

A Welcoming Place for All

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Rosh Hashana 5773

On opening day of the 1948 Olympics, Dr. Ludwig Guttman, a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany, presided over the first Paralympics: 16 wounded veterans competing in wheelchair Archery on the lawn of London's Stokes Mandeville Hospital. At the 2012 Paralympics, 2 and a half million spectators watched four thousand disabled athletes from 160 countries compete in 500 events over 10 days.

If the stories of the Olympic athletes were inspiring, the stories of the Paralympic athletes are astounding:

Noam Gershony was an Israeli helicopter pilot paralyzed in the second Lebanon war. He took up wheelchair tennis in 2007 as part of his rehab, and five years later won Gold in Men's singles.

Brazilian Daniel Defaria Dias was born without hands or feet. He took up swimming at age 16 after watching the 2004 Athens Paralympics. In London he took 6 gold medals.

April Holmes, from New Jersey, was boarding a commuter train when she slipped and fell onto the track. The train severed her leg. 4 years later in Athens she won Bronze in the Long Jump, then Gold in the 100m in Beijing and Bronze again in London. Today she has 3 world records and a foundation to help people with disabilities rise above obstacles and achieve their goals.

At the closing ceremonies, Paralympic chairman Lord Sebastian Coe said: "we will never think of disability the same way...The Paralympians have lifted the cloud of limitation."

And in other news...

The US Justice Department is threatening legal action against the state of Florida for warehousing hundreds of kids with developmental disabilities in nursing homes for the elderly while cutting more appropriate supports and programs. U.S. Assistant Attorney General Thomas Perez said "[Florida's] reliance on nursing facilities to serve these children denies them the full opportunity to develop bonds with family and friends and violates their civil rights."¹

Oy.

On the one hand, we have made amazing strides in protecting the civil rights and appreciating the contributions of people with disabilities. On the other hand, we are still often ignorant and insensitive to their needs. Over the years, the institutions of Reform Judaism have resolved to address the concerns of Jews with disabilities. In December, 1978, The UAHC resolved:

In order to respond to our commitment to a just society in which each citizen lives in dignity, the Jewish community must become more sensitive to the plight of the disabled, the blind, and the deaf. The UAHC therefore urges our congregations to modify as necessary our physical plants, grounds, and camps so as to be more accessible to the disabled; [and] to take steps to encourage the participation of disabled Jews in synagogue life.^[2]

Fast forward through similar resolutions in 1983, 2001, 2008, and 2009, to the 2011 Biennial RESOLUTION IN SUPPORT OF ACCESS TO LIFELONG JEWISH LEARNING FOR JEWS WITH DISABILITIES. It outlines many successful efforts and programs, then goes on to say,

Despite all of these efforts, we know that more can and must be done to build a more inclusive Reform Movement. We must ensure that our buildings and facilities and programming are accessible to all people with apparent and not apparent disabilities, that our demeanor is welcoming, and our language is appropriate – including using “person first language.” ... Then all Jews, regardless of ability, will have the opportunity for meaningful participation in the richness of Reform Judaism.^[3]

Here at Mount Zion, we have a lot to be proud of, especially where our children are concerned. Our Kulam program has been running strong for over 20 years. Kulam, which in English is “Everyone” is an acronym for **K**ids **U**nderstanding and **L**earning At **M**ount Zion, and was founded on the principle that every Jewish child is entitled to a quality Jewish education. We currently have about 35 students in the program. These are kids with anxiety, Asperger’s, attention deficit Disorder, autism, behavioral disorders, congenital disorders, depression, diabetes, dysgraphia, learning disabilities, visual processing disorder, seizure disorder, and so on. We do everything we can to ensure that they participate fully in our formal and informal educational program.

On the other hand, we still have much work to do. The KULAM children will eventually age out of our religious school. Several already have, and we need to work on fully including them as adults in our community, and on making Mount Zion a place where Jews living with disability will want to come. In this year of focus on Tzedek-Justice we need to ask if we are really doing all we can to make Mount Zion not only accessible or inclusive, but truly inviting to people with disabilities. A place where they are not only included but welcomed; not only welcomed, but valued members of our community.

Becca Hornstein, Executive Director of the Council for Jews with Special Needs has written about her family's search for a religious school for her 9 year old son Joel. Clearly she wasn't in Saint Paul...

Joel has autism, and at nine years old, he was an amiable, intelligent child who had regained his ability to speak only 18 months earlier...I called each of the 10 congregations in Phoenix to inquire about their accommodations for children and adults who have disabilities. Their responses were uniformly disappointing; none of them had special ed programs, sign language interpreters, family support groups or any inclusion resources. Even more upsetting was the comment several synagogue administrators made that they "were not aware of any disabled Jews in phoenix." At that moment I realized that not only was my son disabled, he was also invisible.^[4]

Why has it been so difficult for us to fully include and welcome people with disabilities into our communities? The message of our tradition is clear:

All human beings are created in the image of God, and must be treated with dignity and respect. We must pursue justice and perform acts of loving kindness. We must welcome the stranger and visit the sick. We must tend to the more vulnerable members of society. We must treat others as we wish to be treated. We know better, yet we still exclude.

Folks who have studied this have identified several common barriers to inclusion. The top three, like our Ashamnu, are an ABC – Attitude, Buildings, and Communication.

A comprehensive list of **attitudinal** barriers has been compiled by The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability. They include pity, ignorance, stereotyping, denial, and what they call the "Spread Effect," where we assume that if a person is disabled in one aspect, they must be in others as well. It is what makes us shout at a person who is blind, or speak slowly to a person in a wheelchair.

But I think the biggest attitudinal barrier is fear. We know that disabilities are not contagious; still, getting too close to them threatens our sense of wellbeing. Rabbi Alan Henkin, former rabbi of Temple Beth Solomon of the Deaf writes:

Indeed, almost all non-disabled people experience a dread and a dissonance in the presence of a person with a disability. We see ourselves without limbs, without hearing, without sight, without mobility. In people with disabilities we encounter our own limitations; dimly and unconsciously we become aware of the fragility of our own health

and the tenuousness of our very lives...Our pretensions to eternal wholeness are stripped away, and we stand exposed and vulnerable. No wonder we try to keep persons with disabilities at arm's length.[5]

The truth is, we all will probably experience some sort of disability in our lifetimes. I suspect that if we reach out and engage fully and openly with people with disabilities now, it will make it a little easier when our turn comes.

David Lepofsky is a very successful lawyer, author, lecturer, and disability rights advocate in Canada. David was born with congenital vision impairment, and then lost both of his eyes in a freak accident. Speaking to a group of Canadian Lawyers about inclusion, he said:

I am about to talk to you about persons with disabilities, the weirdest minority of all. This is because we are the minority of everyone – we are the minority of everyone because everyone either has a disability, or gets one if they live long enough. Disability usually comes with advancing age. If you don't have a disability, someone near and dear to you has a disability. I am not here to talk about what you can do for me because I have a disability. I am here to talk about what we persons with disabilities can do for *you*, so that when you get yours, you will face a world that is more accessible than the one [I live in] now.[6]

The second barrier is B: the building. Last winter Maureen Sultan and Larry Solomon chaired an inclusion and accessibility task force. They discovered that while we are doing quite well in some areas, we have a long way to go. Although I must say that Larry went above and beyond the call of duty in breaking his leg just so that he could evaluate first-hand whether our men's rooms are fully accessible. He discovered that they aren't. The task force assessed our entire building and compiled a list of needed improvements. It will take time, of course, but I believe we need to commit both effort and funds to carrying them out. This year of focus on Tzedek is the perfect opportunity. Next time you want to make a donation to the Temple, consider earmarking it for building accessibility projects.

The third major barrier to inclusion is **Communication**. Barriers of communication operate on two levels. On one level, they are inadequate accommodations that enable people to see, hear, or understand what we are trying to communicate. With listening devices, large print Torah commentaries, and a NOOK e-reader, we have made a good start. But there are still people who don't come to Mount Zion because we don't meet their communication needs. The other communication barrier has to do with how we communicate ABOUT disability. As you have heard me say many times, I have great respect for the power of words to harm *and* to heal.

The 1978 UAHC resolution talked about “the blind, the deaf, and the disabled.” In 2011, the URJ updated the terminology to “Jews with disabilities,” and promoted using “Person First” language. “Person First” is a movement towards more respectful, accurate communication started by individuals who said, “We are not our disabilities. We are people, first.”

Here is one mother’s description of her first experience with the power of Person First language:

When my son, Jake, was born, I was 20-years-old and clueless about motherhood. I was even more clueless about Down syndrome. For two weeks all I could see was the diagnosis. I cried a lot and thought about all the things Jake would never be. Waiting at pediatrician’s office for his 2 week appointment, I felt ashamed and guilty, like his diagnosis was my fault, and I covered Jake with a blanket so no one could see him. A woman in front of me turned around and nosily peeked under the blanket. She said to me, “Is that a Down's? My friend has one of those,” as if my child were some breed of dog! I was horrified. But I felt powerless and I didn't know what to say or how to defend him. Finally, when the doctor came into the exam room, the *first* thing he said to me was, “You have to remember, he is not a Down syndrome child, he is a CHILD who has Down syndrome.” For the first time in his tiny life I saw my SON. His beautiful almond eyes, chubby little cheeks, and curly hair captured me like never before. And the tears of anger and helplessness became tears of pride and joy. Suddenly what mattered wasn’t that he had Down syndrome, what mattered was that he was Jake.^[7]

Person First Language teaches us not to define people by their diagnoses. It also reframes “problems” into “needs.” Instead of “he has behavior problems,” we can say “he needs behavior supports.” Instead of “she has reading problems,” we can say “she needs large print.” Instead of he’s wheelchair bound, “he uses a wheelchair.”

Person First is more than just careful word choice. It is an attitude of communication which requires us to avoid making assumptions, to speak directly to individuals with disabilities, to offer our hand in greeting. It requires us to ask if someone wants assistance rather than assuming they do, and then waiting for an answer before intervening. It requires us to remember that people with disabilities have something to offer, and to ask for their help too.

Although it might feel awkward at first, the Person-First approach is not radical political correctness, nor does it mean using puerile euphemisms like “height impaired” or “weight challenged.” It is common courtesy and basic respect. It is a curious thing that we forget our manners when it comes to interacting with people who are just a little bit different than us.

Jacob Artson is a brilliant young man living with Autism. He can't speak, but as you will hear, he can communicate beautifully in writing. He has a lot to teach us about inclusion:

When I was diagnosed at age 3, I couldn't speak or move my body properly, and 15 years later I am still extremely impaired in both areas. But if success is measured by being a mensch and helping make this world a better place, then I would classify myself as a success. You can be the judges. When I turned 6, my family moved to LA in search of opportunities for me. Our journey took us to many purported experts, but they all saw me as merely my extremely impaired verbal and motor abilities and assumed my cognitive abilities must be similarly nonexistent... Dr. Ricki was the first to smile at me as though I was a person worthy of respect and dignity. That gave me hope.

What makes a person believe in him or herself? These are the factors that have made a difference in my life:

First and foremost, my family has never wavered in their belief that I am a child of God with an equal claim to dignity and respect. Second, I have been blessed to have had wonderful mentors [who] believed I could achieve greatness. Kids with special needs don't need to be reinforced with "good job" and "good listening" as if we are in puppy obedience training. What we need is stimulation, patience, and someone to believe in us and notice our little triumphs. Third, I have found great support in God and Torah. I think that people vastly underestimate the importance of spirituality for people with special needs... We all need to live with meaning and know that we are not alone in our struggles. Finally, everyone needs a sense of belonging and many of you probably are involved in your [synagogue] for precisely that reason. .. My peers and I have been fortunate that that our typically developing classmates had to fulfill their community service requirements, and so found ways to include us. But now my peers are adults too, and there are no more community service requirements to make people reach out to all of us formerly cute kids who are now trying to make our way in the world.

Artson goes on to propose 3 "mensch ideas" for our consideration:

1. Inclusion isn't just about me, it is about everyone. The truth is that a shul that welcomes me is a synagogue where everyone can find a place and people will want to join.

2. It doesn't take any training to be a leader who models inclusion. It just takes an attitude that all people are made in God's image and it is our job to find the part of God hidden in each person.

3. My favorite Jewish holiday is Passover because it is the story of our people's journey from degradation to liberation. That is the story of my life and the lives of many of my autistic friends. Our lives are not determined by where we start. God lures us to find our gifts and to choose liberation. My journey has taken me through the desert and toward the Promised Land. I look forward to the day when we can all stand together at Mt. Sinai as one people, the day when everyone is included and together we bring God's glory to all of humanity.[8]

Our lives are not determined by where we start but by where we seek to go. In this year dedicated to Tzedek, I pray that we will commit ourselves as individuals and as a community to removing the barriers of attitude, building, and communication that keep us from truly being a welcoming and vibrant Jewish Spiritual home.

I pray that we will bring closer the day when every part of Mount Zion Temple – from our members to our programming to our building says to people with disabilities: "*B'ruchim Ha'Ba'im.*" You are welcomed here. You are valued here. Please, come in.

[1] <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2012/09/justice-department-blasts-florida-for-putting-disabled-children-in-nursing-homes/>

[2] http://urj.org/about/union/governance/reso/?syspage=article&item_id=2147

[3] <http://urj.org/kd/temp/C731F3EF-1D09-6781-A1B64E16DD43F5B3/FINAL%20Resolution%20in%20Support%20of%20Access%20to%20Lifelong%20Jewish%20Learning%20for%20Jews%20with%20Disabilities.pdf>

[4] Foreword, Jewish Community Guide to Inclusion of people with disabilities

[5] Alan Henkin, "The Two of Them Went Together: Visions of Interdependence. Judaism, Fall 1983

[6] <http://www.oba.org/En/about/PDF/DavidLeposkyFinalMar172010.pdf>

[7] <http://www.disabilityisnatural.com/explore/news-and-notes/455-one-mothers-testimony>

[8] <http://mentschen.org/2011/03/22/you-have-probably-never-met-anyone-like-me-by-jacob-artson/>
