

Hope when there is none

The surprising story of Shalva's triumph



THE SHALVA Band performs at the 2019 Eurovision Song Contest in Tel Aviv. (Amir Cohen/Reuters)

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Shalom Yosef Samuels, second child to young parents Malki and Kalman Samuels, was born perfectly healthy on a Shabbat morning in October, 1976. A tainted DPT immunization, administered just weeks before his first birthday, left Shalom Yosef, known as Yossi, blind, deaf and acutely hyperactive.

Just hours after the inoculation, Malki understood something had gone terribly wrong.

"I took Yossi home and followed the instructions they'd given me at the clinic," Malki recounts. "I bathed him, gave him baby paracetamol, and let him sleep. The moment he woke, I knew my baby was gone. He looked up at me with shiny eyes as if to say: 'What have you done to me?'"

Despite many doctors assuring the young couple that Yossi was just fine (part of a malpractice cover-up that gets a lot of attention later in the book), their infant son's issues grew increasingly severe. Samuels spins out chapter after chapter, detailing the extent to which he and his wife exerted themselves to get Yossi properly diagnosed and treated.

At eight years-old, the Samuels found a special education teacher named Shoshana Weinstock. She taught Yossi to finger spell, effectively giving him access to language, and to the rest of the world, that had been locked inside him since his inoculation. A speech therapist named Osnat Ben Tsur taught young Yossi to speak Hebrew. And Weinstock taught him to read and type in braille.

Years before this communication

breakthrough, Malki had made a promise to God.

"If You ever decide to help my Yossi, I will dedicate my life to helping so many other mothers of children with disabilities whom I know are crying with me for their children."

Payback time had arrived.

Malki began modestly, with a vision for a center that would provide after-school care and therapy for children with disabilities, giving the families a much-needed break. Through sheer force of will, despite the ongoing and heavily taxing, court case Kalman was organizing against the Israeli government; his full-time job; and their six children, Malki was successful in convincing Kalman to help her raise funds to fulfill her promise.

As the story of what would eventually become Shalva unfolds, we see a couple of visionaries in constant motion. The way Kalman weaves the story, it is always Malki pushing and pushing to accomplish more. It's more than a little disappointing that, in the extensive photo section in the back of the book, there is not one photo of Malki.

If you are already familiar with the Shalva National Center in Jerusalem, you will be astonished to learn about how many battles had to be fought to create that magnificent campus. Each time yet another medical, financial or legal challenge arises, the sympathetic reader thinks, "How much more can this couple endure?"

Samuels is a detailed and able memoir writer. He doesn't shy away from admitting how painful some battles were, how bitter some defeats.

As great as so many of the people were whose talents led to the creation and building of the Shalva National Center are, there is none so admirable as Yossi himself, a man now in his mid-40s, whose personality outshines every other detail of the story.

"His close friends number in the hundreds and acquaintances in the thousands. He stays in steady contact via personal visits, his weekly blog, emails and text messages that are read to him and to which he dictates his response.

"Yossi's memory is astonishing and he remembers the people he spoke to in great detail. He will remind visitors of which car they drove 10 years ago [and] inquire about their children..." Samuels related about his son's sociability.

One of the final chapters of *Dreams Never Dreamed* is about the Shalva Band and their controversial appearance at the 2019 Eurovision.

"The Shalva Band has always had one goal - to create social change via their music," Samuels wrote, "and their astounding impact is achieving precisely that, inspiring the world to take note and rethink disabilities and inclusion."

Samuels doesn't skimp on the details of what Yossi has been able to accomplish in his life, including overseas travel to Thailand and Sweden and meeting political leaders including former US president George W. Bush and current Israeli president Reuven Rivlin.

"[N]ever did I dream that Yossi's immense challenges and breakthrough to communication would lead to Shalva. Clearly, dreams never dreamed continue to unfold," he concluded. ■

DREAMS NEVER DREAMED

By Kalman Samuels
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