

Ari, My Lion, by Aviva S.

Lions are the only social member of the cat (Felidae) family, as they live in large groups called "prides," consisting of about 15 lions. A single male, or sometimes a small group of 2-3 males, will join a pride for an indefinite period. Lions within a pride are often affectionate and, when resting, seem to enjoy good fellowship with lots of touching, head rubbing, licking and purring.

My brother Ari (which is Hebrew for Lion) did not receive his name by coincidence. He not only is extremely passionate about animals (especially big cats), but he is one of the most social people I know! He is a very rare extroverted social butterfly among the autism community.

In March of 1989, my 7 years younger brother Ari Ben, was born into the world a very healthy- by all physiological standards- baby boy. While my parents were of course elated and celebrating another offspring in the family, I was quite the opposite. I had been the only child for so many years, that now sharing my parents attention, the quiet house, the dog and my life with this new crying, smelly and totally dependent being was quite difficult for me to adjust to.



Siblings Ari S. and Aviva S.

Ari seemed to follow normal child development stages until we noticed several strange behaviors when he was three. Ari was first diagnosed as having ADHD and learning disabilities after preliminary evaluations, but later at age seven, he had several psychotic episodes and violent behaviors which caused the doctors to reevaluate his situation. Their diagnosis was now early on-set schizophrenia as well as the autism spectrum.

When I was 14, our mother had taken a job as the head night shift psychiatric nurse at a nearby residential in-patient psychiatric facility and had put me in charge of being my brother's babysitter, cook, life coach and basically second mother. I did not enjoy the role much at the time. For two years I would be Ari's main caregiver every day after school until our father would return home late in the evenings.

Later in life I would come to realize this time was pivotal to our relationship as not just siblings, but as friends. It was these years that Ari depended on me, and I would push him to do things he was uncomfortable with to help him gain more independence and confidence. He was used to everyone else including our parents, teachers and medical professionals treating him like he was only capable of certain simple and lower level tasks and needed to be given total support and supervision with every single task. I knew he was also taking advantage of the situation and that he was perfectly capable of doing most of these things on his own. So I would test him and say I was not going to help him. He would need to figure out on his own how to do these things, such as cooking in the microwave, using the remote control, learning to use the shower handles to start the water, using soap



Siblings Ari S. and Aviva S.

and shampoo to bathe himself, brushing his teeth, as well as dressing and undressing and getting ready for bed- and he did.

Ari has grown up to love learning and is very passionate about animals, dinosaurs, movies and music as well as people. He is one of the most social people I know, calling all of his family and close friends daily to check in. Ari now lives with JFGH in a supported independent living shared apartment and works full time.

Today, we are much closer than most siblings I know. Ari not only calls me daily to check-in, but we see each other at least once a week for an activity and to catch up. We do everything together from hiking; going to comic conventions dressed in full attire; attending parties; swimming; visiting to zoos, nature preserves and aquariums; seeing movies; and of course dining at his favorite restaurants.

I did not know it when I was a kid, but he is truly one of the best things about my life and I am so happy he is not "typical." I am certain we will always be close, and we will always be much more than siblings.

If you would like to submit a Sibling Scribbling, please email bshapiro@jfg.org.



Siblings Aviva S. and Ari S.