

Meet two graduates who are genuine class acts

Maimo's Yoni Nouriel *Spirit triumphs over tragedy*

Before a rapt class of Maimonides 11th graders, senior Yoni Nouriel held forth on Descartes, definitions of truth and how Jewish conceptions of G-d fit with the beliefs of secular philosophers.

Swept up in Nouriel's enthusiasm, the young audience peppered him with questions. They may have laughed at the goofy way he wiped the whiteboard, but they respected him as a teacher and related to him as a friend.



Nouriel will be among the 50 seniors graduating from Maimonides June 17, the last of the four children in his family to re-

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Maimo senior teaches lessons in class – and by example

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ceive a diploma from the Brookline day school.

At the start of class, Nouriel told the group that he had just been reading Nietzsche and learned to his surprise that the German philosopher was the source of the Kelly Clarkson lyric "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

Rabbi Avinoam Durani, one of Nouriel's thesis advisors, watched from the back of the room. Reflecting on the class later, Durani said that Nietzsche's quote could apply to Nouriel's life.

His mom, Elana, died when he was in 10th grade. Two months later, his brother, Ben, crashed into a utility pole while driving home in a blizzard and fell into a coma for 20 days. Miraculously, after six months Ben made a full recovery.

His father, Daniel, said the family pulled through because of the emotional and financial support of friends. After Ben's accident, Yoni, and his sisters, Leora and Shira, called their friends to ask them to say prayers.

"They are convinced it is a test from above, and we have to go on," Daniel said of his children.

Durani said throughout it



Yoni Nouriel constructed this ark with fellow Boy Scouts as his Eagle project. With him is Rabbi Shmuel Miller, regional director of the NCSY Orthodox youth group, which is receiving the ark.

all, Nouriel never complained and never expressed bitterness.

Finding succor in his spiritual and academic life, Nouriel surmounted the challenges at home.

"What doesn't kill you makes you stronger – he saw this as a way for him to be stronger," Durani said.

Blessed with a positive personality, Nouriel learned persistence from his mother, who launched the elementary and middle school programs at Maimonides. Besides teaching, she also studied instruments on her own.

Nouriel recalled her picking up the cello after not playing

for years. He would hear her play the same note over and over. Frustrated, she would stop for a moment, then try again, until she got it right.

Nouriel is now finishing up his Eagle Scout project that is in memory of his mother: a portable ark for the New England chapter of the NCSY Orthodox youth group.

More than 20 scouts and friends helped construct the ark, putting in a total of 320 hours of work.

Nouriel said the project taught him that leading is about facilitating, not dictating. He would learn a skill from a scoutmaster, such as the prop-

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Rabbi Avinoam Durani
on Yoni Nouriel

er way to glue materials, and then teach the method to the others.

The ark, which weighs about 100 pounds, is finished, but Nouriel is still raising money for embellishments, such as a laser engraving of a verse from the Psalms.

Before he started on the ark, Nouriel didn't have any experience in woodworking. But his scoutmaster, Dr. Howard Spielman, assured him he'd get all the help he needed. "He does not give up on his scouts," Nouriel said of Spielman.

Nouriel said his brother, Ben, is his biggest role model. Ben, too, is persistent. Ten days before he was supposed to get out of his wheelchair, Ben stood up and playfully boxed with his brother. Now, Ben is applying for medical school in Israel.

Yoni Nouriel said he has

known since second grade that he would one day make aliyah. This fall, he's moving to Israel to join his three siblings. His sister Shira is getting her master's at Tel Aviv University, studying emergency and disaster management. Leora is performing community service as an alternative to the army.

Yoni is starting school at Yeshivat Har Etzion. He'll then go into the army, followed by college, and then teaching.

In his last semester at Maimonides, he threw himself into teaching what he called his "guinea pigs."

In addition to teaching philosophy to the juniors – using material drawn entirely from his own reading – he led five Talmud classes for sophomores. Once a week for the past semester he taught mishna and Talmud to middle school students for a required community service project.

Durani said he doubted any adult could have been as resilient as Nouriel.

"To overcome so many crises in his life, and to stay normal, for me it was inspiring to see," Durani said. "It gave me a lot of faith in regard to how strong our students can be."

— Elise Kigner, Advocate Staff