

ROSH HASHANAH EVE 5771: ROMANIA

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The late journalist, Tim Russert, said:

“The best exercise for the human heart is to bend down and pick someone else up.”

I spent a couple of weeks this summer doing just that at a pediatric recovery clinic for orphans in Romania. The web site announcing this volunteer opportunity in Tutova, Romania, began:

“Nothing says ‘love’ like a child's smile!”

“In Tutova, you can help feed and care for babies who arrive at the ‘pediatric recovery clinic’ shortly after birth. Each day, volunteers stimulate, love and nurture them in a way a parent would. Just playing with these children will make a huge difference in their lives.

And you will benefit from the healing smiles and warm hugs of your small charges.”

In other words, I could volunteer to help some children, while at the same time, receiving blessings from my interactions with them.

I thought that my most difficult challenge would be to become attached to a child, and vice versa, and find it painful to leave.

Then I arrived in Tutova.

Baby Maria was just shy of her second birthday, a near miracle given the fact that she suffers from hydro-encephalitis, a condition in which fluid builds up around the brain. Without treatment, it causes brain damage and, eventually, death.

Treatment must occur in the womb or shortly after birth.

Unfortunately, this did not happen for Maria, so her skull has expanded to the size of a watermelon, while her body has remained the size of a six-month old. Maria spends her days lying in her crib, unable to move her extremely heavy head.

She was one of 20 babies and toddlers that I and a group of volunteers would spend a few weeks caring for. Several of the children are mentally retarded – Paula, 4, spends most of her days screaming, crying, or licking the floor. Alex, 8, has brittle bone syndrome, making it very difficult for her to stand or walk. She is also a dwarf and suffers from autism. Because she had been resistant to eating, the overworked staff, though loving and caring, had been feeding her by sitting on her arms and holding her nose.

Alina, 3, is also a dwarf and suffers from fetal alcohol syndrome. She is tiny and can barely open her eyes.

Baby Raul suffers from a condition that causes blisters on his whole body which are in danger of becoming infected – a fatal possibility for Raul. His twin died of this disease. So, wrapped in tight bandages, Raul spends his days lying in his crib, his mouth painted with a blue, anti-bacterial substance. The bandages have to be changed every day, a very painful procedure for this 10-month-old baby.

Ion, 2, had major heart surgery at the age of one. When he doesn't get his way, he has learned to knock his head on the hard floor or the wall, causing himself to wail.

These children are all from very poor families who cannot afford to give them the medical care they need. A majority of them are either orphans, abandoned by their families, or have been taken from their parents by Child Protective Services. This clinic is only one of two in the country that still operates, thanks to a wonderful director and to the organization through which I worked – Global Volunteers. The hefty fee we are charged to participate is in great part donated to the clinic to pay for equipment, food and staff. The staff at the clinic is very caring, but there are not enough aides to spend quality time with the children, some of whom have been there for several years.

So it is the job of the volunteers to devote one-on-one attention to them.

After visiting the clinic on our first day, we were assigned specific children as our wards. I have a confession to make on this Day of Awe. I was afraid to take care of baby Maria with her big head. And I was anxious about tending to a child with severe retardation. I didn't know if I would be able to relate. What I discovered on this trip was how much these children had to teach me about finding God in the most surprising places. Because for me, God is not a Supreme Being seated on a throne in the sky – despite the images throughout our liturgy during these High Holy Days. God is the very ground of our being, the ultimate mystery that makes life possible. I believe that God is the sacred dimension of this world. We glimpse this element of our reality at very special moments – when a baby is born or when we experience a glorious sunset or when we connect in love to another human being. Rabbi Arthur Green, a scholar of Jewish mysticism, says that God and the world are one. “There is no... ‘God and world,’ no ‘God, world, and self,’” he says, “only one Being and its many faces.”¹ Thus, “Creation *is* revelation.”² In other words, I discover God by discovering what God has created – especially other human beings. And Tutova revealed to me the beautiful gifts that each life at the clinic has to offer.

One of my first discoveries was the amazing spirit of **Alina** -- the little girl with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. She is 2 years old but the size of a very thin one-year-old, and she is weightless as a feather. She is a real little sprite, with soft golden hair and thick golden eyelashes that cover her half open eyes.

¹ *Radical Judaism*, p. 18.

² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

But there is real determination in that little body:
we went for a walk and she knew exactly where she wanted to go,
leading me by the hand the whole time.

Because Alina cannot open her eyes all the way,
she looks at you by tilting her head to the right, then to the left,
taking you in with a delighted smile.

Though she doesn't talk – none of the children there do --
she does pick up on some key expressions.

“Whoo hoo,” she would exclaim in her tiny, high pitched voice,
or “Ay ya yay,” echoing one of my favorite sayings.

Many people would discount Alina for not being more developed
physically or mentally. But she is a beautiful little soul,
pure love, and joy, and desire.

Marius is mentally retarded, has a vacant look most of the time
and cries a lot. When these children begin to cry,
it is extremely difficult to console them. You can rub their backs,
rock them, walk around with them, coo at them in soothing tones,
but they will continue to cry. I felt sorry for the volunteer who was
assigned to Marius. Then one afternoon,
I helped her in one of her tasks, which was to teach Marius to walk.
She would hold him and send him to me
as he would take two or three tentative steps, then fall into my arms,
laughing with proud delight. That's when he melted my heart.
He was so excited about being able to take these steps,
and he was so committed to accomplishing this task.

Ion, the two-year-old who had undergone heart surgery,
is a Roma – a group we disparagingly refer to as Gypsies.
You may have heard about France's recent efforts
to send them back to Romania and Bulgaria.

Ion was one of my charges, and I fell in love with him,
with his mop of dark curls and his enormous, dark eyes.
Ion is endlessly curious, wanting to open every drawer,
touch every light switch, push all the buttons on the fans.

Feeling the fan's breeze on his face thrilled him,
making him laugh with delight.

Ion has no interest in toys – only in real things and real people.

We spent long stretches of time watching the men at work next to the clinic, mixing cement and carting items in their wheelbarrows. Just touching a car was a very special moment for Ion, as was watching a large truck drive by. On one walk, Ion found a little girl in a red dress and fell in love. He sat in my lap on the ground and stared at her for a good half an hour. Her name was Magdalena. At first, Ion was very independent, refusing to take my hand when he walked. Within a few days, he insisted that I pick him up and carry him. I think that I succeeded in beginning to break him of his awful habit of hitting his head on the floor or the wall when he didn't get his way, at least I hope I did.

Certainly, another volunteer who was very devoted to **Alex**, the autistic girl with brittle bone syndrome, succeeded in getting her to feed herself, obviating the need for an aide to sit on her arms and hold her nose. The dedication and commitment of the other volunteers was another gift this experience afforded me.

Brenda stood out for me in particular. She chose to care for **Maria**, the baby with hydro-encephalitis. Brenda spent every day with Maria, stroking her skin, taking her for walks in a carriage, even organizing a second birthday party for her. Maria will die pretty soon, but Brenda made sure that every precious moment of Maria's life was lived with great love.

The hard reality facing many of the children when they "graduate" from the Tutova clinic is that they will most probably be institutionalized. **Ion**, who has a heart condition and has been taken from his family by Child Protective Services, will undoubtedly end up in an institution for children with physical handicaps. Foster care is very difficult to get: you have to have one parent at home, not working, and a separate room for the child in order to be a foster parent.

Romania has now run out of money and cannot pay foster families. As a result, many are returning children to institutions. Adoption is even harder, even for Romanians. You have to foster the child for 6 months, then contact all the relatives – and it is not a tradition in Romania to adopt. And international adoptions are forbidden. Learning this broke my heart and made me cry. It's really not so different in the US and that makes it even sadder. The children at the clinic in Tutova are receiving so much love from the aides and the volunteers, I hope this stays with them wherever they go.

While in Romania, I found that I needed to focus on the moment – otherwise it would just be too painful. Moments like when **Ion**, in his little, soft voice, says: “Bye,” waving his hand and throwing a kiss. Moments like **Alina**, the little sprite, placing her head on the boom box to hear the vibrations of the music, or little **Mihaela** in her fairy wings, dancing to the music, or giving Ion a big kiss. It is these moments that are so very precious and sacred. And it is in each and every moment like these that we can glimpse God.

As my colleague, Rabbi Elaine Zecher, puts it so eloquently when identifying a name for God: “the one that speaks to me most clearly is *Zote* -- which simply means ‘This.’ This moment. This feeling. This experience. This encounter. You are that *Zote*, the capacity in each of us to be present in this moment, to savor its beauty and to wrestle with its challenges. ... Where may we find You, God? In this moment: You are *Zote*-this experience in prayer, in study, in relationship...in the eyes of a beloved, in the smile of a stranger, in the iridescent orange glow of the setting sun. I reach out to You in the hope that others, too, will nurture their inner lives and in doing so find meaning and purpose

in how we choose to live our lives and experience Your Presence.”

Brenda, the volunteer who took care of Maria, expressed this so well in our team journal. Here is what she wrote on the last day of our stay: “Butterflies are one of my favorite beauties that surround us in nature. Their detailed wings seem to effortlessly take flight looking for fragrant flowers to calmly rest and replenish. You might be thinking why I might start this journal entry as such... well today Maria Cleopatra was wearing a yellow romper with colorful butterflies – a welcomed sight. I was happy to see Maria and feeding her was a joy. I’ve grown fond of this gentle moment with the music box tinkle of her mobile playing as she drinks her bottle. With outside calling, I prepared her stroller for our final excursion together. Butterflies, I watched butterflies today. Small cabbage butterflies dancing around the simple gardens of Tutova. I watched children being loved and nurtured. Smiles and laughter exchanged. All the children are truly gifts to us as volunteers. Although they are all beautiful, I have dedicated this journal to Maria Cleopatra. Celebrating Maria’s 2nd birthday was monumental... may she celebrate more. Time is precious today. Enjoy this moment. Maria I thank you for sharing “now” with me. So, enjoy the butterflies. Perhaps Maria is my butterfly, an angel here on Earth, and angels have wings.”

May we go forth this Rosh Hashanah, able to value every precious moment, and to see God through the faces of the Other.