

AUTISM AWARENESS ON ACHVA WEST

By Jane Komsky

I spent this past summer on Achva West, and it was a remarkable experience. I got to participate in a vast number of activities that I had never done before. Also, I learned a large amount of Torah and gained a ton of practical knowledge through new experiences. I loved every day of Achva, with absolutely no exceptions. There is nothing not to love: every single day consists of going someplace interesting with all the great people who start out as your friends and by the end of the summer feel like family.

Although every day was great, there was one day that stood out in particular; this day was called Autism Awareness Day. It began as a regular (great) Achva day, but the added dimension of the day turned my Achva experience into something completely unique and new.

Before Achva I did not know much about autism. I understood that there is something different about people with autism, but I did not fully understand what autism is. After the program on Achva, I learned that autism is a brain development disorder that impairs so-

cial interaction and communication and causes restricted and repetitive behavior, all starting before a child is three years old. The cause of autism is not known, and therefore there is no way to prevent or cure it. In most cases a child

In the morning, before the hike, we were not told much about autism, but we were nevertheless told it was Autism Awareness day on Achva West. A hike was a perfect way to start the day; while on the hike I had a long time to think

about autism; for example what I know, what experiences I have had and the people I know that are autistic. After the hike, we watched a movie called "Rain Man" on our way to Boomers Arcade. The movie was about a selfish man who finds out he has a brother that is autistic. At first he cannot stand his brother and his needs, but soon his impatience turns into love and understanding. This movie shows a lot of the characteristics of autism and gives one a greater sense of the illness.

Next we arrived at Boomers which is an arcade that also has go-carting and bumper boats. We could play unlimited games, and the go-karts were a ton of fun. Everyone had an excellent time. Once we were done at Boomers we made our way to our hotel and got ready for the real program.

All the participants and staff gath-



L: Jane Komsky; R: Shira Gaffney posing at Vernall Falls in Yosemite National Park.

with autism does not look any different from anyone else, so by looking one cannot tell. Today, 1 in 196 newborns are autistic. For those who already have an autistic child, the chances of having another one is 1 in 10.

To start off Autism Awareness Day, we went on an incredible hike to a huge waterfall in Yosemite National Park.

ered in a room and we watched a documentary on autism called “Autism Everyday”. We heard stories of parents who have autistic children. Each story by itself was enough to bring anyone to tears. The lives of these people, and the goals they had, all were put aside once they found out their child was autistic. To learn what these people have to go through every day was heartbreaking. Also, the saddest line that each parent just kept repeating was, “One day my child was there and the next he was not.” Most parents do not realize their child

is autistic until he is behind in the developmental process. It can take up to three years for the child to show signs of autism. After listening to each story there is no one I respect more than these parents who have to deal with these problems each and every day.

Next we heard a shiur and we learned how halacha applies to autistic Jews. It was very interesting to hear which halachas they should follow. The last part of our day was after the shiur: we sat in our groups and discussed our opinions, stories, knowledge and expe-

riences with autism. As we went around in a circle, even though each person was from a different town or city, there was not one person in the group who did not have a story. It seems that in

the cause of their smile; it just makes you feel so good inside.

After a long day of fun and learning, Autism Awareness Day was over. I know as each of us left our seats, most of us with tears, we all walked away having learned so much more than we did at the beginning. Even though Autism Awareness Day was now over, I know that it is not something to just forget about.

Achva West was the best summer of my life not only because it’s just fun every second of the day, but because it also taught me lessons about life that I will never forget.

Achva West was truly the summer that will last a lifetime.

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Center: Rabbi Binyomin Hammer, Director of Rabbinic Services, spends time with Achva West
Back Left: Yoni Glatt, Achva West Coordinator

every neighborhood there is a number of autistic people and everyone has interacted with them one way or another. I personally have taken part in many programs involving autistic children; for example I have gone to Kulanu events [Kulanu is a special program in the Five Towns, LI, NY] for a number of years and went on Yachad Shabbatons. From these programs, I learned a lot from some of these people, but the best lesson I learned is that there is no greater joy than when you see someone who is autistic smile and know you are