

*Taking
Tamar*

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Avotaynu
Bergenfield, NJ
2006

Contents

THE BEGINNINGS.....	1
IT'S OFFICIAL!	25
EDUCATION AND THE TRAVAILS OF TAMAR'S LIFE	37
TAMAR BECOMES BAT MITZVAH.....	53
WORKING WITH DOWN'S.....	69
THE BIOLOGICAL FAMILY.....	75
LEARNING WITH TAMAR	84
TAMAR AND HER ADOPTION	132
REEVALUATION OF THE ENTIRE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM	143
TAMAR'S UNEXPECTED ADVENTURE.....	155
BACK TO SCHOOL AGAIN	158
WHEN I GROW UP, I WANT TO BE... ..	160
THE END: A NEW BEGINNING.....	166
FOR NEW PARENTS OF A CHILD WITH DOWN SYNDROME.....	169
POSTSCRIPT.....	171
FAMILY ALBUM.....	173

TAKING TAMAR

THE BEGINNINGS

As I drove home from Jerusalem that winter night in 1985, I could never have imagined that my life would be changed irreversibly. It had begun normally enough: that afternoon, after finishing my day's work at the Ben Gurion University of the Negev in Beer Sheva, I drove straight to my tour-guide course in Jerusalem. It had been a fabulous winter day, bright, clear, and crispy cold. After my course ended at 2100, I drove back to Beer Sheva, reaching home well before midnight. Usually there is terrible winter fog in the Hebron Hills, but this night was so clear and the stars seemed so close that I could put my hand out of the window and see its shadow on the road from the moon and starlight. Before I went upstairs to my house, I stopped by the first floor flat of the friends who were taking care of my dog. I interrupted an animated discussion about a program that had just been aired on television. It had been an exposé on the fate of infants abandoned in hospitals all over Israel because they had Down syndrome, or some other disability—twenty-two children in all. I was appalled that couples could just walk away from their newborn offspring and that the children would be left alone until the age of three, when, according to Israeli law, they could be institutionalized. My neighbors couldn't remember the address to which to write, but they did remember that several of the infants were in Beilenson Hospital in Petach Tikva. I asked them to help me draft a letter offering to adopt one of the Down syndrome children.

That was sometime in December. Months later, when I finally got a response to my letter requesting that I come to Beilenson Hospital for an interview, I had almost forgotten that I had written. The interview was of short duration and hardly worth the two and a half hours it took me to get there. "Do you mind if you do not get one of the children shown on the television?" "No," I replied. "I never saw the program in the first place, so I really don't care. My only criteria are that the child be able to walk eventually and that I

TAKING TAMAR

be able to go abroad for my oldest sister's fiftieth and my mother's seventy-fifth birthdays." Considering the fact that my sister's birthday was not until the end of August and my mother's birthday not until the beginning of May the following year, the social worker was quite certain that neither of these conditions was a problem. There was plenty of time! "All Down syndrome children eventually walk," she added, "usually at about twenty-eight months, give or take a few." Good, I thought, no complications. How could I have been so naive!

In this way, I began my thrice-weekly trek to Beilenson to "get acquainted" with my proposed adoptive daughter. These "get acquainted" sessions lasted until the middle of May. They were very discouraging. I would drive for hours to visit this little fat blob of an infant, who had no light in her eyes, no smile on her lips. I would say, "goo-goo," make faces and play "peek a-boo" to no avail. It was as if there was no one home inside that fat little body, as if she was both deaf and blind. There was no reaction—nothing! Picking her up was a terrible chore. She was dead weight. She didn't put her arms around me, hug me, or give any indication that she knew she was being hugged. Her sparse brown hair hung lifeless and her body seemed to match. Traveling to Beilenson became my own private *Via Dolorosa*. I began to think that I had made a mistake in my willingness to take one of these children. I would have constant arguments with myself: "You contacted them; they didn't contact you!" "But I don't want this potential problem!" "You gave your word!" "But I don't want to make this kind of effort for the rest of my life!" On and on it went. I was trying everything I could think of to make some kind of contact with this child, but she just wouldn't let me. No matter what I tried, there was no reaction from her.

Why on earth had I decided to adopt a child with Down syndrome? Subsequently, many people have asked me this question, and I have never been able to respond satisfactorily. I took a child because I could not bear the thought of a little being like that