



SPECIAL SON

BY JUDY GRUENFELD

FOR RONNIE AND KEVIN

MY TWO SPECIAL SONS

AND FOR THEIR FATHER

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are far too many people whom I wish to thank. The list would be never ending. To family and friends, I thank you all from the bottom of my heart. Without your love and support neither Ronnie nor I would be where we are today.

To The One Above, I am deeply grateful.

PROLOGUE

Dear Reader,

Many people have suggested that I write this book. I do not claim to be an authority. I am just a mother struggling with issues that many of you are also struggling with.

I used to think that I was being punished; for what I don't know. I don't think I am any worse a person than most. But when I started learning Torah I learned that my son has a special soul and that I was entrusted to nurture that soul. I now had a new perspective and did a one hundred eighty degree turn around. I was not being punished. I was being chosen. Why I was chosen, I still don't know. But that attitude has gotten me through many rough days. There are still days when all I can say is, "the best thing about this day is that it is over". But they are fewer and farther between.

Another comforting thought is that you are not alone. I know we know God is with us. But sometimes we need another person. You needn't just sit there feeling sorry for yourself. Reach out. Someone will take your hand.

By reading this book, you are, in essence, taking my hand. We can traverse the bumpy road together. Knowing we are not going it alone eases the burden and enriches the journey.

Judy Gruenfeld
New Jersey
January, 2004

SPECIAL SON

INTRODUCTION

A Siyum (Celebration)

Ronnie's Siyum Invitation

We're making a Siyum with help from above,
For our son, Ronnie, with gratitude and love.

He's learning the Torah; he works very hard;
And so does his moreh, Rebbe Shimmy England

They're both very special, as we can attest,
And we are hoping that you'll be our guest.

Rabbi Blech's Shul is where it will be,
On Madison Avenue and Thirteenth Street.

On May twenty-second, two thousand and one,
At seven-thirty PM. We hope you can come.

Norman & Judy Francis

My Teacher, My Son

It's been thirty-two years, almost to the date
When, unbeknownst to me, He sealed my fate.
A baby boy was born, you see,
A special child was born to me.

We changed him, we fed him, we cooed to him sweetly.
We hugged him, we kissed him, we dressed him so neatly.
We took him for walks, we bathed him at night,
We taught him to talk; we hoped he was bright.

The hair on his head shone like spun gold.
By this time, you see, he had turned three years old.
My sweet little boy had a beautiful fact,
But I started wondering, where is his place?

He's not like the others; something's not quite right.
"Autistic," said doctors. That was my plight.
To whom could I turn? Where could I go?
My hot tears would burn. I just did not know.

Then, one day a friend, with whom I was staying,
Said, "Listen to me. Why don't you start praying?"
"But, that's not my way. It's not what I choose."
"Try it," she said. "You've nothing to lose."

The road I now travel is a quite different one.
And who is my teacher? You guessed it, my son!
His nesharna is special. He's really a gem.
He's shown me the way back home to Hashem.

Special Son - Prologue

May 22, 2001

The day had finally arrived. Ronnie had been learning with Shimmy for five years; the Five Books of Moses, the entire Torah, at the rate of a book a year. Shimmy wanted to make him a siyum, he informed me. I, myself, had been learning for about ten or twelve years, but found myself asking Shimmy what a siyum was.

It's a great accomplishment for anyone to go through the entire Torah, but in Ronnie's case, it was truly a miracle. Ronnie, you see, is developmentally disabled. He is high functioning, but developmentally disabled, nonetheless. Shimmy wanted to make him a huge party and invite just about everyone in Lakewood.

It was a great accomplishment for Shimmy, too, as he had invested a great deal of time and energy in teaching Ronnie Torah.

So, invitations went out and almost every oven in Lakewood was turned on as everyone we knew had started baking for the occasion. We decided not to serve a meal, as there would be too many people to feed.

[ALTERNATE INTRODUCTION: The day had finally arrived. Ronnie had been learning with Zev for five years; the Five Books of Moses, The entire Chumash, at the rate of a book a year. Shimmy wanted to make him a Siyum, he informed me. I, myself, had been learning for about ten or twelve years, but found myself asking Shimmy what a Siyum was. It's a great accomplishment for anyone to go through the entire Bible, but in Ronnie's case, it was truly a miracle. Ronnie, you see, is developmentally disabled, none the less. Zev wanted to make him a huge party and invite just about everyone in Lakewood. It was a great accomplishment for Zev, too, as he had invested a great deal of time and energy in teaching Ronnie Torah. So, invitations went out and almost every oven in Lakewood was turned on as everyone we know started baking for the occasion. We decided not to serve a meal as there would be too many people to feed.]

About seven-thirty PM people started filing in; women coming downstairs, where the party was to be held and men going into the sanctuary for Mincha and Maariv

(afternoon and evening prayers). When the davening (praying) was done, the men joined the women downstairs, on their side of the Mechitzah (divider, separating the men from the women).

Then the speeches began. There were many revered rabbis and friends extolling the virtues of student and teacher. I was listening intently, but my mind couldn't help wander to the time and place it all began.

Had I been able to choose, I certainly would not have selected this path for my son or myself. But, Hashem had his plans for us. And, so it began.

Special Son - Chapter 1

May 30, 1969

The cramps started coming about four o'clock in the morning and woke me from a sound sleep. By five o'clock, I realized I was definitely going into labor. I woke my husband and informed him of the situation. Many comedy routines have been done around this very scene, but let me tell you, I would be willing to bet they are all true. My husband put his pants on over his pajamas, went into the bathroom, and proceeded to shave.

"What are you doing?" I screeched in between contractions.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" he said, seemingly oblivious to my predicament.

"I don't think the baby will care if you look scruffy or not. I need to get to the hospital."

When, after the baby was born, my mother told me that my father had done the same thing, all I could do was shake my head. I wondered if the male child I had just given birth to, would do the same thing when his tum came.

Ronnie was beautiful, with his blue eyes and white peach fuzz on top of his head. I was in total awe. It was love at first sight. I couldn't believe that we had produced such a perfect, beautiful baby. It was, literally, the happiest day of my life, thus far. I was absolutely beside myself with joy.

For a fleeting moment I thought, "This is too good to be true. Someone is going to take my beautiful baby away from me." You know the saying, "If it seems too good to be true, most likely, it is." But, I dismissed the thought as quickly as it had entered my mind and continued to share my joy with both sets of new grandparents, who had come to see their first grandchild.

We went home three days later. My mother hired a nurse to help me take care of the baby and give me a chance to recuperate. The nurse stayed for a week, took a day off (my mother came to help me that day), and returned for one more week.

Since I was nervous about being left alone with the baby, Norman had arranged to take a week off from work, so he could help me. Funny thing though, he never heard the baby crying during the night. And we only had a three room apartment, and the baby slept in the bedroom with us.

Norman would give the baby his ten o'clock feeding so I could go to bed early. I was then on duty at two o'clock, six o'clock, and ten o'clock in the morning.

Finally, he would meander out of bed at about eleven o'clock.

"I appreciate your feeding the baby at ten o'clock at night," I said, "But I need more help. Why did you take the week off, anyway?"

His reply: "I just had a baby. I'm tired!"

"Guess what, I'm tired, too, and I'm still in a little pain. Tomorrow night you're on duty!" Well two o'clock rolled around the next morning, and Norman rolled over in bed, so I have the baby his bottle. However, I would not take "no" for an answer at six o'clock.

Norman stumbled out of bed and wheeled the bassinet into the living room. Ten minutes later, the baby was still crying, so I got out of bed to see what the problem was. There was Norman, sitting at the dinette table, eating a bowl of cereal.

"What are you doing?" I screamed. "I thought you were going to help me. Why are you feeding yourself and not the baby?"

"He has to learn patience," was my husband's brilliant answer.

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. I think I did both. I took care of Ronnie and then Norman and I had a little talk. By the time our second child came along, Daddy was a little more attentive.

When we brought Ronnie for his one month check-up, the doctor noticed that his head tilted to one side and that Ronnie could not turn his head to the right. He suggested we make an appointment with an orthopedist.

The orthopedist said that Ronnie had a tight muscle in his neck. I would have to exercise his neck until the muscle loosened up and Ronnie could turn his head to the right and hold it up straight. Otherwise, he would need surgery, and I would have to commence with the exercises after the surgery.

My mind flashed back: "Too good to be true!" Someone had just turned my dream into a nightmare from which I could not awaken. I had to face the reality of the situation, virtually by myself. I don't remember ever feeling so alone. Sure, Norman and my parents were there for moral support but, Norman was at work all day, and my parents lived a few miles away.

My own feelings aside, I can't imagine the torture Ronnie must have felt every time I took his little head in my hands and twisted it almost to the point of breakage, and held it for five excruciating minutes. I would do this exercise seven times a day, for an entire year.

We cried bitterly together as I would try to talk soothingly to my precious baby, while trying to twist open a pickle jar that was sealed air tight.

When Ronnie was thirteen months old, the orthopedist said that I had done a fine job and he would not need surgery. He and "Floppy", his toy puppy, could both move their heads practically three hundred and sixty degrees.

"Floppy" was given to Ronnie by a dear friend when he was born. After I was done exercising Ronnie's neck, we would both exercise Floppy's neck. You see, Floppy wasn't always floppy. When we got the toy, its head was turned in one direction and did not move. So, we exercised its neck, but Floppy was fine after that.

Out of the first thirteen months of Ronnie's life, only the first month was one of total joy.

From thirteen months, to age two and a half, we had another seventeen months of joy as our baby learned to walk, talk, and do the things that babies do. He was truly one of the most beautiful babies I have ever seen. His eyes became bluer and his hair looked like spun gold; a halo around my little angel's head.

Special Son - Chapter 2

Something keeps gnawing at me. I can't put my finger on it but I keep remembering the feeling I had when Ronnie was born. Someone, somehow, is going to take all this away from me.

At two and a half years of age, Ronnie has a decent vocabulary, but does not seem to be able to converse like other children his age. He counts from one to ten. He knows the alphabet, colors and some shapes. But he doesn't interact with other children. He remains a solitary figure, engrossed in his own, private world. And my world seems to be getting narrower and narrower as I feel I cannot turn away from the reality that grips me like a vice.

By age three, things have not improved much. Ronnie is able to count to twenty, he knows a few more shapes, and is finally able to peddle a tricycle. Prior to this, he would not sit on a riding toy and could not propel himself with his feet. He is still not interacting with other children. And, when spoken to or asked a question, Ronnie repeats what is said to him, rather than engaging in conversation. The term is "echolalia", I would soon learn. He is also spinning objects and flapping his hands, all behaviors typical of autism.

I was expecting again and I am very concerned about Ronnie and my unborn child.

We decide to take Ronnie to a child psychologist, who diagnoses him with Minimal Brain Dysfunction, today known as ADHD. I am beginning to enter the world of alphabet soup.

We are reassured that Ronnie is a very bright little boy and with the proper training he would learn to compensate for the MBD. Norman and I are somewhat relieved knowing that with the proper intervention, Ronnie would be able to overcome his disability.

Norman and I relaxed a little bit as I got closer to my due date with baby number two. When Norman would come home from work, I would try to get Ronnie to "tell Daddy what we did today". Most days he would just repeat what I said. However, one day was different! A neighbor had had a baby and Ronnie and I

went over to see the baby and give the neighbor a gift. This particular family happened to be black. The scene unfolded thusly,

"Ronnie, tell Daddy what we did today."

"We went to see Mary Jones' new baby bear."

Naturally, we had a good laugh but I was oh, so grateful that Ronnie didn't say anything to the neighbor about her "baby bear."

ADHD and autism are often accompanied by perceptual impairment regarding depth perception, and the like. I often joke around saying "Just whose perception is it that is impaired." To this day, Ronnie, not feeling the constraints of polite society, will just tell it like it is.

One evening, when Ronnie was four, I was preparing to leave the house to attend a meeting for parents of children with learning disabilities. Ronnie asked if he could join me.

[ALTERNATE PARAGRAPH: One evening when Ronnie was four I was preparing to leave the house to attend an ORT (Organization for Rehabilitation through Training) meeting when Ronnie asked if he could join me.]

"I'm sorry, sweetheart, you can't come. The meeting is just for mommies," I said.

"No," not just mommies, people, too!" he said.

No one, to this day, has ever, before or since, been able to put me in my place so effectively.

Special Son - Chapter 3

"What a big boy," I said. "No more diapers."

Ronnie was three and a half and finally trained. It was time for nursery school. He did very well until I had my second baby, Kevin, on April 22, 1973. Ronnie was just five weeks short of his fourth birthday.

When Kevin was born, he was the spitting image of Ronnie. Amazingly enough, they don't look at all alike now! My mother had come a week earlier to stay with Ronnie, but my father was thrilled that his second grandson waited for him to come back to New Jersey before making his arrival into the world.

Since it was the week-end, children were permitted visiting privileges at the hospital. We took Ronnie to the nursery and pointed out his new baby brother.

"What's his name," he asked.

"Kevin," I said.

"I don't like that name," Ronnie said. Hmm... Whenever Ronnie felt that I was paying too much attention to the new baby he would say, "Take Kevin back to the hospital."

Ronnie's communication skills were improving somewhat, but then all the "isms" started. "Isms" refers to behaviorisms typically associated with autism, such as, spinning, flapping, echolalia, rocking back and forth, and head banging, which, fortunately, Ronnie never did.

We were totally at a loss as to where to proceed from here. There was no Early Intervention back then, and the behaviorisms started escalating.

Though I did not have the same worrisome feelings the second time around, I cried myself to sleep most nights, worried that Kevin was also be possessed by this same "demon" that had stolen my first born child from me. We still did not know that we were dealing with autism, a pervasive disorder much more serious and severe than ADHD.

By the end of the summer, when Ronnie was a little over four years old, I took him to a pediatric neurologist while Norman stayed home with Kevin. One thing stands out in my mind. The doctor wanted Ronnie to go into another room with her and play ball. Ronnie did not want to leave me. The doctor, clearly annoyed, said,

"Most four year olds would come with me."

Dumbfounded, I replied, "If he were like most four year olds, I would not have brought him to you."

So much for that doctor! For some reason, she sent me a copy of her report in which she stated that Ronnie's biggest problem was his mother. Here I was trying so hard to be the best mother I possibly could, under somewhat difficult circumstances, and this "professional" was saying I was totally inadequate.

The really sad thing is that I believed the doctor. I began to feel not only inadequate, but hopeless and depressed, something I would struggle with for the rest of my life. For, no matter how much you do, no matter how many "stones you do not leave untuned", there is that nagging voice in the back of your mind telling you that you haven't done enough, you missed something, you've failed your child!

Not knowing what else to do, we signed Ronnie up at another nursery school in the fall. Fortunately, he did very well there. His teacher was excellent and knew just how to handle him. By the end of the year he was academically ready for kindergarten, and although the "isms" continued, he was not a behavior problem.

[ADDITIONAL PARAGRAPH, LIKELY IN THIS SPOT OF THE STORY: I didn't know it at the time but my world was about to be turned upside-down. {deleted by Mom: Maintaining my equilibrium has been a constant struggle ever since.} And though it took many years to turn it rightside-up again, each day brings new challenges, and with it, an opportunity to grow. I am certainly not the same person I would have been if I had not been entrusted with this special nesharna. I am very quick to say that if I had the power to change things, I would certainly have chosen a different path for myself and my son. But, would I? Can I be

certain? I have met many wonderful people that otherwise would not have, and experienced many miracles that certainly would have gone unnoticed.

Special Son - Chapter 4

Ronnie did very well in kindergarten. His reading readiness skills were up to par. The next year, he was transferred to another school in the district for first grade. He learned to read very quickly, thanks to his wonderful teacher, who has since become one of my good friends.

The school psychiatrist, while making his rounds, found Ronnie's behavior to be somewhat lacking (remember, those "isms"). Although his teacher wanted him to remain in her class, the psychiatrist said he needed to be in a special school. It was then that we first heard the word "Autism". Ronnie was placed in several different schools, none of which met his needs.

In the interim, I discovered a book written by the father of an Autistic boy who established a program for him and was able to reach inside the child's world and bring him out. The family lived on Long Island and I contacted them immediately. After our initial meeting, the couple said they felt they could help Ronnie. My parents lived in Queens at the time, so, every Sunday night I packed a suitcase and put it and the two kids in the car and drove to my parents' house. My mother would watch Kevin, who was four by then, and I would bring Ronnie, who was eight, to the Long Island couple. They are truly wonderful people and we met their son, who was Kevin's age. There was no trace of Autism in the child. This couple and their method, which was one of total love and acceptance, became very controversial. For a number of reasons it did not work for Ronnie, but I still have the utmost regard for them and their method.

We also tried a nutritional approach. Ronnie was taken off many of the foods he was used to and given mega doses of vitamins. My little trooper was so cooperative, but this, too did not work for him.

At this point in time two schools for Autistic children were suggested by the child study team in our district. We went to visit both schools.

At the first school we visited, the director was so taken with Kevin, that he virtually ignored Ronnie. When I attempted to refocus this man's attention I was asked,

"Do you feel you are the only one who knows what is right for your son?"

Even with all my insecurities, I blurted out, "No. Do you?" "Let's go", I said to my husband. I later found out that this school uses what is called "aversives" which means they can use physical force or pinching and the like to get the students to do what they want them to.

We liked the other school, which is where Ronnie went from age eleven until he aged out of the system at age twenty-one. The last year Ronnie was in the school, his teacher won the New Jersey Special Education Teacher of the Year Award. She's a gem and now runs the school.

Special Son - Chapter 5

I must digress here. I have heard of several instances where a child with special needs can wreak havoc with family dynamics. We were very lucky. I can only remember one instance where Kevin was overtly jealous of Ronnie. I don't remember what precipitated the outburst but Kevin was very upset and said, "Why does everything have to be done so it is good for Ronnie?" I became very upset and asked Kevin how he could possibly feel that way. After all, didn't we love him, take him to play soccer, little league, give him music lessons, karate lessons, and didn't he have just about every toy that was sold in the toy stores? And didn't we pay attention to him and show an interest in what he did? Kevin apologized, stating that he only said what he did because he was mad at the time.

At this juncture, I must tell a story showing just how sensitive Kevin was and is to Ronnie's feelings.

One day Kevin had a friend come home with him after school. I gave the boys milk and cookies before they went outside to play. While they were having their snack, Ronnie came home from school. Kevin's friend noticed that Ronnie's books were a little too easy for someone his age and then he looked at Kevin. Kevin, not wanting Ronnie to feel embarrassed, told his friend, "He's in special ed. I'll explain that to you when we go outside to play".

What more was there to say? I couldn't speak anyway. I was fighting back tears of joy.

Kevin is total joy. Ronnie is, too, but it is bitter sweet. At this point I must tell my favorite Kevin story.

When the children were small my husband worked in New York and didn't get home from work until 8:00 in the evening. One day he came home early. Delighted with the prospect of having dinner at dinnertime for a change, I telephoned my neighbor and asked her to send Kevin home. He had been playing at her house with her children.

Twenty minutes later, Kevin, aged five at the time, had not yet arrived home. When I telephoned my neighbor again she told me she had sent Kevin home right after we spoke. In a panic, we ran to the front door, opened it, and saw

Kevin standing in front of the house, one arm raised in the air and a very large dog sitting in front of him. My husband ran out to rescue him. I gathered him up in my arms and tried to comfort my sobbing child.

"What happened?", I asked him.

In between sobs, he managed to say, "Sharon gave me two cupcakes; one for me and one for my brother, and the dog ate my brothers cupcake!" Smart kid!

Another incident occurred with Kevin that shook me to the very core of my being. He was eight months old at the time. Ronnie was four-and-a-half.

Ronnie had a set of color forms. These are soft, plastic shapes and figures that come with a board. The child can make a design or a scene on the board, creating his own picture. Ronnie was quietly playing with them on the floor and then walked away from them leaving the brightly colored pieces where they were. Kevin was crawling at the time and he crawled right over to the beckoning brightly colored forms. Naturally, a piece found its way into his mouth. When I went looking for him I found him sitting by the color forms, having difficulty swallowing. I grabbed both boys, practically threw them in the car and drove, like a maniac, to the pediatrician.

I ran into the doctor's office screaming that my baby had been chewing on a color form and was swallowing funny. He was taken immediately into the exam room where he was seen by a doctor who was temporarily filling in for another doctor who was ill. I did not insist on the doctor he regularly saw. I just wanted Kevin seen as quickly as possible.

The doctor put Kevin on the exam table, felt his stomach and said, "He's breathing okay, he'll pass it."

"But doctor", I said, "Aren't you going to look in his throat?"

"I will if you want me to but I'm sure I won't find anything", he answered.

"Yes, I want you to", I told the doctor.

He turned on his pen light and look in my baby's throat. The color form was deep down and had adhered itself to the back of Kevin's throat. The doctor then got a long instrument and pulled it out. Kevin was fine, thank G-d. But I walked out of the pediatrician's office in worse condition than when I walked in.

When I got home, I called the office and demanded to speak to the regular doctor. He apologized profusely and assured me nothing like that would ever occur in his office again.

I put the baby in for a nap, gave Ronnie a snack and threw out the color forms. I then sat down with a glass of iced tea and tried to calm myself. All that kept going on in my mind was, "What if I didn't insist that the doctor look in Kevin's throat?"

The lesson I learned when I took Ronnie to the pediatric neurologist was reinforced. Only this time I did not feel incompetent.

At fifteen, Ronnie wanted to be in the Special Olympics. He was a good bowler and an excellent swimmer. But he decided he wanted to learn how to ski. Two special ed. Teachers were in charge of the ski team. Ronnie was given skis and lessons from the teachers and at the appointed time we put him on the bus with the other special olympians. The Special Olympics was a two day event which meant he would be gone over night. Ronnie had a wonderful time and came home with a silver medal.

I don't remember where I was at the time but Norman went to pick Ronnie up when he returned. When I came home, Ronnie was already asleep. Norman informed me that Ronnie had hurt his shoulder.

"How is it," I asked Norman. "He said it's okay."

"Didn't you look at it," I asked.

"No", replied Norman. "He said he was okay."

When Ronnie woke up the next morning I looked at his shoulder which, by the way, was okay. I asked him what happened.

"When I was done taking a shower, I went to turn off the water but the faucet was different and the water got hotter and I fell in the shower".

"Did you tell the teacher", I asked him.

"Yes".

"What did she say"?

"Well", said Ronnie, "I told her it hurts when I do this" and then he moved his shoulder up and down. "She told me not to do that."

Naturally, I called the teacher. I asked her only one question,

"What would you have told him if he said it hurt when he breathed?"

The "professionals" don't necessarily know better than we, as parents, do. We obviously do not know everything there is to know, but neither do they. A competent professional will want parental input, will consider what parents have to say and will guide them towards making appropriate decisions for their child. We must advocate for our children.

Throughout Ronnie's childhood I prayed for a "miracle worker" to walk into our lives and "fix" him. It wasn't until he grew up that I realized my prayers had been answered. He wasn't broken! While accepting our children as they are and loving them unconditionally we, as parents, can make miracles happen every day.

Special Son - Chapter 6

There were times when I really felt desperate. At those times I would write poetry. Putting my feelings down on paper was very cathartic for me. Just acknowledging those feelings and giving myself permission to feel them would clear my head and allow me to go on.

[ADDITIONAL PARAGRAPH: One day, as the words spilled onto the page I started wondering what had brought me to this place and this time. I thought back to my childhood, a childhood of searching and longing. I was by no means neglected. Quite the contrary. I was an only child with two dotting parents. But something was missing. I let my mind wander and was transformed back in time to a Tuesday afternoon when I was eight years old.]

LOST SOUL

My Father is calling from way up Above
His voice is resounding and so full of love
He'll be calling me home, it won't be too long
He keeps reassuring I won't be alone.

There are times when I feel I am quite on my way
And other times that on earth I must stay
The day to day grind is a struggle at best
It's increasingly harder to pass every test.

I'm tired of struggling, I just want to be
I feel like I'm bungling, I've lost what is me
I know I should feel I am comforted though
I'm connected to Him if above or below.

I hang on by a thread, sometimes I lose my grip
With the pain in my head I feel I'm bound to slip
It's such a great struggle each and every day
Dear Father please help me. I can't go on this way.

BE TRUE TO YOURSELF

When perchance you do reflect
And think of thing in retrospect
Be sure you are not apt to say
I should have done it the other way.

DEPRESSION

When the demons get their grip
And I feel I start to slip
I go deep inside myself
The pain I try to squelch.

I know not where it's coming from
Or why the clouds descend
I only know I'm trapped inside
A hurt that will not end.

Impending doom will start to loom
Of life and all its strife
Why does it have to be this way?
I sit and wonder, hope and pray.

My heart is heavy amidst a bevy
Of blessings I should count
The tears won't stop. I seem to shed
A plentiful amount.

If in the end I should descend
Amidst toil and travail
I won't give in, I'll try to win
And even to prevail.

MY PRECIOUS CHILD

My precious child, I love you so
My love for you will only grow
If ever you're lost and all alone

Know you'll always have a home
Within my heart while I still breathe
And to that love you can always cleave
The world may not see you through my eyes
But no matter what your size
You'll always be my precious child,
You'll always be my precious child.

OUR SPECIAL SCHOOL

We began as a seed in somebody's mind
We were planted and nurtured and watered in kind
We started to grow each and every day
We reap and we sow more than you can know
With love and with kindness each teacher provides
We bloom and we blossom like the strength of the tides.

EVEN THOUGH

Even though you think you can't go on, you do
Even though you think there is not hope, there is
Even though you think there is nothing to live for, you find something
Even though you think you're at the end of your rope, you're not
Even though the pressures of life seem so great
That you'll never rise above it
A glimmer of hope shines through
Even though you think you're all alone
A friend comes by to tell you that you're loved
Even though you think you can't make it through another day
Something inside you won't let you give up
Even though darkness comes at the end of each day
A new day always dawns
And brings with it a new beginning.

PRIVATE BATTLES

At night the ghosts come out to haunt me
My mind goes beyond the realm of consciousness

Into the world of the sublime
In the darkness I can see things that are not visible in the daylight
My visions are not clouded by the mundane objects
That surround our everyday lives
The reality that exists only for me rears its ugly head
Like monsters in a grade "B" horror movie
I cannot stop them from coming
They seep into my thoughts and invade my privacy
Like an unwelcome house guest
Another battle must be won
If the darkness is to give way to a new dawn.

A MOTHER'S HEART

By Judy Gruenfeld

Deep in the pit of my stomach
The gnawing starts again
And rouses me from my troubled sleep
I wake up with a start
Hoping the nightmare will go away
But it's not a dream
And the reality assaults me again
Making me feel claustrophobic
There's nowhere to run
There's nowhere to hide
I must face the challenge head-on
Oh, what I wouldn't give
To be free of this burden
To have a clear head and a light heart
And not have the worry invade my thoughts
Every waking moment
He senses my pain and he comes over to me
"I love you, Mommy", he says
I smile
"I love you, too, sweetheart" I reply
No, my heart is not light
But it is full.

OPEN YOUR HEART BY JUDY GRUENFELD

I wish at least you'd understand
Though you never lend a hand
The child's not yours, I know it's true
But still he is a part of you.
Into this family he was born
Please don't regard him with such scorn
And when we come for a visit
Please don't say "I could never do it"
It makes me hurt so much inside
That I just want to run and hide.
He's a precious little baby boy
I know he'll give us lots of joy
Just put yourself in our shoes
I know a different path you'd choose.
Please open your heart and let us in
This is the way you can begin
To see things from our point of view
You see, inside, we're just like you.

PLEASE DON'T STARE BY JUDY GRUENFELD

Please don't stare when we are there
We're just like you, we have feelings, too
If you've a question we don't mind
What we don't like is the other kind
Of treatment that we sometimes get
From people well intentioned, yet
Just don't know how they should approach
Us and the subject they should broach.
We did not choose the path we're on
But you can make the journey one
That's not so painful if you try
To see things from the other side.
Put one foot in our shoe
And see things from our point of view
But for the grace of G-d it's true

The one being stared at could have been you.

PLAY TO WIN BY JUDY GRUENFELD

When I sit down and wonder why
And I just can't help but cry
I think of those who have much less
And then I'm forced to confess
Things could be a lot worse, Jude
Better change your attitude
It's not the way you're dealt the cards
That seems to turn your life to shards
What counts is how the game you play
And make the most of every day.

When my dearest girlfriend passed away Ronnie was twenty-three. The morning after the funeral we noticed Ronnie's eyes were all red and puffy. He told us he had been awake all night crying.

"It's okay to be sad," we told him. "But you don't have to cry alone."

TRIBUTE TO A LOST FRIEND

I miss the you that I once knew
The cheery smile that said,
"You're welcome here at any time."
"Come in!" "We'll break some bread".

Your spirit seemed to fade before me
Like daylight on a summer's eve
And when I tried to light a spark
My pleas you did not heed.

Your heart beats still. Life's blood does spill
Throughout your every vein
And though you breathe and walk and talk
Your spirit's not the same.

But when the soul within you dies
The body very soon decries
The light of life can no longer shine
Good-bye, beloved friend of mine.

I had nightmares for the longest time.

A WORLD APART

The darkness is descending
And the dreams are shining through
The dreams that haunt my consciousness
And sleeping moments, too.
Is it you who won't let go?
Or I who won't give in?

Is it that I miss you so and let the dreams begin

To grab my soul yet whilst I sleep

To wake up and to weep

Or is it I who will not cease

And will not let you rest in peace?

No one can understand what having a handicapped child does to a mother's heart, or the pain you feel when you see other children doing what your child cannot do. It is like having a knife thrust into your gut, tearing you apart and letting the life's blood ooze out of you.

Special Son - Chapter 7

One day, when Ronnie was five years old, we went into town to do some shopping. In front of us was a little old lady, not too much bigger than my son. She had a very unsteady gait and eventually fell to the ground. Ronnie ran over to her saying, "Are you alright?" and attempted to lift her back on her feet. The woman was so impressed that such a young child could be so sensitive and caring about others.

A few years later, I broke my pinky toe. It was late at night and I didn't want to go to the emergency room until the morning. I guess my body went into shock because I started shivering and could not get warm. Both boys climbed into bed with me, one on either side, in an attempt to warm Mommy up. That is one of the sweetest memories I have.

Ronnie was always a very gentle and he could not stand to see anyone hurt or suffer, whether two-legged or four-legged.

The boys wanted a pet and we decided to get them a kitten. They took turns feeding it and sleeping with it. They never argued. Each let the other have his turn and took their responsibilities very seriously. When the first cat, Tigger, was hit by a car, Ronnie was heartbroken. Norman took the boys to the woods where they hurried their beloved pet.

A neighbor brought us another cat but Ronnie said he didn't want the new cat, he only wanted Tigger. Kevin convinced Ronnie to accept the new cat which we named Puff because he was so furry. Kevin took to Puff immediately and Ronnie eventually came around.

The funniest thing was, that Puff thought he was a dog! When the boys rode down the street on their bikes, Puff would run after them. It was really a funny scene.

I remember when the boys got their first bikes. When Ronnie was six we decided it was time for him to have a two wheeler. My parents bought him one for his birthday and Norman and my father put it together. When Kevin turned six my parents bought him the exact same bike. The only difference is that Kevin's bike was 16" whereas Ronnie's was 20". While Norman and my father were putting

Kevin's bike together, Ronnie kept running inside asking, "Is it a bike, yet?" When it was finally all put together I think

Ronnie was as excited as Kevin. Ronnie followed Kevin up and down the block as Norman and my father took turns teaching Kevin how to ride his new bike.

Getting back to the topic of pets, we were without a pet for a while and Ronnie started nagging us for another cat. We finally gave in and went to the animal shelter where Ronnie picked one out. She weighed a quarter of a pound and we named her Muffin. Ronnie was holding her and petting her until it was time for dinner. Before he sat down to dinner he put the tiny kitten in a carton so she wouldn't get lost or hurt. He is now responsible for her care and takes his responsibilities very seriously.

Our next door neighbor has a dog who is always getting out of the yard. When the neighbors aren't home, Ronnie tries to coax him back into the yard.

One Sunday morning I noticed something on Ronnie's arm. When I asked him about it he said it was nothing.

"It doesn't look like nothing to me," I said. "What is it?"

"The neighbor's dog bit me".

"When"?

"Last night".

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"It didn't hurt that much."

"Ronnie", I said, "You need a Tetanus shot and an antibiotic." We went to the emergency room and got it taken care of. The neighbor felt terrible and offered to pay but since Ronnie has Medicaid it didn't cost us anything.

Ronnie had his Bar Mitzvah three months after his thirteenth birthday. In the interim, we attended the Bas Torah of the daughter of a very close friend. The rabbi was standing at the lectern praising all the girls and giving a sermon about how important it is to continue our Jewish tradition. His voice resounded and reverberated throughout the synagogue and bounced off the walls of the circular sanctuary.

Ronnie leaned over to me and whispered,

"Is that G-d?"

We've been very fortunate. Most people have been very nice to Ronnie. One of the cutest things a child has said to me was,

"Is Ronnie 100%?"

I met the child and the parents only once but that was enough to see what a loving, caring family they were.

Special Son - Chapter 8

When Ronnie started attending the last special education school, we sort of settled into a routine. Both boys were in school all day so I decided to go back to school and complete my college degree.

I would feel very awkward when people would tell me how they admired me. After all, not only was I raising two children, one of whom was handicapped, but I also found the time to go to school. But college served a twofold purpose. Aside from the obvious, getting my degree, it also helped me keep my sanity. I felt that I was doing something for myself.

Sometimes I don't know where I end and Ronnie begins. It's almost as though we were still connected by the umbilical cord. Whenever something happens, if I can't get home, the first thing that pops into my mind is, "What will I do with Ronnie?" He must be looked after before I can do anything else.

Whenever I was able to stop feeling sorry for myself, my heart would go out to Ronnie because he was so acutely aware of what he cannot do.

When Ronnie turned eighteen and others his age were going to college he became a little upset that he did not have this opportunity. So, we decided to turn Ronnie's room into a "dorm room". We put college banners on his walls and bought him a small table-top refrigerator. He was delighted! One morning I couldn't find the butter. It was in Ronnie's refrigerator! One afternoon I couldn't find the ketchup. It was in Ronnie's refrigerator! One evening I couldn't find the leftovers I wanted to serve for dinner. I guess we were a little slow, but we finally figured out where to look for any missing items.

I have already stated that there was only one instance when Kevin was overtly jealous of Ronnie. There were two instances when Ronnie was jealous of Kevin. One was when Kevin turned sixteen and got his learner's permit to drive. He was taking driver's education in high school and we started taking him out on the road for practice. Ronnie, like any other young person, was also eager to learn how to drive. Norman took him to the high school, taught him to drive, and let him drive around in the high school parking lot. We had to do some pretty fast talking to explain to Ronnie that operating the vehicle was the easy part of driving. It was

another thing to drive on the road with other vehicles. And, no, he could not have a car.

When Kevin graduated from college my parents bought him a car as a graduation present. I, naturally, was the one who had to tell Ronnie that his younger brother now had his own car. He crumbled right before my very eyes. The only thing that was able to assuage his pain was the promise that Grandma and Grandpa would buy him a combination TV/VCR. Ronnie went shopping with them for his TV just as Kevin had for his car. Eventually, he got over the trauma, and it was traumatic for him. But it left a scar on my heart that won't heal.

Special Son - Chapter 9

OF RICE AND OF SPAGHETTI

When both boys were in school all day, I decided it was time for me to do something for myself. But, what did I want to do? We needed a little extra income so I decided to get a job. But, what could I do? I didn't want to leave the house before I had sent the kids off to school and I wanted to be home when they returned. That left the hours of 9:30 AM to 2:30PM.

Before the kids were born I worked as a secretary but I promised myself that I would never be anyone else's "girl" again. So, I got a job in a fast food restaurant chain, working from 10:00 AM to 2:00PM. After one week of hauling out huge bags of garbage, mopping floors and scrubbing heating ducts, I quit.

"There's got to be a better way", I thought.

A friend of mine, who had returned to school, suggested I do the same. It sounded like a good idea but I had much trepidation. I felt very unsure of my ability to handle college courses, and had no clue as to what I should major in. My friend was going for Nursing. Although I thought I would like to be a nurse, I knew I didn't have the stomach for it. I seriously considered Special Education but decided that one full-time special ed. student was enough for me. I didn't want to major in business. I wanted to help people. After speaking with a counselor, I decided that Social Work would be the perfect solution. I could help people, even those with developmental disabilities, without the intense relationship of student and teacher. I was on my way.

I enrolled in the local community college and got an Associate's Degree in Social Science. I then transferred to a four-year school and obtained a Bachelor's Degree in Social Work. It turned out to be one of the best decisions I had made in my life. It took me many years to complete my education because I had to leave time for my boys, especially Ronnie. Various situations would arise and I had to be available for him.

The two most difficult courses for me were Physics and Statistics. I stayed after school for extra help and came home crying more than once.

"Why am I putting myself through this torture?" I would ask my husband.

"Hang in there", he would tell me. "You'll make it". How right he was. Not only did I make it, but I managed, somehow, to get an "A" in both courses. The teachers were very generous.

One day I was sitting at the dining room table when Kevin, my younger son, who was in the gifted program at his high school came home.

"What are you doing"? he asked.

"I'm trying to figure out a problem in Statistics," I answered.

He came over to me, looked at my paper, picked up my calculator, pushed a few keys and said,

"Here's your answer". He came in very handy that semester.

It's funny, but people would tell me how much they admired me because in spite of the fact that I was raising a handicapped child, I managed to get through college. In spite of my insecurities regarding my ability to handle college courses, I persevered. I found myself looking forward to going to class and enjoyed every minute of school. I did not feel that I deserved and "credit", no pun intended. School was an outlet for me. It helped to keep me sane (although some would argue this point).

I graduated in December of 1991. It was time to look for a job. I now found myself being haunted by the same insecurities that plagued me when I first started school.

"You were worried when you went back to college and you did fine", reassured my husband. "You'll do equally as well at work". Now, almost twelve years later, he very proudly says,

"I told you so"!

Ah, but time wise, working was not easy. My younger son was away at college and it took the entire four years for me to learn to cook for three instead of four. Although, nuking the left-overs was my favorite method of cooking.

I did, however, tell my husband and remaining son, who was attending an adult day program at the time, that I would appreciate it if they would be responsible for dinner on Tuesday and Thursday nights as I first was coming home at 6:00 on those days. They had no choice but to help. That is, if they wanted to eat.

The first Tuesday night my husband brought home ready-made meatballs, a jar of spaghetti sauce, and a box of spaghetti.

As I walked through the door, I was greeted with,

"How do you make spaghetti?"

"The directions are right on the box", I told my husband.

"But I don't know which pot to use" he said. "Could you take it out for me, please"?

I looked at him, snickered, and took out a pot.

"I'm taking a shower," I told him as I pointed to the directions on the spaghetti box.

"It doesn't say how much water to use", he cried. "Please fill up the pot for me".

I complied.

"I'm taking a shower", I repeated.

"Wait a minute", he pleaded. "How high do I put the flame?"

I put the flame on "high" and told my husband,

"When the water boils, put the spaghetti in the pot. Stir it till it boils again. Then lower the flame a little, to a rolling boil. Stir the spaghetti every two minutes so it

doesn't all stick together. It should be done in about eight minutes. Taste it to see if the consistency is good, pour the spaghetti into a strainer. Rinse it with cold water and return it to the pot. Then pour the sauce in and heat it on a low flame until the sauce is hot. If you have any problems, **check the directions on the box.** I'm taking a shower, now".

I turned and ran upstairs for fear that I would never make it to the shower.

Somehow, the spaghetti got cooked and we were actually able to eat it! Although, I must admit that it probably would have been a lot easier on me if I had just cooked it myself.

On Thursday night I came home and found a barbequed chicken sitting on the stove. Ronnie was also at the stove fluffing up a pot of rice.

"Oh, that looks great", I said. "Who made the rice?"

"I did", was his reply.

"That's terrific". Who showed you how to cook rice"?

"No one" replied my Autistic son. "The directions were on the box"!

Special Son - Chapter 10

Ronnie loves to walk. He has a wonderful sense of direction and for several years he would navigate the neighborhood. He never got lost.

But as he got older, other issues precluded his walking too far from home. As he matured, he became very friendly and outgoing, and very curious. Though he is still developmentally disabled many of the Autistic characteristics lessened and some even disappeared. He stopped spinning, rocking and flapping his hands. But the most significant change was the fact that he would interact with anyone, anywhere, and at any time whether appropriate or not.

My father loves to walk and at age eighty-six still walks two-and-a-half miles a day. From day one he took the boys for walks whether they were in the carriage or hoofing it themselves.

When Ronnie was nineteen we went on vacation with my parents. It was after dinner and Ronnie wanted to go exploring. But Grandpa was tired as was everyone else. I did not want Ronnie prowling around in "uncharted waters" but everyone came to his defense. I, myself, was too tired to argue. Against my better judgment I allowed Ronnie to walk around the motel.

About ten minutes later he ran back to our room. He was very upset and babbling on and on about someone who had cursed at him and threatened him. Apparently, one motel room door was open and there was a little girl sitting on the bed, crying. Ronnie, being very curious and upset for the child, had asked the father why she was crying. The father, naturally fearing for his child's safety, started cursing at Ronnie and scared him off.

Incidents like this would repeat themselves often. Ronnie was a grown man now and in this day and age, a grown man who appears to be interested in a child is definitely suspect. As a parent, I probably would have reacted the same way, although I would have handled it differently.

When the last two incidents occurred we had to limit Ronnie to walking up and down the street. The three year old who rode his tricycle around the block could not, as an adult, be allowed to walk around the block. Ronnie could not understand

why anyone would think he would hurt their child. I was very on edge at this time and found myself needing an occasional tranquilizer.

The first of the two incidents occurred when Ronnie saw a school bus pull up in front of someone's house. He stood there waiting to watch the children get off the bus. The bus driver, noticing Ronnie standing there, called the police and would not let the children off the bus. She definitely did the right thing. As a mother I, too, would have been very concerned for my child's safety.

When the police arrived Ronnie went to hide behind some bushes. The officer thought it strange as anyone up to no good would have bolted. As soon as he began talking to Ronnie he realized Ronnie was not "100%" and that he also posed no threat to anyone. The officer offered to drive Ronnie home; an offer Ronnie refused, having had it drilled into him never to get into a car with a stranger. He did, however, give the officer our address and then he walked home. Norman was outside when he pulled up in the police car. The officer was very nice and very understanding but he did ask us not to allow Ronnie to roam the neighborhood. We thanked him very much and assured him of our cooperation. When the policeman left, we had another talk with Ronnie. He still didn't "get it". He would never hurt anyone. All our explaining about the world today fell on deaf ears.

A couple of weeks later, I arrived home from work to find a state trooper car in front of my house. Norman was talking to a very fine looking, clean cut, young man in street clothes. Apparently, this man who lives two blocks from us and is a state trooper, noticed Ronnie peering over his fence watching his two daughters playing in the yard. His next door neighbor wanted him to call the township police, but this very nice officer refused to do so stating that he could tell Ronnie did not pose a threat to his children. However, it was imperative that we keep Ronnie close to home for his own safety.

The following Sunday I found Ronnie straining to look over our back neighbor's six foot fence because he heard someone operating a saw and wanted to see what was going on.

I bought him a Curious George T-Shirt with a picture of Curious George, flat on his back, next to a bottle of ether.

"See what happened to George because he was so curious?", I asked Ronnie. "You can get yourself into a lot of trouble by being too curious." We finally just had to put our foot down and forbid Ronnie from going off the block. Ronnie still couldn't understand why, and I, wanted to cry. Seeing him in so much emotional pain tore my heart out.

My mother, the eternal optimist, is always trying to get me to see the bright side. She wants to buy him a treadmill. It might not be such a bad idea.

Special Son - Chapter 11

TO WORK OR NOT TO WORK

After being at [attending a] the day program for a few years, [my Autistic son] Ronnie decided he wanted to try his hand at another [a] job.\

To employment specialists, who get special needs people jobs and train them, this is supposed to be the ideal: independent employment, out there, in the real world. Though I was an employment specialist at the time I was not sure I wanted Ronnie out there in the real world. But he insisted.

I secured him a position at the local fast food hamburger restaurant. He was in charge of making the burgers. However, I was not his job coach, for obvious reasons. Ronnie learned his tasks well and did a good job. The manager at the time said Ronnie was his best worker.

A taxi would pick him up at 10:30 in the morning and drive him to work and also pick him up at 3:30 in the afternoon and drive him home. This was a problem as the cab company was very unreliable. I received many panicky phone calls [while at work] from Ronnie when the cab was late or never showed. I would have to leave work, pick him up, take him to work, and then go back to work myself.

I was used to getting these phone calls in the morning. I was not used to the one I got one afternoon at 3:30. When I answered the phone, I heard,

"Hello, this is Ronald. I never should have been born. I think I'm going to commit suicide".

I tried to remain calm. I was pretty sure that Ronnie could no more harm himself than anyone else.

"How are you going to do that?", I asked.

"I don't know", was his reply.

"Ronnie", I said, "Put on your coat and walk around the block till I come home. Promise me you won't hurt yourself. I'll be home in half an hour."

"Okay", he said.

"You promise"

"Yes."

That was the longest half hour in my life. Should I have told him to go around the block? When I arrived home I found Ronnie pacing back and forth in front of our house. As soon as I got out of the car Ronnie ran over to me and told me what happened. He'd been picked on several times by the high school boys at the job but never so viciously.

Ronnie began, "This kid called me a retard and a baby and said I never should have been born." "I'm stupid and worthless": he added, "And I want to die. I don't deserve to live."

"And this is that kid's opinion?", I asked him calmly, while my insides were churning.

"Yes", was the answer.

"And you believe him?"

"Yes".

"Why?"

"I don't know. Because he said so." Ronnie was getting more and more agitated. I tried to reason with him.

"Remember, I told you that people treat other people the way they, themselves, are treated [have been treated]?"

"YEEEEES!" he stomped.

"Well, obviously this boy hasn't been treated very well."

Ronnie wasn't convinced.

"I tell you what," I said. "How about you and I take the day off tomorrow and do something special together?"

"You mean I don't have to go to work tomorrow?" he asked.

"That's what I mean", I said. "It's Friday. We'll both have a long week-end."

"Okay", Ronnie answered.

"Now, I'm telling you that you're smart, you're an adult, and I, for one, am glad you were born. Do you believe me or that mean kid?"

"I don't know" was still the answer.

"You think about it. In the meantime I'm going to call your work and tell them what happened."

The manager apologized profusely and said he would take care of it.

When I hung up the phone I noticed that Ronnie had a red mark on his neck.

"What's that"?, I asked.

"He said he was going to slit my throat and he grabbed me with the hot tongs [he answered]."

"Get your coat", I said, "We're going over there."

When we showed the manager the red mark on Ronnie's neck he was beside himself [nonplussed]. He said he would take care of the matter. Ronnie never saw hide nor hair or that boy again.

Eventually, this wonderful manager left and was replaced by one with little finesse and less people skills. After several months of Ronnie being up tight and stressed

out from this manager, he was finally fired after six-and-a-half years on the job.
[*]

I don't know if the job had anything to do with it, but Ronnie became very obsessive-compulsive and at age thirty, for the first time in his life, had to be put on medication. The doctor told me that OCD often accompanies Autism and ADD and manifests itself on or after [at about] the thirtieth birthday.

"Well," I said to the doctor. "He's right on target with that milestone!" Sometimes we develop a sick sense of humor. But, at least it keeps us laughing. I was concerned about any short or long term effects from the medication. But, bottom line, you can't worry about tomorrow if you can't get through today.

[* Ronnie is now attending a workshop. Gone are the panicky calls regarding a late taxi or an insensitive co-worker. We're both more relaxed. For the first time since Ronnie had been born, when it came to making a decision, I chose myself instead of him. Though Ronnie wanted another job in the community I did not feel up to dealing with it. I feel selfish but we both had to go on with our lives. While our children are our main concern, they must have healthy parents if they are to thrive. The workshop turned out to be the better of the two options for both of us.]

Special Son - Chapter 12

Ronnie had been nagging us for a computer for the longest time. We didn't feel it was worth the investment considering what he could get out of it. However, when we went to Norman's sister last year, my brother-in-law gave Ronnie an old laptop, bought him some CD's, and showed him how to use it. Ronnie was in his glory. The computer did give him some problems, but he took to it like a fish to water, and amazed all of us with what he was able to do. It became another appendage. Wherever Ronnie went, so did the laptop. One problem took him days to figure out, but he did it. Hopefully, he's learning patience and fortitude. He was very proud of himself and is gaining self-confidence.

He eventually got a regular computer, that Kevin put together for him and he also has a pocket PC.

Ronnie spends hours at the computer gaining knowledge and skills that we thought were well beyond him. He's also in and around the house more. Instead of going for a walk he will sit down at the computer.

Of course, he is now nagging us because he wants to go on the internet. But we'll take one step at a time and tackle each day as it comes.

Special Son - Chapter 13

May 22, 2001

The sound of applause brought me out of my reverie and back to the present. Kevin had just read the poem I wrote. My friends told me they wanted a copy of it. Some suggested I submit it to a magazine for publication. Some had tears in their eyes. One woman who attended also has a child with special needs. She thought she would come, eat, say "Mazel Tov" and go home, but found it to be a very emotional experience. "Words from the heart enter the heart". One mother knows what another mother feels. It was a momentous occasion for all of us.

Then the eating and dancing started. Ronnie was the center of attention and everyone wanted to dance with him. It was as if we had just come home. We were where we belonged. In the Orthodox world I have found open arms, open hearts and open homes. The world "out there" can be a cold and lonely place, as you well know. But in our insulated community Ronnie and I have found acceptance, camaraderie and hope.

As I watched the men whirling and twirling and listened to their singing I knew Ronnie would have a good life. As I wrote in the poem, Ronnie has taught me a lot and I have met very many wonderful people that otherwise would have remained strangers. I guess we're pretty lucky, after all.

EPILOGUE

Our journey is not over. I do not know what is around the next bend. But I do feel better equipped to deal with the unknown. The future is dubious. We need to make plans, but there are no guarantees. I once saw someone wearing a T-Shirt that said, "Life is uncertain. Eat dessert first". Our children are our "dessert". Let's enjoy them!



Hospital
picture



88 • 130



88 • 130

Dad finally figured it out.



3 mos. - head
~~tilts~~ tilts to
the right.

10



1 year - head
held straight

11



Liederhosen from Europe



ages 8 + 4 - Smoking Dad's pipe



ages 8 + 4



Mommy baked a cake for
Daddy's birthday.
ages 7 + 3



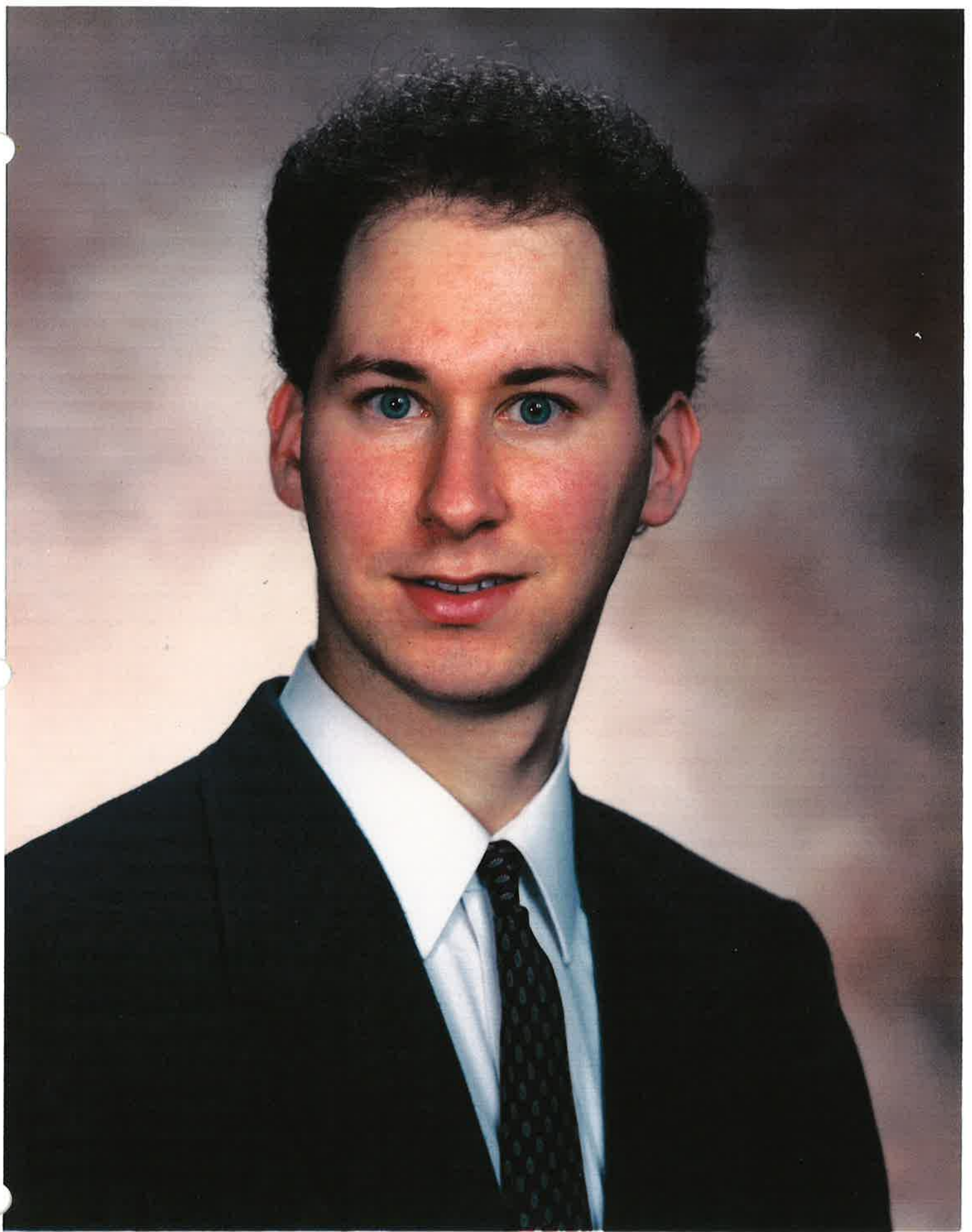
Ronnie's Bar Mitzvah



Kerin's Barmitzrah



age 21 - graduation



Kevin - college graduation



Norman
+ me



Ronnie + muffin



My Parents



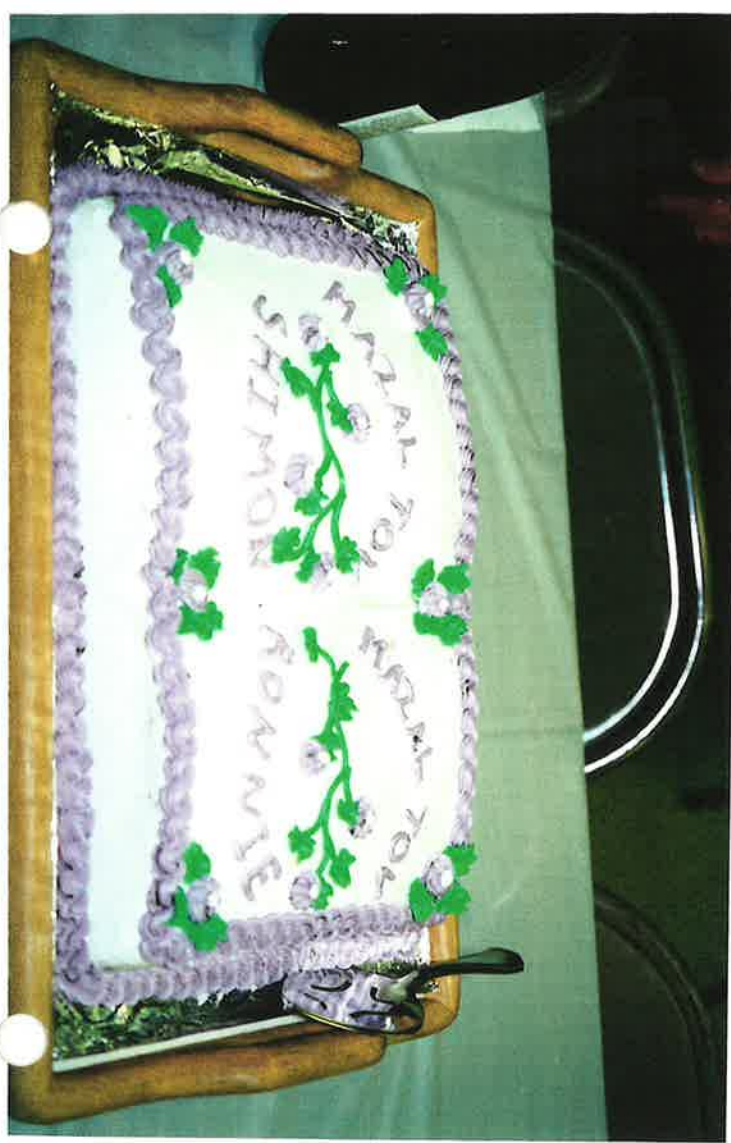
Norman's Parents



Age 5



Norman's sister
& Brother-in-law aka
Aunt Sib and
Uncle (computer) Allen



Two Siyum Cakes