

ZACK POWER

BRIGHT, CHARMING, PERSONABLE. THESE AREN'T THE FIRST ADJECTIVES YOU WOULD USE TO DESCRIBE A QUADRIPLÉGIC YOUNG MAN WHO DEPENDS ON OTHERS FOR ALL HIS PHYSICAL NEEDS. BUT THEN YOU PROBABLY HAVEN'T MET ZACK POLLACK, WHOSE MOTIVATIONAL SPEECHES HAVE INSPIRED SCORES TO BECOME BETTER, STRONGER, AND HAPPIER PEOPLE

BY *Baila Rosenbaum*
PHOTOS *Zahava Pollock*



What kind of image pops into your head when you hear the words “motivational speaker”?

Chances are you thought of either your favorite *rav* or *rebbetzin* or a super-hip TED Talks speaker — someone who’s polished in both attire and speech, someone you’d like to emulate at least in some small way.

One image that probably didn’t come to mind was someone who is incapacitated by cerebral palsy — someone confined to a wheelchair, someone whose speech is compromised, whose words are unclear.

Yet it’s the second description that outwardly describes Zack Pollack, a 22-year-old *semichah* student at REITS who has already built a career as a successful motivational speaker. With a powerful message to share about the harmful effects of bullying and the love that is spread through inclusion and friendship, Zack is determined to not let his CP get in his way. Or as he puts it, “I’m a kid that wants to give *chizzuk* to the world.”

Listen to My Story Zack’s struggle started before birth. While pregnant, his mother Barbara developed a condition called pre-eclampsia, forcing Zack’s delivery at only 24 weeks and at a weight of one and a half pounds. Zack spent almost the first four months of life in the hospital until he was stable enough to join his parents, Barbara and Larry, and brother Rudy in their Passaic, New Jersey home. After eight months of tracking his progress and noting delays, they got a diagnosis: cerebral palsy, a condition defined by impaired muscle coordination (spastic paralysis) and other disabilities. It’s typically caused by damage to the brain before or at birth.

“It was shocking to hear the diagnosis,” Larry remembers. “But when we asked the doctor what it meant, he just said, ‘All I can say at this point is that he’ll never be an athlete.’ We didn’t know CP would affect him to this degree.” The Pollacks left the doctor’s office and drove straight to Hackensack University Medical Center to find out what therapies would be available to Zack and how best to address his needs.

Despite his severe physical and intellectual challenges Zack had a



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NOTHING LIKE FRIENDS When Zack says he loves life, it's largely due to his wonderful friends. (Top) Counselor Michael Celler pushed Zack's wheelchair through a 13-mile run and then carried him over the finish line for the gold, while buddy Avraham Fried narrated a film clip about Zack and heroism



so he could continue his studies. Mr. Janoowalla would turn out to be the key that turned Zack's watershed moment into a career in sharing. "We started talking and he asked me what I wanted to do," says Zack. "I told him I wanted to be a motivational speaker. I had a message I wanted to convey." Mr. Janoowalla was up to the challenge and worked with Zack to assemble his thoughts and hone his skills. Then he invited Zack to speak at the public school where he taught. Zack's ambition took its first baby step forward.

Today, Zack's speaking resumé includes both Jewish and non-Jewish venues. He has spoken to student audiences in yeshivos, day schools, public elementary and high schools, and colleges. He's visited inner-city schools and spoken to kids at risk. His adult venues include nonprofits, community groups, charitable organizations, and political fundraisers. He's spoken to groups of several hundred, as well as small groups in classrooms. Although it's not always easy to understand him, his talks get an astonishingly strong

happy childhood, supported by family, friends, and the warm Passaic community. He enjoyed summers with Camp HASC and maintained close relationships with the staff all year long. But there was an additional hurdle to face when the cute, towheaded boy became a teen. Zack suffered from scoliosis, a curvature of the spine. The curvature was so serious it affected his internal organs and required major surgery to correct. "It was a risky operation but there was no choice," Larry recollects. "His condition was life threatening."

"My back was like a pretzel," Zack explains. "When you have scoliosis with CP, not only is the back curved, but the muscles are tight and pulling in different directions. I felt like there was a 10,000 pound weight on my back."

Zack was 14 years old when he bravely said goodbye to his parents and prepared himself for a ten-hour surgery that resulted in two titanium steel rods being placed from his neck down to his lower back. Thankfully, the surgery was a success. Zack came through with not only a straight back but an epiphany: "Life isn't just about living. You have to live life with purpose and make the most of every day. If you believe in your strengths, your weaknesses will disappear and your strengths will prevail. It's not about what you can or can't do, it's about how you do it."

Although he was a student at the Passaic County Elks CP Center High School, after his surgery Zack needed to convalesce at home for almost a year. The board of education arranged for a teacher to visit him

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response. "I can't say he's ever had an audience that got the better of him," says Barbara. "Sometimes I'll cringe when I hear a student ask a question — they can be so blunt! But Zack takes it in stride and responds candidly. He really believes in what he's doing."

"I want people to listen to my story and start thinking about how to apply it to their own story," Zack adds. "I speak about a number of themes, including inclusion of people with disabilities; extending friendship and help to all classmates; stopping the pervasive problem of bullying; the power of positive thinking; never giving up; the importance of education; and the importance of faith. I emphasize that I love my life."

Riding the Roller Coaster When Zack says he loves his life, he isn't kidding. His website has video clips of his speeches, but it's also chock-full of testimonials and pictures of his various accomplishments.

One of those accomplishments is being a gold medal marathon winner. With the help of his close friend and former HASC counselor Michael Celler he completed the 2011 ING Half Marathon held in Miami, Florida to help raise money for Camp HASC. Celler pushed Zack's wheelchair through the 13-mile run and then, for those last few steps, helped him out of his wheelchair and walked him over the finish line, where Zack received his gold medal. Zack's race was the subject of an NBC television news story and he often shares this inspiring clip in his presentations.

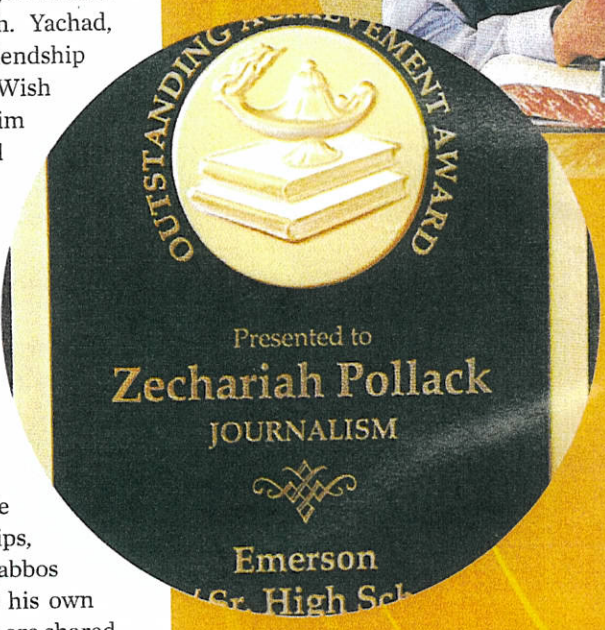
He has also run the Miami Rock 'n' Roll Marathon and, to raise money for Kids of Courage, the Bahamas Half Marathon. As a camper with Kids of Courage, he's traveled across the country over several summers to experience life and to learn to live with more independence. His most memorable activity? Jet skiing. "They didn't tell me about that till later," Barbara says with a wry smile. "Or the five roller coaster rides."



Worries aside, Zack's parents recognize the importance of the many organizations their son has interacted with. Yachad, HASC, Kids of Courage, the Friendship Circle, and the Make-A-Wish foundation have all provided him with strong and meaningful friendships. "The friendships that have been created through his involvement with these organizations are the key to his happiness," explains Zack's father. "Without his friends his quality of life would be greatly diminished."

When Zack makes a friend, it's a friend for life. He maintains his relationships, going away with friends for Shabbos and welcoming his friends to his own home. Weddings and *simcha's* are shared. "One friend even planned her wedding around his attendance," Barbara fondly recalls. "We took a road trip to Memphis for that wedding and Zack spoke. It was a wonderful trip."

Zack is also a world traveler, having enjoyed summers in Israel with Yachad on their Yad B'Yad program. The program



Zack is honest about his limitations, but states emphatically that "handicaps don't mean you can't have a normal life." The awards on his wall prove it

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includes a mixed group of disabled and non-disabled Yachad members and high school students from across America. There's an amazing picture on Zack's website of Zack in his wheelchair hanging on a zip line over a desert valley that would make any mother's hair stand on end. Zack loved the trips on many levels. "They had a dual purpose," he says. "Teaching people how to be friends with the disabled and learning about our Jewish heritage."

Making Up Lost Time As a teen, Zack attended Emerson High School, a regular public high school with an inclusion program combining disabled and non-disabled students. From an early age his formal Jewish education was limited to the Sunday mornings that he spent learning with the students at Yeshiva Ktana of Clifton-Passaic.

When he was set to graduate high school, the Pollacks met with the school counselors, who asked what Zack's plans were for the future. Barbara laughs at the memory. "When we told them he was planning to attend a theological seminary, they looked at us like we were the worst parents in the world! But this was what Zack wanted to do and now when I meet people from his high school days, I tell them how he's growing and thriving and

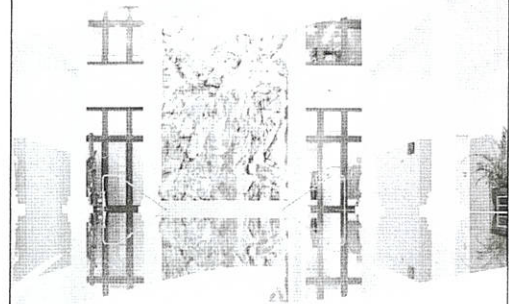
has never been happier."

Today Zack attends the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University, and with typical Zack-like determination, he's making up for lost time. He learns in the *beis medrash* along with his two *chavrusas*, and he joins Rav Hershel Schachter's *shiur* in the afternoon. In the evening, he Skypes with a Passaic *chavrusa*.

When I ask Zack about the difficulties involved with commuting to and attending yeshiva full time, I expect to hear about mobility problems, social challenges, or difficulty of access. Instead Zack answers, "Sometimes I don't understand the Gemara right away. Overall, I'm good at understanding, but sometimes my *chavrusa* has to go over it once or twice."

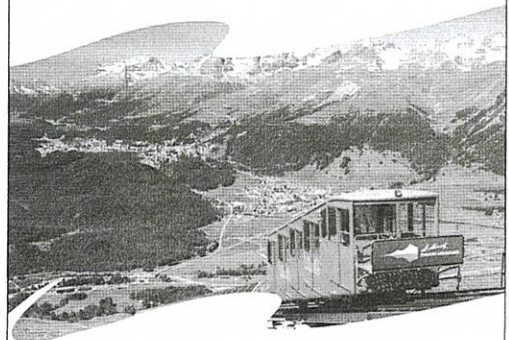
Bullying Is Not Here A source of joy for Zack is that many of his counselors and trip-mates over the years are now his fellow YU students, learning alongside him as peers. But his circle of friends extends far beyond the *beis medrash*. In 2006, after Zack had spent five years memorizing his *haftarah*, his family celebrated his bar mitzvah with a remarkable, community-wide celebration. Assemblyman Gary Schaer, a member of the New Jersey Legislature and president of the Passaic City Council, as well as Zack's friend, helped mark the day in a special way. Schaer had the New Jersey Legislature

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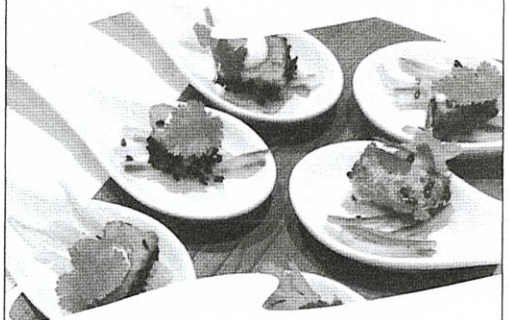
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vote a resolution in honor of Zack's special occasion. The framed resolution honoring Zack's bar mitzvah hangs proudly in his bedroom alongside a baseball bat signed by baseball Hall of Famer as a one of a kind personal gift. Pictures of Zack with another improbable friend, an NFL defensive tackle for the New York Giants, line another wall. At a Make-A-Wish event Zack went down to the football field after a game and he and the player connected. They've kept in touch for the last four years with Zack enjoying the games and the team enjoying Zack.

Despite Zack's amazing ability to make friends wherever he goes, he never forgets the kids who aren't so fortunate: the ones who are the social outcasts at school and become victims of bullying. He knows all about it because he's been there. Once Zack and a wheelchair-bound girl who couldn't speak were bullied on their school bus. The girl had no way to communicate her distress or defend herself, but Zack did; he told his parents and they contacted the school. The offending student was removed from the bus and forced to sign a contract promising not to threaten or bully in the future.

Zack will often talk about bullying when he's invited to speak to younger children, and he makes sure to address the bully himself. "We get cards and letters in response to Zack's speeches and some have described the remarkable impact he's made," Barbara shares. She describes how some students admit to bullying and resolve to change, while others say they've become more attuned and sympathetic to those who have been bullied. "One girl wrote that she finally realized how her actions hurt others and she decided to stop her angry behavior. I told Zack that not only did he change her life, but the lives of everybody around her."

For teenage audiences Zack talks about inclusion and accepting others: "Getting to

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know one another and, more importantly, getting to know themselves." Zack gives voice to the feelings of the handicapped, explaining how just because a person may have difficulties or may use a wheelchair, those differences don't have to take away from their lives or impact how they are perceived of by others. "Handicaps don't mean that you can't have a normal life. I am not a person *in* a wheelchair. I am a person that *uses* a wheelchair."

When speaking to religious yeshivos and day schools, regardless of age, Zack tries to emphasize how important volunteers have been in his life. He strongly encourages the next generation of volunteers to come forward. "They'll get as much out of it as they give. Their lives will change, too."

Yet even though Zack comes prepared with ideas he wants to share, he is confident enough to let his listeners choose what direction his speeches will take. The younger audiences tend to be interested in his daily life. They ask questions about how it feels to be in a wheelchair, what his daily needs are and what he likes. Zack will tell them honestly that his parents take care of all his needs — feeding, dressing, and changing him. He'll often also engage the audience in conversation, asking the kids about their favorite sports, music, or hobbies. Then he'll tell them about his own, emphasizing, "I'm really just like you are, except I use a wheelchair." Are they ever afraid of him? Zack smiles mischievously, "Maybe I'm afraid of them?!"

ChaZack Because Zack's sincerity comes through, his talks evoke many emotional responses: cheers, tears, hugs, and photo ops, as well as invitations to return. He admits, "When I speak, it makes me feel good, too. I also benefit; it helps me get my emotions out. And when I speak to non-Jewish groups I feel that I'm making a *kiddush Hashem*."

But without the use of his arms, how

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does Zack manage to prepare for his speeches? "I like to write in my room — I call it my studio," says Zack, referring to his cheerful blue bedroom. "I write late at night, when it's quiet." Zack "writes" in his head, without using a computer or having anyone transcribe his thoughts. "I'm amazingly lucky that I'm able to put together my thoughts and memorize them and can keep them in my head until I speak."

That natural talent was strengthened by his first exposure to media in high school. Zack was a reporter for the high school cable TV station and he got used to constantly rehearsing for a performance. Even after he graduated from Emerson High with honors, receiving the annual award for the top student in media/journalism, he continued to put into practice what he learned in school.

Zack also has had experience being the subject of an interview from an early age. When Zack was at Camp HASC, his counselor Josh Graber, a student at YU, presented him with an unusual proposal. YU was having its first film festival competition — the topic was My Jewish Hero — and Josh asked Zack if he could feature him in a short, three-minute film. Graber named the film *ChaZack* and arranged to have it narrated by Zack's friend, singer Avraham Fried.

The film explores what it means to be

a hero. Does having a handicapped body automatically make one a hero? Do hardships make one noble or courageous? Is the label "hero" just a cliché? In the film, Zack's friend Josh explains why he views Zack as a hero and chose to feature him in the film. "Zack is a hero because he understands his disabilities. And he sees them as simple obstacles that are in his way and easy to conquer. He overcomes and perseveres. Zack is the happiest and most sincere person I've ever met."

Rabbi Elchonon Adler, *rosh yeshivah* at REITS and neighbor of the Pollacks, was instrumental in getting Zack enrolled in the yeshivah program. He appears in the film with his own view on Zack. "Any time a person is able to use everything within them to reach their potential — that is the measure of a hero, of *gevurah*. And Zack really exemplifies *gevurah* in that respect. He teaches all of us to strive to reach our potential."

The film also includes 13-year-old Zack's opinion about what makes a hero. "A hero is someone that saves people's lives and also changes people. Also, people that love and care for each other. The reason I'm a hero is because I care about you and you care about me!"

As a 22-year-old yeshivah student, Zack's response is more insightful when he's asked who is a hero. His reply? "Hashem."

Heroes don't grow in a vacuum and Larry and Barbara Pollack have had to call upon their own supply of *gevurah*. Raising Zack has brought challenges and joy, but in the interim they have had other hardships to surmount. Barbara successfully battled three bouts of cancer and they feel fortunate that they were able to have another child, their daughter Shayna, to complete their family.

Larry will never forget a conversation he had in the hospital, right before Zack's birth. When Barbara was in labor they knew their baby might not make it. Barbara insisted on a cesarean to ensure that Zack would have the greatest chance at survival. The doctor took Larry aside and suggested they opt for a natural birth. Such a premature baby could not possibly be born healthy, its chances of survival were slim. Why should Barbara be scarred by surgery for no reason?

"I got mad," Larry says. "The doctor had already written him off. I told her she'd better do everything in her power to make sure our baby had the best possible chance to survive."

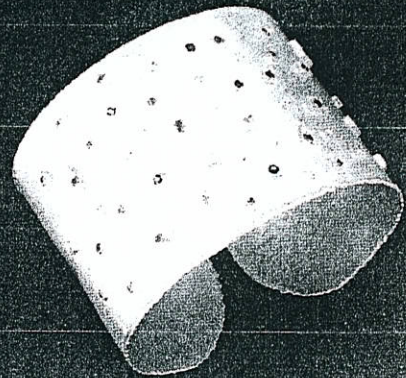
"It's not because of Zack's disabilities that he's so special, but in spite of them. There are people who have questions in *emunah*, but we don't have that problem. There are no coincidences. We see miracles every day."

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