In Praise of People with Down's Syndrome
By Edward Hoffman, Ph.D.

Have you ever gotten to know someone with Down's Syndrome? Unfortunately, it's likely that your answer is *no*, for the majority of American couples prefer to end the life of their baby-to-be with this medical diagnosis—-a decision made at considerably higher percentages among European countries such as the UK, Denmark, and Iceland. Why do they do so? Let's be honest: it's mainly because prospective parents believe that their son or daughter with Down's Syndrome is "better off dead"- and that raising such a child is overwhelming and empty. As an educational psychologist and professor who has written more than twenty books, I can assure you that both beliefs are completely false.

From the beginning of my long career, I've worked with parents, teachers, and of course, individuals of all ages diagnosed with Down's Syndrome. The latter have included children, teens, and adults ranging from their early 20s into their 60s in varied locales. True enough, their intellectual deficits preclude the attainment of prestigious careers, but since when is that criterion an ethically valid reason to terminate a human life? As virtually all Jews today know, some of the most diabolical Nazis had doctorates or medical degrees.

Certainly, the Jewish tradition regards every life as sacred—and does not make distinctions about "IQ" or future earning potential. From my professional experience, virtually all individuals diagnosed with Down's Syndrome are eminently capable of happiness and joy, friendship and love, kindness and empathy. And like all of us, they experience sadness, anger, disappointment and regret. At the outset of my career, I learned this during six months of weekly counseling with a 40-year-old man with Down's Syndrome who felt lonely and unappreciated in his community agency residence. In short, their range of emotions are essentially identical to those without this medical condition.

But don't just take my word for it. Prominent Jewish artist Paul Palnik of Columbus, Ohio, comments that, "I have had numerous occasions to be in the presence of the special people diagnosed as having Down's Syndrome. I worked at a residential program for children surrendered to the care of the State of Ohio, and then again at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin. I always felt blessed to be around those with Down's Syndrome. Their laughter and joy were always pure. When one earned their love and respect, their hugs were magical. They never plotted deceit, they were never malicious, they didn't seek ego satisfaction. When authentic achievement came their way, they celebrated with honest pride, so lovely to behold that at times it brought tears to my eyes as my heart swelled with love."

As for the pressures involved in raising a child with Down's Syndrome, the tremendous growth of special educational and early intervention programs—with a plethora of adjunctive services including sibling support-groups and work-training venues—makes parenting such a child far less isolating and stressful than a generation ago. Yet, most Americans of child-bearing age haven't been sufficiently educated about this new reality—-and mistakenly regard such students are "un-educable."

As a final note, I'd like to share a vivid personal experience from last spring. Called to psychologically evaluate a Brooklyn yeshiva child with ADHD, I entered the large school for boys and waited for a testing room to become available. It was a sunny Friday afternoon, and as I gazed around the lobby, I noticed a group of half-a-dozen teens in the corner talking animatedly and bantering with each other. Backpacks and sleeping bags lay piled beside them, and I realized they were ready to leave for a weekend camping trip. *How nice*, I thought. I heard one teen loudly say, "I'm going to ask the Rebbe what he thinks about that!" and the group immediately burst into laughter.

Then I suddenly noticed that they all had features associated with Down's Syndrome—-and a wave of emotion swept over me. Who could possibly think they were "better off dead?" I wished that every prospective Jewish parent informed of fetal Down's Syndrome could have seen this happy, confident, and respectful teen-age group so that the right decision concerning the issue of abortion would be unmistakably clear--and even obvious.

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