



Far from home, but never alone:

Baby Bracha's miraculous journey

Our greatest blessings are often the things we least expect. Esther Weiss's family didn't expect to adopt a baby with special needs. Esther didn't expect to spend 6 months in Israel separated from her husband. And she certainly didn't expect the outpouring of love and support she received from Seach Sod.

If you ask her, Esther Weiss will tell you that her Chicago family is a regular frum family. Her youngest was 13 when the call came. A baby with Downs Syndrome was looking for a family to care for her. Someone had suggested the Weiss family as a possible alternative home. "We were not looking to adopt," Esther says. "We were on to the next stage of life with some of our kids already out of the house. But when Hashem wants a neshama

to be in a family, He makes sure it gets there."

They called their new baby Bracha, because she was such a blessing for their family. Sometimes people are surprised to learn that they adopted a baby with special needs. "We're not heroes," Esther is adamant. "We were given this unbelievable treasure. Everyone who sees Bracha instantly falls in love with her."

Six weeks became six months away from home

Their incredible journey with Bracha was only just beginning. The Weiss family had planned to spend Purim and Pesach in Israel where their daughter was in seminary for the year. "I went ahead with Bracha and the other girls and my husband was going to follow with the boys once yeshiva finished," Esther says.

They didn't realize it at the time but the flight that Esther and her daughters took was the last to arrive in Israel before the Coronavirus quarantine requirements for foreign visitors came into effect. By the time Mr Weiss was due to join them all flights had been cancelled. Suddenly Esther was alone in Israel with a special needs baby. "Thank goodness that I had my older daughters with me. They were a big help with Bracha. We packed up and went to my sister's house. I think we had a better Pesach than my husband and the boys who were alone back at home in Chicago."

Once Pesach came and went, Esther was still stuck in Israel. Even once some flights were resumed, Bracha's medical team in Chicago advised against flying. "The numbers of infection in Israel were much better than in the US. Bracha's system is weaker than a regular baby. Our doctors

said it was better to stay put,” Esther explains. “I knew we needed to do whatever was best for Bracha, even if the separation was hard. She was always our first priority.”

Unexpected support

As the weeks dragged on, Esther was getting worried about Bracha’s development. “Getting the correct intervention in the first year can make all the difference for special needs children. I knew that Bracha needed more than the exercises her therapist had recommended before we left Chicago but I had no idea where to find the help we needed in a strange city.” Everything about Bracha’s life thus far had been an open miracle but what happened next was more than Esther could have imagined.

“On Shavuot afternoon, we were sitting in the lobby of the apartment building where we were staying when an Israeli family came past. Bracha is such a smiley, friendly baby that as soon as they saw her, they commented how cute she was,” Esther says. “The mother asked where I was getting her therapy. When I said I needed to find somewhere, she offered to help me.”

“If I’m really honest, I wasn’t expecting much,” Esther confesses. But the next day her phone rang.

Seeach Sod offers hope

It was Leah Mendelowitz, Director of External Relations from Seeach Sod offering Esther to come with Bracha the next day to meet the Seeach Sod team.

“I had never heard of Seeach Sod. I didn’t realize they have a massive operation with centers all around the frum communities in Israel, helping individuals with special needs of all ages,” Esther says. “Our meeting turned out to be an evaluation of Bracha’s needs with the Head of their Center for Early Childhood Development- Rehabilitative Daycare Center.” Esther walked away with a full schedule of therapies for Bracha.

“We went twice per week with multiple sessions each day,” Esther explains. “Everyone was so nice and supportive. It was obvious from the start that they really cared about Bracha and were invested in her progress.”

At Seeach Sod everyone is family

English speaking therapists were assigned to work with Bracha so that Esther could communicate easily. “Our focus in Seeach Sod is to care for the complete individual. Every child is part of a family,



“Seeach Sod was created to empower children and adults with special needs to live the most meaningful possible lives as members of the frum Jewish community,”

and a community. We want them to feel part of the frum community and we want their family to feel part of Seeach Sod,” explains Rabbi Shimon Levy, CEO of Seeach Sod.

Parents play a huge part in the development of any child. For a baby like Bracha, the partnership between the therapists and her family was essential. “I think Esther worked as hard as we did!” Says physiotherapist Chana Alony.

When Bracha started at Seeach Sod, she was 8 months old but not yet able to sit unsupported, or crawl at all. Physical therapy focused on crawling and strengthening her arms and upper body.

Occupational therapy worked to increase her fine motor skills so she could ‘finger feed’ herself. Speech therapy focused on sucking and chewing. With such a dedicated team and clear therapy plan in place, Esther was confident that Bracha was receiving the

best possible care.

A meaningful life for every Jewish neshama

“Seeach Sod was created to empower children and adults with special needs to live the most meaningful possible lives as members of the frum Jewish community,” Rabbi Levy says.

Founded nearly 50 years ago, by the late Rabbi Dov Levy to provide a Torah true education for his son born with special needs, Seeach Sod has since grown to provide support for over 1400 individuals with special needs and their families. With early childhood intervention, elementary school, Talmud Torah, Yeshiva, Seminary, men’s and



women’s vocational programs, and residential homes for adults, Seeach Sod allows its members the chance to lead complete Jewish lives from birth to 120.

“I can’t adequately describe how much the therapists at Seeach Sod did to help Bracha,” Esther says. “The progress she made was amazing. Every time we went to Seeach Sod, we would come home and within a day Bracha would master a new skill.” It wasn’t just the time spent in therapy sessions that impressed Esther. “Between sessions the various therapists compare notes so that they were all working in sync together.”

By the time they were finally able to go home, Bracha was able to feed herself, crawl on her tummy and sit independently.

“I thought that Corona left me stranded in a foreign country, but really Hashem was sending us to become a part of the Seeach Sod family,” Esther says. “I never would have imagined how far Bracha could progress in such a short time. She simply blossomed. I will always be grateful to Seeach Sod for their dedication in bringing out Bracha’s potential.”

To support Seeach Sod’s life-changing work, go to www.seso.co.il

Rav Shimon Levy, CEO of Seeach Sod at the boys’ Chumash Mesiba”

