

Shabbat Shalom:

February is Disabilities Awareness Month and our February newsletter, Kolot B’Nai Shaolm, reminds us that “February is the month when we are asked to renew our commitment to inclusion.” In order to do so, however, we must understand the concept of inclusion. Wikipedia tells us that:

Inclusion is a term used by people with disabilities and other disability rights advocates for the idea that all people should freely, openly and without pity accommodate any person with a disability without restrictions or limitations of any kind.

Wikipedia continues:

Inclusion argues that the whole of society, its physical accessibility, and its social attitudes should exist with universal design in mind, thus ending physical marginalization by ending the idea that a body that is different is incapable of self-management.

Our perception of inclusion and of the differences between people with disabilities and people without disabilities is just that . . . our perception. We base our perceptions on a series of questions that we pose to ourselves. Am I comfortable interacting with the person? Do I have to make accommodations to interact with the person? Does the person interact with me in a way that is normal. For me, that last question is the most difficult to answer because, in our house, normal is just a setting on the washing machine. In the end, I suppose our perception of people with disabilities most often is colored by whether or not we can see the disability.

In some ways, we all have disabilities or, at least, inabilities. For example, I am unable to say no. That is how I became BSO’s first vice-president; just a heart beat away from the presidency. But all kidding aside, I am sometimes limited because I am painfully shy. People always laugh when I tell them that. They think I am making a joke. Yes, I am standing here speaking to you this morning and, as a trial lawyer, I regularly stand in front of judges and juries and advocate, effectively, for the rights of my clients. In a structured setting, I am very comfortable addressing a crowd, no matter how big, and no matter how diverse. Nonetheless, when we gather after services for an oneg, you will typically see me standing by myself observing rather than standing in a group of people engaging in conversation. For me, it is easier to talk to people than to talk with them. I can engage in unstructured conversation and I do

engage in unstructured conversation, but it is very difficult and, frankly, very uncomfortable. In the broadest sense, I am a person with a disability, but people do not generally perceive me that way and they certainly do not treat me any differently than anyone else. If I choose to be, I am included. Not everyone is so fortunate.

The inclusion issue was among the issues addressed at BSO's recent Mitzvah University in a program titled "Nothing About Us Without Us." The presenters at this program, a panel of young adults with Autistic spectrum disabilities, talked about their experiences in the community, their aspirations, and their dreams. The panel was chaired by Ari Ne'eman, a Sondheim Scholar of Public Affairs, studying Political Science at the University of Maryland Baltimore County. Ari is the founder and President of the Autistic Self Advocacy Network, a non-profit organization of adults and youth on the autistic spectrum. Ari is also a person with Asperger's Syndrome. Asperger's Syndrome is an autism spectrum disorder that is most typically associated with difficulties in social interaction. Although people with AS often have typical linguistic and cognitive development, they tend to exhibit repetitive behaviors and restricted, more stereotyped patterns of behaviors and interests. I recognize and appreciate people with AS because I have spent the better part of the last ten years studying how they develop and recognizing and marveling at what wonderful people they can and do become.

Ari, who has spoken nationally and has advocated in the Maryland legislature for the rights of people with autism spectrum disorders, addresses the inclusion issue in a slightly atypical way. While Ari certainly advocates for inclusion and for the rights of people with autism spectrum disorders, Ari focuses his attention on helping people with autism spectrum disorders develop and use their ability to advocate for themselves. He preaches the need for self advocacy in school, in the work place, and in society in general.

Ari was joined on the panel by five or six other young adults of varying ages and with varying degrees of affectation. One panel member was a gentleman named Mike. Mike is a graduate student at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore who is pursuing his masters degree in the medical sciences. Mike was not diagnosed with Asperger's until after he came to Hopkins. While he always felt that he was different than others, Mike was unable to put his finger on the differences and never had a name or label for his feeling of difference. Mike recounted the time that he was working with a professor in a lab and the professor began to ask him a number of

questions about his social behaviors. As the questioning continued, Mike began to realize that the professor was not simply making conversation but was examining him. The Asperger's diagnosis soon followed. Mike says that, in many ways, he was relieved to have received the Asperger's label. Being different without knowing why sometimes caused him confusion and anxiety. While people frown on labeling kids, and I am among those that do, Mike provided a different perspective. Having a label to put on the feeling of difference left Mike with a feeling of empowerment. It provided an explanation for his differences and gave him a rung to hold on to when he was feeling anxious.

Unfortunately, not everyone who learned of Mike's diagnosis felt the same sense of relief. In a very emotional discussion, Mike talked about how his parents, people who had always been very supportive and positive about his life and achievements, suddenly treated him more like a person with a disease. The love and support turned into resentment and embarrassment. Mike felt like a stranger in his own home. In many respects, Mike actually felt like his parents would have treated a stranger better than they treated him. Mike's current primary goal is to obtain employment in his field so he can end his financial dependency on his parents and break away to become his own person.. Mike's quest for employment has been largely unsuccessful and Mike believes that it is not due to his lack of ability, but rather, because of what others see as his disability. Despite his educational successes, Mike has found that, in other arenas, he is not being included.

Mike's story and participation at Mitzvah University was ironic. The cover for our Mitzvah University Program read: "Al sh'loscha d'varim ha-olam o-maid. Al ha-Torah, v'al ha-avodah, v'al g'meelut chasadim." The world stands upon three things: On Torah, worship, and loving deeds." For Mike, while the knowledge of his disability has set him free in some respects, others' knowledge of his disability has caused him pain. The world has not always been one filled with loving deeds. Mike's story, as part of Mitzvah University, is ironic for another reason. While we note that the world stands on Torah, Torah is not always a source of comfort for people with disabilities. Indeed, we are asked to pay heed to the Torah, even though our Torah, at least in part, singles out people with disabilities in a way that, today, we would say, is not very "PC." In Parsha Emor, which is found in the Book of Leviticus, we are told "The Lord spoke further to Moses: Speak to Aaron and say: No man of your offspring throughout the ages who has a defect

shall be qualified to offer the food of his G-d; no one at all who has a defect shall be qualified: no man who is blind, or lame, or has a limb too short or too long.” These words, from Parsha Emor, are written to address the proper performance of the task of offering the food of G-d within the Temple. In this, and other ways, the Torah sets forth very specific rules for the performance of sacrifices. Rules are also the focus of today’s Parsha. Parsha Mishpatim is very explicit in telling us how to behave. It contains a veritable laundry list of offenses and the consequences for committing those offenses. The articulated rules are both explicit and abundant, and touch on almost all aspects of how people should behave toward others. Parsha Mishpatim can be viewed as a foundation of our moral and ethical code. Yet this same document, our Torah, dictates that we discriminate against people with disabilities.

In an article titled: One of the Most Embarrassing Passages In the Whole Torah -Parashat Emor, Rabbi Jack Riemer analyzes the Torah’s direction to exclude persons with disabilities and offers the following:

Some have explained it historically. They have said: That was then and this is now. And they have pointed out that since the fall of the Temple and the end of the sacrificial system, these laws no longer apply. Today, a kohen who is a person with a disability can duchan, can get the first aliyah, can officiate at a pidyon haben, and can do anything and everything that any other kohen can do. And that is somewhat comforting.

This explanation, which is not fully accepted by Rabbi Riemer, doesn’t resolve the exclusion issue. Rather, in a “slight of hand” type of approach, the explanation suggests that we not dwell on the ills of historical, outdated, commandments, in order to surreptitiously divert our attention from the more contemporary issue relating to inclusion of people with disabilities. Today’s issue is whether people with disabilities are welcomed into society and whether WE welcome them as part of OUR community. Some ask, why must WE educate students with learning differences or disabilities? Why do WE have to go out of our way to make OUR synagogue accessible to people with physical disabilities or mental or emotional challenges? Why do WE have to change how we do things when it is hard enough to meet the challenges of our OWN lives?

The Torah requires exclusion, but it also speaks of inclusion when it commands. “You shall not insult the deaf nor place a stumbling block before the blind; you shall revere your G-d — I am Adonai.” G-d commands our reverence, demands our respect. In order to respect G-d,

we are challenged to respect all of those who are created in G-d's image - whether challenged or not. In today's Parsha, we see at least some emphasis placed on the plight of the poor and those who are otherwise vulnerable. The Parsha's instructions include: "You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan," "You shall not subvert the rights of your needy in disputes," and "if you lend money to the poor, do not act as a creditor, exact no interest from them." Taken together, these passages hit on some of the most important components of contemporary Judaism, tzedakah and tikkun olam. While not specifically addressed in today's Parsha, the general concepts apply equally to our treatment of people with disabilities and, more specifically, our inclusion of people with disabilities.

Consider these three questions posed by Rabbi Reimer:

If Yitzchak Avinu, Father Isaac, who became legally blind in his old age, were to come into our synagogue and want to daven with us, would we have a large print prayer book available for him?

If Yaakov Avinu, Father Jacob, who was injured in an encounter with a mysterious stranger and limped for the rest of his life as a result, were to come into our synagogue and want an aliyah, would he be able to get up to the bimah here? And if not, if we don't have a ramp that makes the bimah accessible to the people with disabilities, what would we say to him?

If Moshe Rabeynu, Moses our teacher, who had a speech defect, were to come into our shul and want to read from the Torah that he gave us, could we handle it without becoming embarrassed if he were to stutter?

I suggest it is not enough to refrain from placing a stumbling block in the path of the blind. Rather, it is our task, our obligation, to REMOVE the stumbling block. After all, if we fail to do so, aren't we as culpable as if we had placed the block there ourselves. As Jews, as a Congregation, as a community, we have the responsibility to analyze our selves and our environment in order to make the necessary accommodations to allow people with disabilities to have the same opportunities as people without disabilities. It is not enough to say that we try to treat people with disabilities as equals, or that we try to make them feel as though they are equals. We frankly should not "treat" them differently at all. We need to make appropriate accommodations so that they are equals. Equals in their ability to access our building, equals in

their ability to participate in our services, equals in their ability to access our programming, and equals in their ability to be part of our community.

We must ask ourselves, why do we make certain accommodations and not others. We have large text sidurim for people who are vision impaired and make those available on a daily basis. On the high holidays, and on other special occasions, we have interpreters to sign for people who are hearing impaired. Why don't we make that accommodation on a regular basis? Yes, there is a cost, but do we only want people who are hearing impaired to come to shul on high holidays and those other special occasions? I know that it is our practice to provide an interpreter to sign when we know that someone with a hearing impairment is going to be attending services. In fact, BSO provides the interpreter without cost. I suspect that some people in need of an interpreter or other accommodation might feel uncomfortable asking for the accommodation, at least on any kind of regular interval. I certainly would feel that way. To truly accommodate, to include, is not simply to provide the interpreter when asked; it would be to provide an interpreter on a regular basis so that people with hearing impairments can come to shul and be a part of the community without having feel that they are a burden. If any person does not come to services because there is no interpreter, we have failed. If any person feels like he or she is a burden, we have failed.

Similarly, if a child with a learning disability cannot fully access his or her religious education here at BSO because of the learning disability, isn't it the responsibility of our synagogue, our community, to help that child succeed in spite of the disability, and to do so without additional cost to the family of the child. Our secular educators are charged with that obligation and often fail to meet that obligation. Lawyers and educational advocates are engaged to hold the school system responsible for its failures. Why should we hold ourselves to a lesser standard. After all, given the opportunity to overcome and excel, today's learning disabled students may become our lay or spiritual leaders of tomorrow. They may be the building blocks, the foundation of BSO's future.

Money is always an issue, and certainly is no less of an issue in these economic times. Nonetheless, as we observe, as we celebrate disabilities awareness month, it is important to make BSO an environment that is open and welcoming to persons with disabilities. To do so, it is important that we provide accommodations, as part of our every day culture and environment.

By making BSO truly accessible to persons with disabilities, we can be truly inclusive and attract members that might otherwise be turned away, not only from BSO, but from Judaism. It is our obligation to make everyone feel welcome and to treat nobody as a stranger within our community. As today's Parsha tells us, not once, but twice, "Do not oppress the stranger." The Torah reminds us that we were once strangers in the land of Egypt and that we should welcome and treat everyone equally. Yes, on the surface, the use of the term stranger suggests a context limited to persons from foreign lands; however, we know that many of the teachings of the Torah are found between the lines. Strangers are not only people from foreign lands. Strangers are also people who are different. Different in religion, different in skin color, different in ideological beliefs, different in abilities. Mitzvah University helped demonstrate that helping others is a mitzvah. Treating people with disabilities as equals, in fact, making our environment such that they are equals is a mitzvah.

Several weeks ago, Rabbi Sunshine delivered a sermon in which he related the Haggadah's story of the four sons. You know, the wise son, the wicked son, the simple son, and the young son not yet old enough to inquire. As I listened to Rabbi Sunshine speak on this topic and as I thought about our observance of Disabilities Awareness month, I imagined a different version of this well known story. In my version, the wise son would ask "what are the difficulties that people with disabilities face and how can WE help to integrate OUR community members into our community. He is wise because he recognizes that people with disabilities are often an asset to the community and often serve as more of a benefit TO their community than a burden ON their community. To include them in the community and to tap into their individual skills is to build the community and to serve G-d. The wicked son might ask, who are THESE people and why do I have to deal with them. It makes ME feel uncomfortable and I would prefer that they just go somewhere else so I do not have to even see them. He is considered wicked because he believes that life would be better if everyone was the same and if he did not have to acknowledge the existence of people with disabilities. His mantra might well be "out of sight, out of mind." I imagine the third son, the simple son, asking, "Why do these people have to suffer. Why are they so unlucky to be afflicted with a disability. He would be regarded as simple because he cannot comprehend the wonderful achievements that people with disabilities have realized and the insights they have to offer. He cannot comprehend that a disability can be overcome. After all, Moses, in spite of his speech impediment spoke on G-d's behalf and led the Jews out of Egypt. The youngest son, not yet old enough to inquire, likely does not understand

the difference between a person with a disability and a person without one. In most instances, the young son does not even see that his playmate has a disability. As he looks at his playmate all he can see is . . . his playmate. He does not see or judge the physical or emotional disability and does not analyze how or whether his playmates disability will affect him. In the story in the Haggadah, we are instructed to tell the young son the story of Passover, but what are we to tell him in this version of the story. I suppose that, to him you shall say . . . nothing. There really is nothing to be said because his peer is, in the truest sense, a peer. Say nothing and aspire to be like the son who is too young to even inquire, for in his own naive way, when it comes to inclusion of a person with a disability, he is already, the wisest son of all.

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