

July 2015, end of year ceremony - KFIR team at Nirim youth village

*A speech of a graduate's mom*

Dear families, wonderful staff, honored friends and guests, and last but not least, our beloved Tzevet (team) KFIR.

On Wednesday, November 7, 2012, I stood in the corridors of the Jerusalem Magistrates' Court for the first time. I was in shock. My son was about to be brought before a judge, in handcuffs, for a hearing on charges of violence. I just could not believe I was there. Me?! How did it happen? How did I let our lives get so out of control? I felt like such a failure, such a terrible mother, even though we had tried so hard to prevent this from happening.

I still don't fully know how we ended up there, although I do understand much more now than I did then. I do know that once he left elementary school, my son simply could not find himself. He moved from school to school so that by the time that November day arrived, he had already been enrolled in six different educational institutions. After he was asked to leave the third school, social services became involved. By then, despite the fact that the principal at each new school promised that he could help my son, I knew, deep in my heart, that it was already too late. We should have brought him here a year ago. We were always two steps behind, sticking our fingers in a dam that was threatening to burst at any moment. If I were to be totally honest with myself, I had been afraid for years. I used to think to myself, "If he can just finish high school and go into the army without hurting himself or someone else, everything will be OK."

The almost two and a half years that my son has spent at Nirim have been full of ups and downs – I am quite certain that he was suspended and summoned to more disciplinary hearings than any student in any class. For the first year and a half, something held him back from giving 100 percent to the process that students at Nirim go through. He had a good relationship with his *madrach (instructor)* and social worker, but he would not let down his guard. They couldn't really help him because he wouldn't let them get close enough. There were times when I truly felt despair because to me, Nirim represented his last chance to turn his life around. I knew that he couldn't possibly be happy, but he was stuck, and he just couldn't extricate himself. Once, when he was angry at the staff – for some reason I don't even remember – he shouted at me, "You think that Nirim is G-d!" I answered, "No, not quite G-d – but just one level lower." I had implicit faith in the staff. And everyone who knew my son had faith that he could succeed. But he didn't have faith in himself or in the fact that others could see all of his talents and strengths.

At what might have been his last day at Nirim, something clicked, and as he, his father, the staff, and I sat around the table, he opened up. Just a little bit, but enough for him to get one last chance. He was going to be sent to the farm (an agricultural secluded farm). I had heard about the farm, but I didn't really know much about it. He would leave home the day after Rosh HaShana (the Jewish new year holiday) for at least six weeks, with no phone, no computer, no Facebook. Ordinarily, his father and I would not have been able to see him during that time, but because he would be there over Sukkot (Jewish holiday) and everyone was going on vacation for

a couple of days, we were assigned shifts. I'll be honest. The last thing I wanted to do was to cook, pack a suitcase, and travel to the Golan. My holiday would already be ruined by what was going on, and I did not want to spend it with my son and his sullen face. Well, he was allowed to phone six days later, on Erev Yom Kippur (a Jewish fast day). And something in his voice had changed, something I can't really describe, a certain serenity that I hadn't heard for years. All of a sudden, I felt a flicker of hope. And I started looking forward to seeing him. I spent a two wonderful days with him. We herded the goats, he showed me how he had already fixed up the tent where he was living, I timed him as he ran laps, we sat around and talked, and I just enjoyed being with him. My smiling, lovely son had come back to me.

Over the past 10 months, since he arrived at the farm, he has undergone an incredible transformation. Through hard work, the constant guidance of the staff, and much introspection, today, he knows who he is, he understands what led him to the place where he is now, and he knows how he wants his future to look. He is able to show the entire world the gentle soul, the caring, the sensitivity, the sweetness, and the keen intelligence that we always knew he had. His brothers and sister and the extended family have welcomed him back with open arms, so happy that he wants to rejoin us. Yes, they were angry at him for a long time, but I think that much of their anger stemmed from the hurt they felt at what they saw as his rejection of us.

I have also changed in how I see my role as a parent, and I believe his father has, too, but here, I can only speak for myself. One of the words that one hears often at Nirim is responsibility. I thought I knew what my responsibility as a parent was, but it turns out that I really didn't. It was only last summer, at a moment when it looked like my son's career at Nirim was coming to an untimely end – and that there was a real risk that he would go back to one of those places I never wanted to see again in my life – that I finally internalized the meaning of the word responsibility, at least as far as it pertains to parenting.

It was my responsibility to meet my son's material needs, and to raise him with love, good values, and the desire to be a contributing member of society. Last summer, at the juncture I found myself – and him, all of us – I would gladly have the way paved for him so that there would not have been the tiniest pebble for him to stumble over. But I suddenly realized that I couldn't do that – not because I didn't want to, but because it is just not possible to do that for another person, not even for the sake of the child that you brought into the world. At that point, it was my responsibility to hand the torch over to him. He would have to decide how he wanted to live his life. I had already said all that I could; I just didn't have any words left. And, thank G-d, he made the choices that have led him to this graduation ceremony today.

I just want to make it clear that while I am obviously telling the story of my son, I am really speaking about all of you. It's not easy to be at Nirim. There are a lot of rules, a lot of requirements, and a lot of expectations. There are many times when you had to reveal secrets that you'd rather no one else knew. You had to look at what caused you pain and meet it head on. Those are very difficult things to do.

But you've done it! Each and every one of you has undergone an extraordinary transition – from children who didn't know what everyone wanted from them or what they wanted from themselves, to young adults who have achieved a degree of self-understanding that many people do not achieve until much later in their lives, if at all. You have learned to deal with disappointment, to channel your energies in positive ways, to tell people how you feel without offending or angering them, and to build true, strong, supportive friendships that will last the rest of your lives. You have demonstrated strength, integrity, perseverance, and the desire to succeed. The truth is, everyone should have the opportunity to experience Nirim, and now – finally – I think that all of you understand how lucky you were to get here, one way or another. I am not just proud of you, I am a bit jealous! You are all amazing people, and I am so happy that I have had the privilege to get to know you. All of us here are waiting to hear great things in the future!

Over the past few years, every person in this room has witnessed wonders and miracles. Many of those events are attributable to the staff at Nirim – a group of the most dedicated people I have ever had the honor of meeting. You have shown our children endless patience, love, caring, and understanding and for that, we parents shall be eternally grateful.

Finally, I would be remiss not to mention the role that G-d played in this story. I truly believe that everything that you, the students, and we, the parents, have experienced is part of the unique plan that He has for each and every one of you – and that He will help all of you to forge your path in your own special way.

ברוך אתה שהחיינו וקיימנו והגיענו לזמן הזה. אמן.

(Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, who has kept us alive and sustained us, and allowed us to reach this season. Amen)