his body to catch up with it. It was the most unorthodox crawl I have ever seen. Nonetheless, it was very cute and he seemed to get to where he wanted. Onlookers would crinkle their faces and say: "ooh, what a cute crawl." I wasn't sure what to make out of those comments. Maybe I was just insecure due to the fact that Josh is my first born, or maybe I was just about to take my seat in my "Lessons from Josh" classroom.

Gymboree was the worst toddler experience. Josh failed – so to speak the class for his age group and had to join the children a year younger than him. My face fell to the ground when they informed me that he was not able to progress to the next level. I hated birthday parties. Josh was getting really big now. He looked so cute in his coordinated outfits. He wore his jeans with the famous hole created as a result of his highly unorthodox crawl; I still have these jeans today. He looked like a baby version of Henry Fonda in *Easy Rider*. He was the biggest crawler at the party. I desperately wanted him to get up and walk.

Finally, my paediatrician said the magic words. "Take him to physio."

And off we went, every week to Sick Kids Hospital, where I would sit with my coffee and watch magic happen under the guidance of the physiotherapist. Two months later, Josh started to walk.

And now, his six-foot-four strong body runs, skis, sails and bikes – far and fast.

What did I learn from Josh's early struggle to crawl and walk? Nothing. I should have learned not to care what others think, but I didn't. God tends to give us homework when we haven't finished our learning, and since I didn't, after the summer of fifth grade, Josh developed a stutter which would come to change his life and the lives of those around him.

This development happened out of the blue. It is known that there is no known cause, except perhaps maybe after a stressful or traumatic situation, which there was none. Stuttering can also be genetic, but in Josh's case, it is not.

There were and are times when people stare and frown when he begins to speak. They ask what is wrong and try to finish his sentences. Some even push suggestions to "fix" him. They pester Josh with suggestions about potential therapies and suggested speech techniques.

Josh cleverly describes this using the analogy of obesity. "You wouldn't walk up to an obese person out of the blue and recommend a diet plan!" This is extremely hurtful to him and family members, although we take it kindly and give a nod of thanks for their intended concern. Everyone has their struggles in life; however it doesn't necessarily imply that something needs to be "fixed", especially by means of unsolicited suggestions.

However, those who know Josh are in awe of his courage. We are patient and let him finish with kavod, the respect and honour he deserves. In fact, he is no different from any other person in a speaking situation, only requiring a little more time to get his point across. Sometimes it can take a full hour to recite a 15 minute English presentation, but he does so with pride and confidence.

As the years passed, we have experimented with many intense therapy options, but they have barely helped. In spite of these efforts, recently his speech has improved. Josh often says that his "friends, family, Judaism and Israel" are the best speech therapies he can find. Josh often mentions, "I find comfort in things I care about, and those who matter to me don't care about the delivery of my speech." As Josh finds himself in the world, he slowly but surely builds his confidence and speaks his mind eloquently.

Josh has "trucked through" (a saying that my middle son Adam refers to – a football term that means to charge through and keep going) his valedictorian speech presented at middle school, various business and school presentations, political discussions and many

many lectures to remind me to bring my reusable mug to Starbucks. He advocates for himself, and doesn't take crap from anyone while still radiating immense kindness.

As a mother, I often ask myself why we are in this position. Why does my handsome, intelligent son, with a *neshama* as pure as gold have a difficult time getting words out of his mouth? Why was he given this struggle?

His bar mitzvah portion was about Moses, who questioned his appointment from God, citing a "slowness of speech and tongue". Regardless, Moses' difficulty arguably made him an even better ambassador of B'nei Israel.

Why was Moses chosen to be a leader? Why is Josh blessed with so many gifts, yet he struggles with speech?

We are here for a reason and given gifts and struggles for a purpose, I believe. Perhaps Josh is here to teach tolerance and determination. Maybe because he is blessed with so many other talents, his speech impediment humbles him.

Josh continues to be a leader, hang out with his friends, participate in Jewish youth groups, and zealously advocate for issues that are important to him. His determination supersedes any stumbling block in his way. He humbly earns academic grades at the top of his class and truly cares about those around him.

We try really hard to ignore the jeers and criticisms, rather focusing on Josh's strength and courage. Like his jeans with a ripped hole, he gets to where he wants to go, says what he wants to say, even if it takes him a little longer.

I would never have the guts to do what he does at his age of 16 and because of him, I take more risks, try things I was previously afraid to do and I start saying, and this is the fun part: "Who the %\$&# cares?"

Bernard Baruch states that "those who mind don't matter, and those who matter don't mind." Josh's attitude towards life stems from this inspiring ideology, and I am so fortunate to be on the receiving end of his wisdom.

Sharon Neiss-Arbess grew up in Montreal and received her Bachelor of Arts degree from Concordia University's communications studies program and then received a diploma in the advertising program from Algonquin College in Ottawa. After graduation, Sharon worked as a copywriter in the advertising industry for several years. She presently co-publishes a family calendar called Day Ja View and has recently published her first Young Adult fiction novel titled *Me and My So-Called Friends*. Sharon lives in Toronto with her husband, Gordie and her three children, Josh, Adam, and Olivia.

Josh Arbess is a student at Tanenbaum CHAT in Toronto. He is involved in many aspects of communal life, such as Jewish youth groups, fellowships, and volunteering. Josh's speech impediment does not define him; rather he is able to live his life fully in spite of it.