

# NACHES OF A DIFFERENT SORT:

## *Raising an Autistic Child*

By *Rachelle Namak*



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Harriet Goldhor Lerner's story (Spring 1989) about her achievements and those of her sister made me think of the Yiddish expression *naches fun kinder* (pleasure from children's accomplishments). Of all the Yiddish expressions which my parents uttered, this one took precedence. Like a magical incantation, these words accompanied every report card, every word of praise from a teacher, every certificate, every diploma. Long before the age of pop psychology, I grasped intuitively that my parents were looking to my sister and me to compensate them for their immigrants' lives of privation and anxiety.

I never chafed under this expectation to bring home *naches*, to let my parents warm themselves in the reflected glow of my accomplishments. Bringing home *naches* was simply my job.

Such understandings die hard, if they ever die at all. When I was pregnant with my daughter, I, too, dreamed dreams of all my child would be to me. More sophisticated than my own mother in the damage done by vicarious living and hidden messages, I chided myself guiltily for such atavistic notions. But, try as I might, "*naches fun kinder*" hovered over my baby's cradle. All the aunts and uncles wished for me the blessing of *naches*, the centuries-old benediction. "May she be a source of joy; may she gladden your old age."

My daughter was three years of age when she was diagnosed as autistic, and all talk of *naches* abruptly stopped. Indeed, all talk of my daughter changed from exclamations on her brown-eyed beauty to whispered exchanges among the relatives when they thought I could not hear. The word "autistic"—now in vogue with the popularity of the Dustin Hoffman film "Rainman"—was unheard of in my mother's world. At a loss to explain how a beloved grandchild could be irreparably

damaged, my mother took refuge and solace in a world of denial. Like many women of her background, she poo-hooped the diagnosis of the doctors, and, at the same time, looked to the gods of science to one day—soon—cure my baby.

Ten years have passed, and no miracle of science has appeared. My daughter, at thirteen, is still a beauty. Rare is the picture which does her justice, for she does not flirt with the camera. When I ask her to smile, she points to her mouth, but, depending on her mood, the smile may or may not come.

For many years, while my daughter was growing up, I felt myself forever shut out from the *naches* my family had wished for me at her birth. The word carried with it the aura of education, prizes, trophies and material success. My child, at age thirteen, has no speech. She has a limited vocabulary of signs which she uses for communication. She cannot read, but she loves to look at magazines. She is locked away from me in her own world much of the time. My love is powerless to break down the wall which separates us.

And yet, in a way which my mother and

my aunts perhaps can never grasp, my daughter has brought me *naches* beyond telling. It is she who has taught me a wisdom which all my university classes ignored. Walking with my daughter on a summer's day beside the lake, I watch her stop to pick the dandelions in her path. She throws stones in the water and laughs out loud as they splash. She touches the down on a baby's head and shrieks as it chortles. My daughter loves the smell of pizza and the touch of her stuffed animals. Her world is very much a world of the senses, one which we are educated to downgrade in deference to the world of the intellect. Her joy is in the moment, pure and unsullied.

My handicapped child has taught me that *naches* comes not solely from academic glory, but from every halting step on the road to independence. She may need me to finish tying her shoes, but the first step she can do herself, and it lifts my heart with pride. She can pour herself a glass of milk and peel her orange—tasks which, for her, require concentration and diligence.

My daughter is a joy to me. It is not the joy my mother envisaged. Nor is it the joy I envisaged when I was carrying her years ago in Winnipeg. She will never read these words of love. I hug her and tell her I love her, and I hope that somehow my love flows to her through my touch and the sound of my voice.

My daughter will never dedicate a book to me, nor will she thank me in a graduation ceremony. She will never tell me in words that she loves me. She dreams her own dream, as I dreamed a dream separate from that of my own mother.

My daughter does not need to lay trophies at my feet to make me proud. It is enough for me that she is.

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