

## Balancing Decorum and Inclusion in Services

One of the great challenges in synagogue life is how to make services inspiring welcoming and inclusive of all types of people. Rabbi Brian Beal, a successful pulpit Rabbi for more than 16 years and who led an award winning synagogue inclusion effort, will help us work through the related issues and provide concrete suggestions on how to better integrate people with disabilities into your synagogue's tefilla.

*Speaker: Rabbi Brian Beal*

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## **"Please Rise"... but What If I Can't Stand During Prayer?**

BY MORIAH BENJOSEPH , 2/16/2016

I've often been taught that as the people of Israel, named after our forefather, we are meant to struggle with God. It just never occurred to me that could include the struggle to remain upright.

I recently asked a number of rabbis why we stand during certain prayers during worship. They told me:

"We stand in order to show respect to God."

"Standing helps us to highlight the central parts of the service."

"Standing is actually the norm from a period when services were much shorter. We've since added in sitting parts."

"Standing brings us physically closer to God."

I was slightly disappointed by these answers.

Since discovering a passion for Judaism at 8 years old, prayer has been a central part of my Jewish experience. I loved attending Shabbat services with my family, and I was always eager to stand for prayers, especially as the ark was opened.

This began to change at 16, when standing for long stretches started to bring me dizziness, fuzzy vision, and vertigo. By 20 years old, I could barely stand for five minutes without fainting.

That summer, I was diagnosed with a disability – a dysfunction of the autonomic nervous system, which controls all the functions of your body that you never think about. Not fainting, it turns out, is chief among those functions.

Just a few months after my diagnosis came the High Holidays, 10 days that require the most standing out of the whole Jewish calendar. Each time the rabbi asked us to rise, I braced myself and, as I stood through a lengthy *Avinu Malkeinu* prayer and an endless Torah procession, my grip tightened on the pew in front of me and my vision swam. "You may be seated" became my favorite words.

In the past few years, many rabbis have transitioned from "please rise" to "please rise if you are able." I appreciate the acknowledgment that not all of us in a congregation are able-bodied, but despite the olive branch, I continued to rise for every prayer. The truth is that I don't look sick.

Nobody who look at me and could know I'm disabled. It's one thing to feel like a 20-year-old living in an 80-year-old's body; it was another to admit it to my entire congregation.

But what does it mean for my prayer if I *don't* stand? Am I less respectful of God? Am I further from God than the rest of the congregation, standing all around me?

The *Amidah*, which is the central set of prayers in a Jewish worship service, literally means "to stand." Clearly, rising ourselves up is an integral part of our prayer. But maybe we can redefine how we envision our ascent.

For those who are able to stand, the tradition is perfect just the way it is. Those of us who aren't able can instead focus on raising the *intention* of our prayer. The parts of the service where we are asked to rise are meant to be the most important parts. We can pray with utmost intention. During songs, we can raise our voices. And we can talk to our rabbis about finding a solution in each of our congregations that is meaningful for us and for our entire community. I am no longer as sick as I used to be. These days, I can comfortably stand through the *Sh'ma* and *Amidah* and *Aleinu*, but I am not the only one who has struggled to rise during prayer. I am not the only one who hides my disability because I am embarrassed or ashamed or fear disbelief. I am not alone, and when we rise up to speak out and share our stories, truly then do we rise above our limitations.

**For important resources created by top disability experts, visit the [Disabilities Inclusion Learning Center](#), created by the [Union for Reform Judaism](#) in partnership with the [Ruderman Family Foundation](#).**

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**Original found at- [http://www.reformjudaism.org/blog/2016/02/16/please-rise-what-if-i-cant-stand-during-prayer?utm\\_source=TMT-Tuesday&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=20160216&utm\\_campaign=TMT](http://www.reformjudaism.org/blog/2016/02/16/please-rise-what-if-i-cant-stand-during-prayer?utm_source=TMT-Tuesday&utm_medium=email&utm_content=20160216&utm_campaign=TMT)**



## Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

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### Jacob Who Loves the Sabbath

God has shown you, O mortal, what is good: to walk humbly with your God.  
(Micah 6:8)

For ten years, I served as a congregational rabbi in the suburbs of Orange County, California, delivering many passionate sermons on the holiness of the Sabbath. I spoke of the need to reserve one day each week devoted to contemplation, to community, and to God. Quoting sources ancient and modern, I urged my congregants to abandon the headlong pursuit of elusive chores, of work never completed, and instead, on this one day, to savor the simple wonder of being. But despite all those years of preaching Shabbat, and even though I myself was Sabbath-observant, I don't think I truly understood my own message or felt the full power of the seventh day until after I left the congregation. It was only after my family moved to the city that my six-year old son Jacob showed me how to engage in the true soul-rest of the Sabbath.

Jacob gave me the gift of the Sabbath. Jacob is autistic. His mind perceives the world in ways different from most people; his sense of timing and priorities follows its own inner schedule. The agendas that consume most of us simply don't exist for him. Jacob is indifferent to matters of social status. He loves what he loves, and he loves whom he loves. Jacob is passionate about his family, for example, cuddling in our bed early in the morning, sitting side-by-side as we read together, laughing as we chase one another in the park. And Jacob is passionate about the Torah, transforming a stray stick into a Torah scroll; he cradles the branch in his arms while he chants the synagogue melodies. Marching his "Torah" around the room, Jacob sings the ancient Psalms of David with same joyous intensity of the ancient singer of Israel. One of the insights — and challenges — of his autism is that unless Jacob loves it, it doesn't get his attention.

Now freed from my obligation to arrive at services early, to stand on the pulpit, and to lead the congregation in prayer once we moved to the city, I looked forward to savoring the early Shabbat morning walk to our new synagogue with my son. On our first Sabbath there, I tried to walk the way most other people walk. I wanted to arrive punctually. Jacob, on the other hand, was already where he wanted to be: enjoying a walk with his Abba. I cajoled, pulled, pushed, yelled, but Jacob would not rush. I told him we were going to miss services, and still he strolled. I insisted that he hurry, and he paused to explore a patch of flowers, or sat himself down in the warm morning sun. I tried grabbing his hand and pulling him by force. I tried walking behind him and pushing with my knees. Nothing worked. By the time we arrived at the synagogue, hopelessly late, my stomach was in knots. I was drenched in sweat, and far too frustrated to

pray.

The second week repeated the aggravation of the first. We still reached services late, and I was so annoyed that I couldn't even sit still when we did get to the sanctuary.

This last week, I realized that something had to give. Jacob wasn't going to stop being Jacob, which meant that our walk would have to proceed his way, on his schedule. Resigned to slow frustration, I decided to make the best of it; I would learn to walk the way Jacob walked, but I would take a book. I chose as companion a medieval mystical text, the *Tomer Devorah*, *The Palm Tree of Deborah*, a meditation on Kabbalah and ethics by Rabbi Moshe Cordovero. Book in hand, I abandoned any commitment to schedule or pace.

As Jacob and I and Rabbi Cordovero set out on walk number three, I tried paying no attention to our speed or direction. When I got to the corner, I didn't let myself look at the light — invariably green until right before Jacob caught up. Instead, I read.

It's impossible to read quickly while walking, to focus on how many pages are already finished. Reading while walking is a form of meditation: savoring individual words, you find yourself delighting in phrases. To the prophet Micah's praise, "Who is like You, God?" Rabbi Cordovero responds "there is no moment that people are not nourished and sustained by the Divine power bestowed upon them. Thus no persons ever sin against God without God, at that very moment, bestowing abundant vitality upon them. Even though they may use this very vitality to transgress, God is not withholding. Instead the Bountiful One suffers the insult and continues to enable the limbs to move." The words on the page melded with my walk: I could feel life's vitality infusing my own, making this very walk a celebration. The sunshine streamed into my soul, God bestowing life and love without conditions or restraint.

As I walked and read, the stroll was punctuated by the intense fragrance of a colorful bouquet. The words of the *Tomer Devorah* reframed the morning song of a bird into an outpouring of creation's gratitude to God. The egglike flowers of the dogwood trees seemed to gesture the words of the psalmist, "How manifold are your works, O Lord. In wisdom have you made them all." In the towering palm trees we passed, I could feel the call of the prophet Isaiah, "Before you, mount and hill shall shout aloud, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands."

From time to time, I just turned to relish my son's meandering. His joy was contagious: the pure delight of a little boy with his Abba and with time. And his joy was pure. My son cannot read, yet his very presence, I could now see, affirmed the words of Kohelet that "there is nothing better than for one to rejoice in what he is doing." Occasionally, I found myself slipping into my old apprehensions, worrying about what part of the service I was missing, or fretting about not proceeding quickly enough. But the allure of my book, the walk, the sun, and my son, restored me. Jacob's spirit had become infectious.

When we finally did arrive at the synagogue, the service was more than halfway over. They were already putting the Torah scroll back into the Ark. Jacob squealed with delight, "The Torah! The Torah!" and ran to the front of the sanctuary. Too excited to stand still, he bounced on his toes next to the person holding the Scroll, while the congregation recited the ancient praise: "Hodo al eretz v'shamayim! God's glory encompasses heaven and earth!" My spirit soared, for I had just borne witness to that glory in the flowers ablaze in color and light, in the delicate breeze swirling through the leaves. "God exalts and extols the faithful, the people Israel, who are close to God. Halleluyah!"

More than any sermon I've ever heard or given, I owe the fullness of the Shabbat to my son. Jacob taught me through his own example that we can't possibly be late, because, wherever we are, we are already where we are supposed to be. Our minds just have to acknowledge what our heart already knows. Jacob has taught me how to walk with God.

I learned that day that Shabbat is the cultivated art of letting go, letting be, and letting in. In that art, Jacob is my teacher, my master, my Rebbe.

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<http://ziegler.aju.edu/default.aspx?id=8294>

## The Inclusion Confession By Rabbi Rebecca Schorr

By [Transitions to Work](#)

*The central section of the Yom Kippur liturgy is the public confession known as the “viddui.” Originally patterned after the priestly narrative of Yom Kippur in Leviticus 16, the current iteration, with its poetic catalogue of sins, is the work of our rabbinic sages, who believed that the best way to have mastery over our behaviors is to recognize, name, and internalize our wrongdoings. Only then can we hope to overcome them. Following the traditional rubric, this new viddui is meant to help us recognize, name, and internalize the many ways we continue to exclude those in our community whose abilities differ from ours.*

For the sin that we have sinned before You under duress and willingly; and for the sin we have sinned before You through the hardness of heart.

For the sin that we have sinned before You by failing to include every member of our community.

For the sin that we have sinned before You by making it difficult for those who are different to find their places in our synagogues, schools, and organizations

and for the sin that we have sinned before You for thinking that we are doing all that we can.

**For all these, O God of mercy,  
forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.**

For the sin that we have sinned before You by building ramps without widening doorframes.

For the sin that we have sinned before You for dedicating seats for those with mobility difficulties without constructing accessible bathrooms.

For the sin that we have sinned before You for installing assisted hearing devices and allowing speakers who believe themselves to have loud voices to speak without using the sound system

and for the sin that we have sinned before You for believing we are being inclusive when we don't truly include all.

**For all these, O God of mercy,  
forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.**

For the sin that we have sinned before You by using words to tear down rather than build up.

For the sin that we have sinned before You by not removing words from our vocabulary that are outdated, outmoded, and unacceptable.

For the sin that we have sinned before You for standing idly by while our family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers use words like “retard” or “retarded” to describe a person or situation

and for the sin that we have sinned before You by not speaking out when these words are bandied about by rock stars, sports figures, and pop icons.

**For all these, O God of mercy,  
forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.**

Courtesy of 2013 Ruderman Prize in Disability [B’nai Amoona Synagogue](#), St. Louis

For the sin that we have sinned before You for staring at the child having the public tantrum and assuming he needs better discipline.

For the sin that we have sinned before You for judging that child’s mother rather than offering her a sympathetic glance.

For the sin that we have sinned before You by accommodating those with physical limitations while not making accommodations for those with developmental limitations

and for the sin that we have sinned before You by not providing support and respite for the parents and caregivers.

**For all these, O God of mercy,  
forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.**

For the sin that we have sinned before You under duress and willingly; and for the sin we have sinned before You through the hardness of heart.

For the sin that we have sinned before You turning away from those who seem different.

For the sin that we have sinned before You by putting those who seem different into categories such as “less able” and “undesirable.”

For the sin that we have sinned before You for failing to recognize a piece of You in every soul.

**For ALL these, O God of mercy, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.**

*Ordained by the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Rabbi Rebecca Einstein Schorr is a CLAL Rabbis Without Borders Fellow, a contributing author of *The New Normal: Blogging Disability*, and the editor of the CCAR Newsletter. Writing at her blog, [This Messy Life](#), Rebecca finds meaning in the sacred and not-yet-sacred intersections of daily life. [Engage with her](#) on Twitter!*

*Follow other post on inclusion issues at The Ruderman Family Foundation blog [Zeh Lezeh \(For One Another\)](#)*

*<https://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Ruderman-Family-Foundation/206931976041027?ref=hl>*

## The RAC- Liturgical Additions

### Liturgical Additions

Many Jews turn to prayer and meditation for strength and healing, either when struggling with a mental illness or when acting as a caregiver. Adding existing liturgy, creating new prayers and offering new interpretations during a worship service can help those who are struggling with these issues to find comfort in a connection to God and Judaism. What follows are some suggested additions to a prayer service including psalms and prayers.

#### Textual Additions

##### Genesis 1:27

27) So God created the human beings in the divine image, creating them in the image of God, creating them male and female.	כֹּז וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ, בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ: זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה, בָּרָא אֹתָם.
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Suggested insert location: *Ma'ariv Aravim, Nisim B'chol Yom* (For Daily Miracles), *Yotzer Or*

Each of us is made in the image of God with all of our myriad differences including mental health conditions. We are each irreplaceable, precious and have contributions to make to the Jewish people and to our world. Let us as a congregation reach out to remind one another of this when despair, disappointment and suffering may cause us to feel uncertain about our worth and importance.

##### Isaiah 61:1

1) The Spirit of the Eternal God is upon me, because the Eternal has anointed me to bring good things to the afflicted; God has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.	א רִיחַ אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה, עָלַי נָשַׁח מְשַׁח יְהוָה אֵתִי לְבִשֹּׁר עֲנָוִים, שְׁלַחֲנִי לְמַשֵּׁחַ לְנַשְׁבְּרֵי לֵב, לְקַרְא לְשִׁבּוּיִם דְּרוּר, וְלִפְתּוֹחַ סִימָּוִת.
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Suggested insert location: *Mi Chamocha, Elohai N'shamah, Nisim B'chol Yom* (For Daily Miracles)

God cares about those who are afflicted, feeling despair, isolation and pain. These words also remind each of us that just as Isaiah was so charged each of us has the responsibility to help those who are suffering, to offer comfort and to help them to find the means to be freed from the prison of mental illness. Each of us is reminded to create places and attitudes of welcome to reduce others' feeling of isolation.

##### Psalms 146:7-9

7) The Eternal sets prisoners free; the Eternal	ז יְהוָה, מַתִּיר אֲסוּרִים.
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restores sight to the blind; 8) The Eternal makes those who are bent stand straight; the Eternal loves the righteous; 9) The Eternal watches over the stranger; God gives courage to the orphan and the widow.	ח יהוה, פקח עורים יהוה, זקף קפופים; יהוה, אהב צדיקים. ט יהוה, שמר את גרים יתום ואלמנה ועודד.
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Suggested insert location: *Mi Chamocha, Hashkiveinu, Nisim B'chol Yom* (For Daily Miracles)

We serve as the hands and eyes of God, using our gifts and strengths to help one another, including those who are weakened by carrying the weight of their own mental illness or that of family members.

### Modern Psalms

The following three modern psalms come from the writings of Debbie Perlman, reflecting today's modern issues and situations.

#### **One Hundred Seventy-Four: For Seth<sup>1</sup>**

Bound like Isaac upon the rock, Held fast by thought terrors: Mind grasping, pulse booming, grasping Bands of breathlessness.	Give us strength, Almighty One, To work free the mind-made knots, Worrying them with our worries Until a rush of wings clears the air.
Where is the angel with the ram Come to rescue this beloved son? When will he arrive, loosening the bonds That hold my child to the precipice?	Give us courage, Almighty One, To cope with snarls and tangles; Binds loosen and return, Abide with us.
I did not offer up my son, Though my love for You is steadfast; I cannot untie him, Though my faith in You is firm.	

#### **Two Hundred Forty-Six: The Plague of Darkness<sup>2</sup>**

Deliver me from darkness of my soul, Created by internal enemies, my defeaters;	Strengthen the stars, remove the obscuring clouds, Unwrap the blindfold from my eyes;
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<sup>1</sup> By Debbie Perlman in Address, Richard F., *Caring for the Soul R'fuat HaNefesh: A Mental Health Resource and Study Guide*, New York: UAHC Press, 2003, page 23.

<sup>2</sup> By Debbie Perlman in Address, Richard F., *Caring for the Soul R'fuat HaNefesh: A Mental Health Resource and Study Guide*, New York: UAHC Press, 2003, page 21.

They shake the foundation of my being,  
They battle my innermost self.

Renew in my spirit fortitude and strength,  
Your precious shard of brilliance, my sunrise.

Not as day fades to evening, but as thieves they  
come,  
So abruptly they steal the light  
That I stand immobile, mute.  
Be again my Light, Holy One, as I seek the light.

### **Two Hundred Fifty-One: Beginning Therapy<sup>3</sup>**

Today I will begin to uncover my heart,  
I will let accumulation of sorrow surface;  
Today the cycle of hurt and longing is suspended,  
Arresting my spiral into the maelstrom.

All my yesterdays describe my future,  
Yet I am more than their sum;  
I begin the deciphering with trepidation,  
Help me to calculate my strengths.

If I falter, frightened of the struggle,  
Be with me, my Staff and my Lamp,  
Hold out a lantern of courage,  
Fortify me, let me persevere.

Mark this day with Your kindness,  
Reassure my search for wholeness;  
Give me patience as I take small steps,  
Guide and vouchsafe my journey.

### **Other Liturgical Additions**

#### **For Healing From Trauma<sup>4</sup>**

The day always comes when your body learns to live with the trauma life has sunk into your bones, learns to let blood pool alongside the broken and jagged fragments of your singular shattering. Healing is not as we imagine: there is no seamless return to who you were before. Help us to trust that the day will arrive when you become one again with the heart you felt torn away from, borne back by blessing, by the source of life that moves between each pulse.

#### **For Those Living With Chronic Illness<sup>5</sup>**

May the one who blessed our ancestors, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, bless all those with chronic illness and help them to endure. Lift up their spirits and give them strength to embrace both joy and sorrow. Help their friends and caregivers know their own strengths and weaknesses, and the common humanity shared with those to whom they offer comfort. We remember

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<sup>3</sup> By Debbie Perlman in Address, Richard F., *Caring for the Soul R'fuat HaNefesh: A Mental Health Resource and Study Guide*, New York: UAHC Press, 2003, page 24.

<sup>4</sup> By Jaqui Shine in Michael Tyler and Leslie Kane, eds, *Siddur Sha'ar Zahav*, San Francisco: Sha'har Zahav, 2009, page 40.

<sup>5</sup> By Jeffrey Lilly in Michael Tyler and Leslie Kane, eds, *Siddur Sha'ar Zahav*, San Francisco: Sha'har Zahav, 2009, page 40.

Jacob's limp, Moses' speech impediment, Leah's weak eyes, and all that contributed. Grant courage, faith, and joy to all who bear chronic illness and to all who love them. Amen.

### **For Ongoing Therapy<sup>6</sup>**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart move me through pain and into connectedness with others.

When I reach beyond the darkness within, You meet me halfway -

Let me not project the judgment and impatience of my guarded heart unto others. But may it be Your will, God, as I strive forward into uncomfortable territory, that I be blessed with openness and understanding that I long to give, and that I am so afraid to receive.

*P'tach libi b'Torahtecha.*

Open my heart to Your words.

### **Recovering from Mental Illness<sup>7</sup>**

I know better that to claim that I'm cured. Victory over this enemy, with whom I often collaborate, is probably not final. But I am better today that I've been in some time, and I know what I can do if it starts getting bad again, and for this I thank God.

### **Give Me Your Hand (a responsive reading)**

<sup>8</sup>When all seems dark and the darkness is harsh, GIVE ME YOUR HAND.

When I cannot see light even in the brightest day, GIVE ME YOUR HAND.

When you are tired and every breath is heavy, GIVE ME YOUR HAND.

When my words do not grasp the depth of yearning in my soul, GIVE ME YOUR HAND.

When your feelings are overwhelming or dulled, GIVE ME YOUR HAND.

When I am confused and don't know what to do, GIVE ME YOUR HAND.

So that we may be together, GIVE ME YOUR HAND.

Please feel free to add your own desire to which we can all respond: GIVE ME YOUR HAND.

### **For Caregivers<sup>9</sup>**

Source of Comfort, bless those whose tender hands and weary backs, whose loving hearts and busy legs, care for those of our world who are in need. May Your spirit fill them with strength and courage. Be with them in joy, laughter, and when their task seems more than they can shoulder. God of Blessings, bless the caregivers of the world, as You bless those they lovingly attend.

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<sup>6</sup> By Anna Lichtenberg (Chana Harei-Orr) in Michael Tyler and Leslie Kane, eds, *Siddur Sha'ar Zahav*, San Francisco: Sha'har Zahav, 2009, page 41.

<sup>7</sup> By Dana Vinicoff Michael Tyler and Leslie Kane, eds, *Siddur Sha'ar Zahav*, San Francisco: Sha'har Zahav, 2009, page 41.

<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Eric Weiss, based on text from Talmud Bavli, Berachot 5b and inspired by sermon by Rabbi Susan Lippe, Congregation Beth Am, Los Altos Hills, titled "A Jewish Response to Mental Illness" delivered June 21, 2002 / 11 Tammuz 5762, <http://www.jewishhealingcenter.org/MI/Give%20Me%20Your%20Hand.pdf> (accessed July 11, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> By Andrew Ramer in Michael Tyler and Leslie Kane, eds, *Siddur Sha'ar Zahav*, San Francisco: Sha'har Zahav, 2009, page 42.

### On Coming Out of Dark Places<sup>10</sup>

Creator,  
I have been in such dark places  
a flashlight was useless  
I have felt fear  
no words could comfort me  
I seemed lost  
and yet  
through Your compassion and lovingkindness  
I am here, now.  
Blessed are You  
the Guardian of all  
who carries me  
to a safe place.

*Many worship leaders insert the following Psalms, regularly into healing services:<sup>11</sup> Psalms 27:1-5, Psalms 30:2-12, Psalm 42:2-6, Psalm 77:2-10, Psalm 88:2-19, Psalm 103:1-5, Psalm 116:1-9, Psalm 121, and Psalm 142:2-8.*

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<sup>10</sup> By Kevin Johnson in Michael Tyler and Leslie Kane, eds, *Siddur Sha'ar Zahav*, San Francisco: Sha'har Zahav, 2009, page 41.

## Tefillah Le- Ya'akov: A Prayer for My Autistic Son

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### Tefillah Le-Ya'akov: A Prayer for My Autistic Son

Bradley Shavit Artson

My son, Jacob, is autistic. After his initial diagnosis, it took me several months to begin to come to terms with his condition, to be able to see my child rather than just a diagnostic label, for my love to transcend my pain.

At the same time that I was struggling to regain some emotional balance and strength, the bottom fell out of my prayer life. Accustomed to davvening three times each day, I found that I didn't want to turn to God anymore. When I did pray, it was with little real kavanah. More often, however, I didn't pray at all. Sometimes my silence was the result of anger. Often my silence reflected a depleting lack of energy: as my depression sapped my strength, there was simply nothing left for prayer. Additionally, my inability to pray was an outward sign of anguish, rage, and terror: what kind of future awaited us? Would I ever hear my son speak? Why did this have to happen to Jacob? To me?

Human nature being what it is, I slowly gathered the sparks I needed to re-engage life. Even in my despair, I sought out sources of hope and solace. My energy level did begin to recover over time, assisted by my son's heroic efforts, my wife's endless devotion, and a host of teachers, occupational therapists, speech pathologists, psychologists, neurologists, and more. His good humor, his diligence, and his cheer were infectious. How could I not smile at his glow? How could I not gain strength from his beauty and his joy?

With my spirit on the mend and a newly-reconfigured faith, I sought a way to include Jacob in my prayers. But how? He wasn't sick, since "sickness" is something that comes from outside and for which you seek a cure. Autism doesn't generally result in a cure, and whatever may or may not contribute to its causes, it is internal, a neurological disorder. So asking God to "cure" Jacob doubly missed the point: (1) his autism was part of who he is, and (2) I had to learn to affirm him, autism and all. Jacob doesn't see himself as sick. He sees himself as Jacob. So should I. As he is — autism and all — Jacob is a blessing.

I decided to fashion an insertion in the Amidah, just as Jews do for one who is sick, for a special festival or fast day, for employment, fertility, or prosperity. Since Jacob's disability wasn't sickness awaiting a cure, the "Refa'enu" was hardly appropriate. So, where to put my petition? The prayer that seemed the most conducive for my aspirations was the "Honenu" prayer, one which praises God for the surprising gift of our ability to discern, to think, to understand. It was that capacity that Jacob's autism directly challenged, and in that realm that progress (as distinct from a cure) could happen.

Progress—even incremental progress—would summon vast skill and energy

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from Jacob, and it would require understanding, diligence and patience from us, from our extended families, and from his teachers. I needed words to help me focus on the tasks at hand, and on the distant goal. I needed holy words to carry my hopes up to God. I needed Jewish words to strengthen me for the road ahead. So do all parents of special needs children. Indeed, everyone working with children or adults with disabilities could easily adapt the words of my prayer to apply to the individual/s in their care.

### The Prayer

יְהי רָצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ יי אֱלֹהֵי וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתַי וְאֲמוֹתַי, שֶׁתְּשַׁלַּח מְהֵרָה לֵב נָבוֹן וְחָכָם, לְשׁוֹן עֲדִינָה וְשִׁפְתַּת אֱמֶת לְבֵן יָקִיר לִי, יַעֲקֹב דָּב, כִּי נִפְשׁוֹ קְשׁוּרָה בְּנִפְשֵׁי. תֵּן עֹז, רַחֲמִים, וְחֶמְלָה עָלֵינוּ, עַל מִשְׁפַּחְתּוֹ וְעַל מוֹרָיו, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: חֲזַק וְאַמֵּץ אֶל תַּעֲרֵץ וְאַל תַּחַת.

אַתָּה חוֹנֵן לְאָדָם דַּעַת, וּמִלְמֵד לְאִנּוּשׁ בִּינָה. חַנּוּנוֹ מֵאַתָּה דַּעָה, בִּינָה וְהַשְׁכָּל.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי, חוֹנֵן הַדַּעַת.

*You graciously favor humans with discernment, and teach people understanding. Grant us of Your discernment, understanding, and insight.*

*May it be Your will, Adonai my God and God of my fathers and mothers, that you swiftly send a heart discerning and wise, a refined tongue and true speech to my dear son, Ya'akov Dov, with whose soul my own is bound. Grant strength, mercy, and compassion to us, to his family and to his teachers, as it is written: "be strong and resolute; do not be terrified or dismayed."*

*You are bountiful, Adonai, granting discernment.*

### The Commentary

לב נבון, **a discerning heart**, is found in Proverbs 15:14: "The discerning heart seeks knowledge," and Proverbs 18:15: "The discerning heart acquires knowledge; the ears of the wise seek out knowledge." Autistic children are so bombarded by sensory information and stimulation that they experience difficulty knowing how to attend to what requires their attention while screening out the rest. Their challenge, like that of snow blindness, is one of too much information, rather

than too little. Jacobs needs to be able to discern what deserves focus and what he must disregard.

נבון וחכם, **discerning and wise**, are the traits that Pharaoh seeks in a counselor (Genesis 41:34) and which he finds in Joseph (Genesis 41:39). Joseph was a master at preparing for the future, at fathoming the human heart, and at reconciling the estranged. Jacob, too, will need those skills to live a full life in the future, and he will rely on a circle of caring people to assist him in that task and to share the joys of his future. Being נבון, discerning, alone, is not enough. Jacob needs חכמה, wisdom, to help him accept who he is, with his special strengths and unique challengers. He needs wisdom to persist in learning and growing, and he needs wisdom to continue to love Torah and allow God to be a source of comfort and of strength.

שפט אמת, **true speech**, according to Proverbs 12:19, “abides forever.” “True speech” signifies multiple meanings: Jacob never lies, and in that regard, God has already granted him true speech. But true speech also connotes real speech, the kind of speech that communicates information, feelings, thoughts, and desires. Speech that is true is also certain and reliable; it is available whenever needed. Finally, true speech is speech that allows one’s inner richness to emerge, rather than functioning as a crutch for the disability itself. For many autistic children, the use of speech for droning repetition is both a temptation and a trap. I pray that Jacob may continue to develop a שפט אמת in every sense.

בן יקיר לי, **my dear son**, is from Jeremiah 31:20. This stirring passage carries God’s words of reassurance to Israel that God’s love for us, undiminished. The full citation is “Truly, Ephraim is a dear son to Me, A child that is dandled! Whenever I have turned against him, My thoughts would dwell on him still. That is why My heart yearns for him; I will receive him back in love – declares *Adonai*.” The assurance that a special-needs child is lovable and is loved is of vital importance, embodies the firm conviction that God loves us all. God’s great love is the underpinning of Torah, a consequence of the divine image of every human being.

כי נפשו קשורה בנפשו, **with whose soul my own is bound**, is a paraphrase of the poignant words of Judah, explaining just how greatly his father, Jacob, is attached to Benjamin, ונפשו קשורה בנפשו, (Genesis 44:30). Perhaps it is only a parent who knows that incredible, almost painful, intimacy in which one is so connected to another person that the border between one soul and another blurs and disappears. Judah certainly was conscious of that radical connection and vulnerability, as was Jacob. So is every parent of a special-needs child.

חזק ואמץ, **be strong and resolute**. Nine times the Tanakh relays the admonition to be strong and resolute, urging it on the Israelites in the conquest of the Land of Israel, and on the Jews in persisting with the observance of the Torah. It is what David urges on his son, Solomon, as Solomon prepares to become king. Our quotation is from Joshua 1:9. The full citation, in which

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God addresses Joshua, is “I charge you: Be strong and resolute; do not be terrified or dismayed, for *Adonai* your God is with you wherever you go.” This seems to me to be exactly what everyone should know in working with special-needs children: we are not alone, and hope is itself a powerful tool in allowing the child to blossom and grow. Rather than allowing the terrors of an imagined future to cripple the present, I see this verse as encouragement that each challenge can be met, and that God will provide the resources of heart and soul to help us walk each step of the way.

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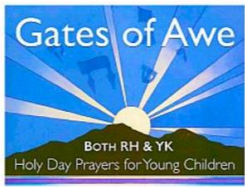
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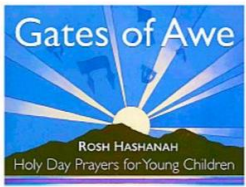
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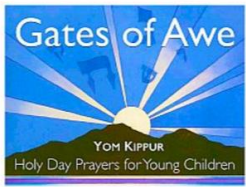
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Written by Behrman House Staff, 07 of May, 2013

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## Mishaneh Ha-Briyyot: A New Jewish Approach to Disabilities



*by Rabbi Elliot Dorff*

I want to suggest a virtual Copernican revolution in how the Jewish tradition, and Jews along with it, should understand and treat disabilities. In order to describe this new view, I need first to summarize what the Jewish tradition has said in the past.

### **A Summary of the Tradition's Treatment of Disabilities**

I think it is fair to say from the very start that traditional Judaism's approach to disability is remarkably enlightened and compassionate, especially when compared to the treatment disabled people got in other cultures. Before we get to the specific legal aspects of this, note that almost all of the biblical heroes were disabled in some way. Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah are all barren for some time in their lives,<sup>1</sup> Isaac and Jacob suffer from blindness in their old age,<sup>2</sup> Jacob was lame for much of his life,<sup>3</sup> and even the greatest biblical hero, Moses, suffered from a speech impediment.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, a number of talmudic rabbis were disabled; for example, Nahum of Gimzo, Dosa ben Harkinas, Rav Joseph, and Rav Sheshet were all blind.<sup>5</sup> The more “manly” biblical models - Esau, Gideon, Samson, and even David - are all portrayed as flawed in character. In contrast, the heroes of Greek and Roman culture were all physically perfect -- even extraordinary. American secular culture applauds those who overcome disabilities, along with those who triumph over any obstacles, and some popular movies, like *Philadelphia*, and some country songs, like Mark Wills' “Don't Laugh at Me,” warn us not to ignore or denigrate the homeless or ill, but very few, if any, commercials depict disabled people or even old people because Americans honor youth and ability. That is why Franklin Delano Roosevelt insisted on hiding his wheelchair in the last years of his presidency. Thus the fact that so many of the biblical and rabbinic heroes were disabled in various ways speaks volumes about how our tradition from its very beginnings thought of this group of people: in contrast to the Greek, Roman, and American cultures, in Jewish sources the disabled were to be construed like everyone else, and they were often leaders.

This stems from some deep Jewish convictions. For the Jewish tradition, we are all created in the image of God,<sup>6</sup> and, as such, we have divine worth independent of whatever we do. That does not mean that we may do whatever we want; quite the contrary, God gives us 613 commandments, and the Rabbis add many more. Moreover, the fact that each person is created in the image of God does not mean that we have to like everyone or what everyone does. It does mean, though, that even when we judge a person harshly for his or her actions, we must still recognize the divine worth inherent in that person. The extreme illustration of that is that the Torah demands that “If a man is guilty of a capital offense and is put to death, and you impale him on a stake, you must not let his corpse remain on the stake overnight, but must bury him the same day. For an impaled body is an affront to God”<sup>7</sup> - literally, “a curse of God.” That is, the image of God inherent in even such a person must be honored. How much the more so must we honor the image of God in those who have not committed heinous crimes but happen to be disabled in some way.

The Jewish tradition is remarkable not only in how it *thought* about the disabled, but in the *actions* it demanded with and for them. In Greek and Roman cultures, “imperfect” infants were put out to die, and disabled adults were left to fend for themselves and often mocked to boot. In Jewish culture, in contrast, killing an infant for any reason constitutes murder,<sup>8</sup> and the Torah specifically prohibits cursing the deaf or putting a stumbling block before the blind.<sup>9</sup>

As Jews, we dare not forget these fundamental features of our tradition's thought and practice. On the contrary, given how other cultures treated the disabled, we should take pride in the fundamental humanity embedded in our own tradition.

With this as a background, though, it is also important that we acknowledge that Jewish sources did put the disabled at some disadvantage. This especially affected the Temple and the biblical concept of the holy. Specifically, while disabled men born into the priestly class were not denied their part of the priestly portions, they were not allowed to serve in the Temple and were instead put to menial work such as cleaning the kindling wood from worms, for which a special area was set aside: “No one at all who has a defect shall be qualified [to offer a sacrifice], no man who is blind, or lame, or has a limb too short or too long; no man who has a broken leg or a broken arm; or he who is hunchback, or a dwarf, or who has a growth in his eye, or who has a boil-scar, or scurvy, or crushed testes.”<sup>10</sup> Maimonides explains the exclusion on the grounds that “most people do not estimate a person by his true form, but by his limbs and his clothing, and the Temple was to be held in great reverence by all.”<sup>11</sup> Somehow, for the

Torah and Maimonides, one could be disabled and still function as the people's political leader, but one could not serve in the sacred precincts of the Temple. One verse in Deuteronomy even says that a man who has crushed testes or a severed penis “may not enter the congregation of the Lord”; it is not clear whether that only refers to a man who voluntarily maimed himself that way in service of some Canaanite god, or whether it refers to any man in that condition, and we also do not know the meaning or implications of “not entering the congregation of the Lord,”<sup>12</sup> but it clearly constitutes an exclusion of such men from normal status.

Now, as we turn from ancient rites to Jewish law now in practice, I shall summarize the various categories of disability and how the Rabbis treated them. In all fairness, by and large the Rabbis limited any legal restrictions on the disabled to the specific tasks the disability prevented them from doing, seeing such people otherwise as full-fledged Jews. That is, the Rabbis did not dismiss the disabled categorically from Jewish responsibilities and roles; they instead sought to empower them as much as possible. Still, Rabbinic law does impose some limitations on them in both ritual and civil law.

The disabilities the Rabbis discuss are the following: one who is insane or sufficiently mentally retarded to lack the mental ability to be held legally responsible (*shoteh*); blind (*suma*); epileptic (*nikhpeh*); sexually neuter (*tumtum*) or hermaphrodite (*androgenus*); or sterile (*saris* for a male; *aylonit* for a female). In addition, they speak about a *heresh*, a term the Mishnah defines as someone who is both deaf and mute, but the Talmud defines *heresh* as someone who is deaf but not mute, *ileim* being used to describe a mute.<sup>13</sup> That ambiguity will affect later rulings about that category.

Here, then, are some of the rulings regarding the disabled in Jewish *ritual* law:

1. Blind people should say the blessing before the Shema that praises God for creating light because even though they cannot see the light of day, they benefit from it because others see them and keep them from accidents.<sup>14</sup>
2. Similarly, even though the third paragraph of the Shema (Numbers 15:39) commands us to wear fringes so that we may see them and thereby remember God's commandments, blind people are obligated to wear fringes because others can see them.<sup>15</sup>
3. Along the same lines, even though the Shema begins with “Hear O Israel,” a deaf person, who by definition cannot hear either the command or his or her own voice saying the prayer, can nevertheless fulfill the commandment of reciting the Shema because others can hear him or her saying the prayer.<sup>16</sup>

4. Since the Torah must be read and not recited by heart, blind people may not serve as the Torah reader, but they may be called up to recite the blessings over the Torah and they may read the Haftarah from a Braille text or even recite it by heart.<sup>17</sup> A deaf person may read from the Torah as well as recite the blessings over it.<sup>18</sup>
5. A blind person may lead the congregation in prayer because blindness does not free a Jew from the duty to pray and, contrary to reading the Torah, one may pray by heart.<sup>19</sup>
6. A *heresh* (probably here a deaf-mute) cannot fulfill the obligation of the community to hear the Purim *megillah* read because such a person cannot speak audibly.<sup>20</sup>
7. Despite some arguments to the contrary, a blind person is obligated to recite the *Haggadah* of Passover, as two great, blind talmudic scholars, Rav Sheshet and Rav Joseph, did.<sup>21</sup>
8. A blind person may not serve as a kosher slaughterer, for one must see clearly to cut firmly and quickly to minimize the animal's pain. A deaf-mute or even a *shoteh*, however, may serve in this capacity if they are supervised by a person who knows how to do this and who attests that the slaughter fulfilled the requirements of Jewish law.<sup>22</sup>
9. Finally, a *heresh*, *shoteh*, and a minor are not obligated to hear the *shofar* blown on Rosh Hashanah and therefore are not eligible to fulfill the commandment for others if they blow the *shofar*. The later codes specify that this applies only to a deaf person, but a hearing person, even if mute, is obliged to hear the *shofar* blown and therefore can fulfill the commandment for others.<sup>23</sup> This is a good example of a general tendency embedded in all of these Jewish ritual laws and in Jewish civil law as well - namely, that the Rabbis restricted a disabled person's duties and eligibility only to those areas affected by the disability.

Now let us look at a few of Jewish civil laws related to the disabled. In general, deaf-mutes were categorized together with insane people and minors because the Rabbis had no way of knowing whether deaf-mutes understood what was happening or not; as a result, deaf-mutes, like minors and the insane, were not given much legal status. The blind and the crippled, on the other hand, were presumed to have full legal competence, except in areas that required someone to see or to walk. In other words, Jewish law worried most about legal competence (what American lawyers call "*mens rea*"), and that was much more likely to be compromised by mental, rather than physical, disabilities.

Here, then, are some examples, of Jewish civil laws relating to the disabled:

1. An insane person and a minor who does not realize the value of an object cannot acquire title for themselves or for others; only an agent of sound mind (such as a parent) can acquire title for them. A deaf-mute and a minor who *can* understand an object's value, however, can acquire title for themselves, although not for others.<sup>24</sup>
2. Because inheritance to and from blood relatives requires no legal transfer of property but rather occurs automatically at death, both an insane person and a deaf-mute can make bequests and receive them. In both cases, though, a trustee or guardian must be appointed to look after their affairs.<sup>25</sup>
3. An insane person cannot buy or sell property, but a deaf-mute and even a minor can buy or sell movable property (but not real estate) in order to sustain themselves.<sup>26</sup> Special care had to be taken, though, to assure that the witnesses to the sale correctly understood the gestures made by the deaf-mute to indicate an intention to buy or sell.<sup>27</sup> Someone who was mute but not deaf, however, could effect an acquisition or sale even of real estate.<sup>28</sup> Someone who sometimes was of sound mind and sometimes not, such as an epileptic, has full ability to buy or sell both movable property and real estate while of sound mind, but the witnesses must take steps to ensure that that is indeed the case during the transaction.<sup>29</sup>
4. Even though there were restrictions on the ability of deaf-mutes, insane people, and minors to acquire property, someone who took away anything such people found had committed theft.<sup>30</sup>
5. Insane people were not held liable at law, and if the situation required it, a guardian was appointed to protect the interests of both the insane person and those who might suffer as a result of his or her legal immunity.
6. An insane person may never serve as a witness, and even a sane person who is confused about a given matter may not serve as a witness about that matter. Those who are sometimes sane and sometimes insane must be tested to ascertain their eligibility as a witness.<sup>31</sup> The deaf and mute were also excluded from most testimony because the Rabbis, interpreting Leviticus 5:1, determined that one must be able not only to hear, but to speak in order to testify.<sup>32</sup> The deaf and mute could, however, testify to free a woman from becoming chained to her first husband and thus unable to remarry (*anagunah*).<sup>33</sup> The Torah's verse requiring that witnesses see what happened also excluded the blind from testifying, even if they recognize the voices of the parties.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, since these disabilities barred a person from serving as a witness, they also excluded them from being eligible to serve as a judge.<sup>35</sup>

7. An insane person could not marry because such a person could not legally consent, but a deaf-mute could.<sup>36</sup> Sterile people could marry as long as both parties were aware of that fact at the time of marriage, but otherwise the marriage was void. Someone who exhibits no sexual characteristics (a tumtum) could marry either a woman or a man, although the marriage had doubtful status. A hermaphrodite (*adrogenus*) may marry a woman but not a man because the Rabbis considered such a person male.<sup>37</sup>
8. Finally, and perhaps most indicatively, just as a person who disgraces an able-bodied person must compensate the victim with money as well as seek forgiveness, so too anyone who demeans a disabled person must pay such damages. Only an insane person is not paid for this, according to the Talmud, because being insane, in the Rabbis' judgment, already constituted a disgrace second to none.<sup>38</sup> That last provision may disturb us, but what is remarkable is that Jews were forbidden to embarrass all other categories of disabled people and had to pay damages if they did.

## **My Copernican Revolution**

*Dayyenu*, that is enough to give you a good sense of the tradition's treatment of disabilities. It is not a perfect picture; there are parts of the story and the law that we might wish were different. Those who would like to see changes in Jewish attitudes toward the disabled or the laws governing them base their arguments on the immense changes that have taken place in recent times in technology and medicine, enabling even paraplegics to get around, the deaf to communicate through sign language, and the blind to read texts translated into Braille. Psychotherapy and drug therapies have made good progress in relieving a variety of psychological disorders. Obviously, such disabilities often still compromise a person's competence to do some things, but, many maintain, the advances in what the disabled can do should move us to change Jewish law in a number of particulars. I completely agree with such moves, and I think that they are completely in line with the Rabbis' careful analysis of identifying exactly what people suffering from a particular disability can and cannot do.

In this paper, though, I want to try a completely different approach. I call it "a Copernican revolution" because like Copernicus, who got us to think of the Earth as going around the sun rather than the other way around, I similarly want to prod us to think of the world from the vantage point of the disabled. That is, I want to suggest that we think of a world in which *the norm* is what we now call "disabled," and we able-bodied and sane people are the abnormal ones. What would - or should - Jewish perspectives and law look like then?

This project of mine may seem a little crazy to you, and so before I go any further with it, I would like to point out two things that might make it seem considerably more reasonable. First, the idea struck me because of what a disabled person told me long ago - namely, that from the point of view of the disabled, all the rest of us are "*temporarily abled*"! How do you like *that* description of yourself? But we all know, of course, that they are right: Even Olympic athletes will, in the course of life, most likely lose at least some of their vision and hearing, and even the most nimble and those who exercise regularly will not escape the slowing down and the aches and pains that age inevitably brings. We nervously joke about it, but even our mental processes may dull; you do not have to have full-blown Alzheimer's to become increasingly forgetful -- and yes, often more crotchety -- as time goes on. As my wife, Marlynn, told me, the first time she heard about disabilities was at a conference of the Bureau of Jewish Education in Los Angeles in 1971, when a young woman who was wheelchair-bound told the assembled teachers: "Don't care about the disabled out of sympathy. Care for them for your own selfish reasons, for you too will be like me some day." My intention is not to depress you; it is only to point out that it is not so far-fetched to think of everyone as disabled, especially as the American and Jewish populations age.

Second, one is not just abled or disabled; there are *degrees* of disability. I, for example, have worn glasses since I was 17, and it was also during that year that I had my first asthma attack. Ever since then I have lived with these disabilities. The asthma, in particular, prevents me from engaging in fast sports. In my younger days, when the test of a male's masculinity was all-too-often connected with his athletic abilities, and when asthma medications were much less helpful than they are now, that particular malady took quite a toll on my psychological well-being and my social standing. I mention these things not to seek your sympathy, but just to indicate that each one of us is disabled in some ways -- physical, mental, interpersonal, or all of the above -- and even if we learn to cope with these problems, they do change our image of ourselves and what we can do. So all of us who think of ourselves as able-bodied should not have too much difficulty picturing ourselves as at least partially disabled.

In such a world, then, in which the norm is being disabled and the unusual thing is to have full control of one's physical and mental faculties and full ability to interact socially with people without any psychological problems whatsoever, how would we want Judaism to treat disabilities? I guarantee you that our whole attitude would change. Instead of thinking about humane treatment for the disabled as being motivated by our own compassion or God's

commandment, we would see it as simply caring for ourselves - much as we see any of the services that we Americans expect the government or others to provide for us.

With that as the norm, wheelchair access, for example, would not be a new and sensitive thing; it would be what we just normally assume. "Walk" and "Don't Walk" lights at intersections would naturally have ticking sounds so that the blind would not have to depend on the sighted or what traffic they hear to know when to cross. As many college classrooms are now equipped with internet access, so too they would have facilities for Braille transcriptions of materials being discussed in class, and they would be routinely staffed by people who sign for the deaf. The same would be true for business meetings, court proceedings, and the like. Even private homes would be easily accessible for people in wheelchairs and would be arranged to ensure that the blind would have an easy time finding their way without tripping.

As the objects of society -- the nouns -- would change, so too would daily activities -- the verbs, so to speak. That is, daily activities and special events, including trips, would be planned assuming that most people are disabled in some way. So, for example, there might still be sports for the able-bodied, together with teams and league competition, and there might even be professional sports teams for the able-bodied, but such activities would be seen simply as a subset of the larger social efforts to provide athletic expressions for all of society's members. Thus, just as there are now professional men's and women's basketball teams for the able-bodied, so too there would be professional teams for the blind, deaf, and wheelchair-bound, perhaps differentiated by sex as well. Courses in schools and colleges would be taught in a multi-media way so that people of all kinds of abilities and disabilities could participate. It would be obvious that school districts needed to schedule and pay for classes for autistic children and those with other developmental disabilities, with teachers specially trained for helping such children. Business meetings, court proceedings, and visits to the doctor, the accountant, the barber, and everyone else who provides a service or sells a product would all be easily handled by all people, regardless of their forms and levels of ability or disability. Even those inviting others to their homes would automatically think about not only the activities that they plan, but even how to give directions to get to their home for people of varying abilities and disabilities.

What kind of society would this be? Clearly, our whole way of looking at the world and what we expect of people would change. That would bring with it a number of objective, subjective, and interpersonal innovations.

First, objectively, massive economic and social changes would be entailed in the kind of Copernican revolution I am proposing. As I indicated through only a few examples, both the objects and activities of our lives would have a very different character. Much of that would cost considerable sums of money, and that is a real concern, but, truth to tell, the economic outlays to make this happen would be nothing like the 14% of Gross National Product that we currently spend on cosmetics.

The real difference would be one of attitude. Instead of thinking of ourselves with all kinds of abilities and coping with whatever disabilities we have, and instead of modeling ourselves after people with no apparent disabilities, we would instead think of human beings as coming in all kinds of shapes and sizes, abilities and disabilities.

### **The Costs and Benefits of Such a Copernican Revolution**

While I very much encourage us to entertain my proposal, I must warn you that it entails significant costs. First, in the most literal sense of the word “cost,” my plan, as I indicated above, would require major financial expenditures. There is no getting around that, and it is a major concern. To do anything like what I am proposing would require major outlays of money. We have already tasted that in the costs of complying with the Americans with Disabilities Act, but my proposal would require much more. If anything, American society today seems to be moving in the opposite direction, as we have seen the United States Supreme Court chip away at the ADA's protections and its costs over the last several years. The current Administration, and American society generally, may not be ready to spend more money on these issues, and that raises real questions about the viability of what I am suggesting.

Even apart from current spending priorities, it must be acknowledged that one important reason why society is structured as it is does not stem from fear of the disabled or prejudice against them, but from the fact that the vast majority of us, for the vast majority of our lives, are, in fact, remarkably abled. We may require glasses, asthma medications, and the like; but God has given most of us bodies that enable us to do many things for many years, and God's agents in the form of doctors and other mental and physical health care personnel are extending our abilities and their longevity yet further. Thus there is a certain plausibility in treating the abled as the norm and the disabled as the exception, not only in conception, but in creating social policy.

Furthermore - and this really gives me pause - I fear that my proposal may understate the pain involved in being disabled. After it is all said and done, it *is* harder to cope with life if you are blind and most people are sighted, deaf when most people are hearing, unable to walk when most people can, or unable to learn or interact with people as most people do. This increased difficulty encompasses not only the physical trials of getting around in the world of the abled, but the emotional challenges of feeling a sense of self-worth and the social obstacles of creating friendships. I certainly do not want to minimize those problems in the least; on the contrary, my proposal aims at mitigating them by resetting the default option in society, as it were - that is, by making us think of everyone as disabled in some way. Even less do I want to stand in the way of efforts to develop cures for disabilities or better tools to cope with them; on the contrary, I want to encourage such efforts as much as possible. So my proposal of making the disabled the norm should *not* be construed as minimizing the pain involved in disabilities or as discouraging efforts to alleviate that pain.

Moreover, to do what I am proposing would require us to do some considerable emotional work in readjusting our American way of thinking and feeling about ourselves. Currently, with the exception of doctors and other mental and physical health care personnel, most of us live in a state of denial for most of our lives about the disabilities that we ourselves will most probably incur at some later date. We do that, in part, by choosing to engage with only able-bodied people in at least the vast majority of our daily activities. We avoid visiting the sick at hospitals, not only because it is a bother and poses a real risk for infection, but also because hospitals remind us of our own vulnerability and even our own mortality, and we do not like to think about that or feel insecure.

In the society that I am proposing, though, very much like the society of our great-grandparents, people will encounter others of all ages of ability and disability on a daily basis; the disabled will not be sequestered into specific institutions for them, but will rather live at home and will regularly study and work with the more able-bodied. That may make some of us today, who are used to being protected from daily reminders of our vulnerability, terribly uncomfortable. Such feelings may pass, however, as we again get used to such a society. In many ways, this is similar to the process by which Jews of my generation gradually accepted women -- and, for that matter, men -- participating in many areas of life where they had never been before. But like the opening of roles in society to people of both genders, so too the opening of society's spaces and activities to people of all levels and forms of ability and disability will, at least, take some getting used to.

So much for the costs of my proposal. What are its benefits? First of all, making the disabled the norm would make all of us feel better about ourselves, for such a society would be much more accepting of high degrees of disability in the various areas of life. That would not stop a bad baseball player from striving to be a better one, or a person ignorant of science from becoming more adept at it, for we would still try to develop our physical and mental abilities, as we do today.

On the other hand, this social arrangement would help to control our egos, for it would remind us that our human claim to worth is not a function of our abilities. In the Torah, God warns us against claiming that “My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me. Remember that it is the Lord your God who gives you the power to get wealth”<sup>39</sup> - and, for that matter, to do anything else. We certainly can and should feel proud of our achievements, but seeing the world from the vantage point of the disabled should restore and reconfirm in us a needed sense of humility.

My proposal would also make society as a whole a kinder, gentler, more inclusive place to be. People would not be judged primarily by how much they can do or how beautiful they look; since the norm would be a lack of many abilities, people would be judged primarily by what they do to help others in coping with life. That is, *character* would have a much greater chance to be the criterion of worth in such a society - and that, I dare say, is a very nice result.

And what about the trappings of Jewish law? The intriguing part of this proposal is that it might prompt us to look with a completely new lens at a number of the details of Jewish law regarding the disabled. As I indicated above, in most cases Jewish law makes every effort to include the disabled as much as their disabilities will permit, and we should be proud of the extent to which ancient Jewish law did just that. Some provisions of Jewish law, though, would become hard to justify if we look at the world from the vantage point where most of us are disabled. For example, if most of us were blind, we certainly would not require the Torah to be read from a scroll that is only accessible to the sighted; we might *allow* reading from such a scroll, but we would presume that most people would read from a Braille text. Similarly, if most of us were deaf or blind, we certainly would not exclude deaf or blind people from giving testimony to what they did perceive through their functioning senses. Now that we know that mute people are not necessarily or even usually insane, we would treat them at law like everyone else. And we probably would maintain, contrary to the Talmud but very much in line with its reasoning regarding those asleep, that those who insult the insane *would* be liable for

damages because others hearing the disparaging remark would understand it as an insult.<sup>40</sup> Thankfully, there are only a few such cases in which Jewish law would need to be changed, but looking at the world through the lens I am suggesting makes those areas that need to be changed crystal clear.

## Epilogue

And now, with apologies to you all, I am going to pull what football players know as a “double reverse.” We owe God daily thanks that most of us, for most of our lives, do not suffer from debilitating conditions that make living life hard. Because that is the case, and because we do need to work to ameliorate the difficulties faced by people who suffer from such maladies, the norm will inevitably - and properly - continue to be people with what we have come to expect as normal human abilities.

At the same time, I hope that this thought experiment will motivate us to think much more deeply about disabilities in our society generally, and in Judaism in particular. Only when we walk in the disabled community's moccasins, at least in our imaginations, aided by what we can learn from what the disabled themselves tell us about what they face, can we begin appropriately to judge how we think about the disabled and how we treat them in society generally and in Jewish life in particular. In the meantime, may our journey into the world of the disabled - and into the upside-down world in which they are the vast majority - make us better, more sensitive people and Jews.

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## Notes

In the following, M. = Mishnah (edited c. 200 C.E.); T. = Tosefta (also edited c. 200 C.E.); J. = Jerusalem (Palestinian) Talmud (edited c. 400 C.E.); B. = Babylonian Talmud (edited c. 500 C.E.); M.T. = Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* (1177 C.E.); and S.A. = Joseph Karo's *Shulhan Arukh* (1567 C.E.), with glosses by Moses Isserles.

1. Genesis 15:2-4; 18:1-15; 25:21; 30:1-8, 22-24; 35:16-20; I Samuel 1:1-20.
2. Isaac: Genesis 27:1; Jacob: Genesis 48:10.
3. Genesis 32:25, 31-32.
4. Exodus 4:10.

5. Nahum of Gimzo: B. *Ta'anit* 21a. Dosa ben Harkinas: B. *Yevamot* 16a. Rav Joseph and Rav Sheshet: B. *Bava Kamma* 87a. There were also a number of anonymous, blind scholars: B. *Haggigah* 5b; J. *Pe'ah*, end.
6. Genesis 1:27; 5:1; 9:6.
7. Deuteronomy 21:22-23.
8. M. *Oholot* 7:6.
9. Leviticus 19:14.
10. Leviticus 21:17-21.
11. Maimonides, *Guide to the Perplexed* 3:45.
12. Deuteronomy 23:2; see commentary on that verse in *Etz Hayim* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002), p. 1122.
13. *Heresh* as deaf-mute: M. *Terumot* 1:2. *Heresh* as deaf but not mute, with ileim describing a mute: B. *Haggigah* 2b.
14. B. *Megillah* 24a-24b; S.A. *Orah Hayyim* 69:2.
15. M.T. *Laws of Fringes* 3:7.
16. I am drawing this list from the work of Carl Astor, "*Who Made People Different: Jewish Perspectives on the Disabled*" (New York: United Synagogue of America, 1985), Chapter Four, a book that I heartily recommend in its entirety. In the Talmud, whether the deaf are obligated to recite the Shema is disputed (B. *Berakhot* 15a), but the codes rule that a deaf person can fulfill the commandment: M.T. *Laws of Reading the Shema* 2:8; S.A. *Orah Hayyim* 62:3.
17. That the Torah must be read: B. *Gittin* 60b. That blind people are therefore excluded from reciting it for the congregation: S.A. *Orah Hayyim* 53:14; 139:4. That the blind may be called to recite the blessings over the Torah: Moses Isserles, gloss and the commentary of the *TaZ* (*Turei Zahav*) by Rabbi David ben Samuel Ha-Levi there.
18. Astor, "*Who Makes People Different*," pp. 75, 107-109.
19. S.A. *Orah Hayyim* 53:14.
20. B. *Megillah* 19b; S.A. *Orah Hayyim* 689:2. M.T. *Laws of the Megillah* 1:2, however, leaves out the *heresh* as an excluded category.
21. B. *Peshaim* 116b.
22. M.T. *Laws of Slaughter* 4:5; see, however, B. *Hullin* 2a, where this special circumstance permitting the animals that they slaughter for consumption is not mentioned.
23. S.A. *Orah Hayyim* 589:1-2 with the glosses of R. Moses Isserles and the *Magen Avraham* there.
24. M.T. *Laws of Acquisition (Zekhiyah)* 4:6-7.

25. M.T. *Laws of Inheritance (Nahalot)* 6:1; 10:5. As for inheritance from one's spouse, marriage to a deaf-mute or insane person is valid only by rabbinic, and not by biblical authority, because such people could not be presumed to be of sound mind and could not pronounce the blessings with the proper intent. Therefore the usual, biblical laws of inheritance, where property is passed on automatically to relatives in a prescribed order, do not apply, and the property is treated as gifts. A deaf-mute cannot give gifts but can receive them. Thus a woman who is deaf cannot transfer property to her husband, but a man who is deaf can receive property from his hearing wife (M.T. *Laws of Marriage* 22:4).
26. M.T. *Laws of Sale* 29:1.
27. B. *Gittin* 59a, 67b.
28. M.T. *Laws of Sale* 29:3-4.
29. M.T. *Laws of Sale* 29:5.
30. B. *Gittin* 59b.
31. M.T. *Laws of Testimony* 9:9.
32. B. *Gittin* 71a.
33. M.T. *Laws of Testimony* 9:11.
34. M.T. *Laws of Testimony* 9:12.
35. B. *Niddah* 50a.
36. B. *Yevamot* 112b.
37. B. *Yevamot* 81a.
38. B. *Bava Kamma* 86b.
39. Deuteronomy 8:17-18; see verses 11-18 to understand the context.
40. B. *Bava Kamma* 86b.

***<http://www.uscj.org/JewishLivingandLearning/SocialAction/Accessibility/MishanehHaBriyyotANewJewishApproachtoDisabilities.aspx>***

## Culture Change and Suggested Steps to Take

*Rabbi Brian K. Beal*

- Reading table on same level as *kahal*
- Easy access to *kippot*, *talitot*, and *mezuzot*
- Hearing loop, appropriate lighting, and other technological assistance
- Welcoming signage that indicates what assistance is readily available
- ALWAYS use a microphone
- Big print *siddurim*, *mahzorim* and handouts
- Designated space for wheel chairs, walkers, etc. (even if not yet 'needed')
- Opening announcements: "If there is anything we can do today or going forward to give you greater access to prayer and participation in synagogue life, please let us know."
- "Please rise as you are able."
- Weave Inclusion into *Divrei Torah*, teaching, storytelling, etc. (e.g. Moses stuttered, Isaac eyesight impairment, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel- mental health).
- Invite people with disabilities to serve as ushers, speakers, Torah readers, etc.
- Train *tefilah* 'friends', who can sit with people who need assistance.
- Speak openly with 'regulars', Torah study and adult education participants, choir members, etc. about welcoming people with disabilities
- Address issues related to Inclusion in the sanctuary in newsletter articles, website postings, eblasts, etc.
- Consider planning a special Shabbat service with disability as a theme (e.g. speaker, 'creative liturgy,' etc.)

## Words of Wisdom on Inclusion



Here is a collection of thoughts from various texts for use in preparing D'var Torahs, Sermons, and articles about disability issues. The Accessibility Committee encourages you to welcome congregants with disabilities by offering a "Disability Shabbat." •

- When a person insults someone else it is his own defect that he is revealing. (*Kedushim 70a*)
- Train a child according to his way; even when he is old, he will not depart from it. (*Proverbs-Mishlei 22:6*)
- Anyone who deprives a student of being taught Torah is as if he robs him of his father's legacy. (*Sanhedrin 91b*)
- As it says, "Torah tziva lanu Moshe morasha kehillat Yaakov'-Moshe commanded us the Torah, an inheritance of the Congregation of Yaakov. (*Devarim 33:4*)
- You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind. (*Leviticus 19:14*) (We do not wittingly place a stumbling block before a person with a disability, yet by ignoring their needs, we do inadvertently place a stumbling block before them.)
- And Moses said unto the Lord: "Oh Lord, I am not a man of words, neither in the past, nor since haste Thou Spoken unto Thy servant; for I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue." (*Exodus 4:10*)
- Ben Azzai taught: Do not disdain any person; Do not underrate the importance of anything-For there is no person who does not have his hour, and there is no thing without its place in the sun. (*Pirkei Avot 4:3*)
- If there be among you a needy person, thou shalt not harden thy heart, but thou shalt surely open thy hand. (*Deut. 15:7*)
- On the Talmud Yerushalmi, Masechta Horayot, the following Gemara appears (*Horayot 3:5*): Rave Yochanan said: "During the entire forty days and nights that Moshe Rabbeinu spent on Har Sinai, he kept learning the Torah and forgetting it. Finally, it was given to him as a gift. Why did this happen? To provide an answer for the slow learners."

The Penai Moshe explains: Why, the Gemara asks, was the Torah not given to Moshe as a gift at the outset? To provide an answer for the slow learners who forget whatever they learn. When they ask, Why should we labor for no purpose?" the answer will be from Moshe himself, who learned and reviewed even though it was all forgotten, until finally it was given to him as a complete gift.

- And let them make Me a Sanctuary, that I may dwell among them (*Exodus 25:8*) (This is an incredible statement of priority: the Sanctuary is not a place simply for God to dwell (the verse does not say, "that I may dwell in IT" •) but to dwell among THEM, among the people. The implication is that God dwells where the people come together. In so many ways we are trying to create the sense of community by inviting people to use the front door of the Congregation as a portal from the impersonal world of business to the personalized community of spirit. [*Rabbi Rick Sherwin, Orlando, Florida*])
- In houses of worship, we may find the common faith that binds us together. In a time when declining attendance is already a concern, it is ironic that more is not being done to draw the nation's largest minority-at 54 million people strong-into the Sanctuary. (*Robert P. Bennett*)
- Religion is about faith and compassion. It is also about unity and the building of community. But it's hard to build a community when many of those who wish to become members cannot gain access. (*Robert P. Bennett*)
- Participation in the religion of one's faith enriches lives. (*Lorraine Thal, Program Assistant, National Organization on Disability's Religion and Disability Program*)
- Give me a quiet heart, and help me to hear the thin voice of silence within me. It calls me to reflect the Divine image in which I am created. It teaches me to do my work faithfully, even when no one's eye is upon me, so that I may come to the end of each day feeling that I used its gifts wisely and faced its trials bravely. It counsels me to judge others less harshly and to love them more freely. It persuades me to see the Divinity in everyone I meet, and to see that same Divinity within me. (*Adaptation of a prayer by Rabbi Chaim Stern, by Rabbi Rick Sherwin*)

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<http://www.uscj.org/JewishLivingandLearning/SocialAction/Accessibility/WordsofWisdomonInclusion.aspx>



Jewish tradition teaches us of our obligation to ensure equal access for all people and to help facilitate the full participation of individuals with disabilities in religious and public life. We are taught “Do not separate yourself from the community” (Pirke Avot 2:5); accordingly, we must prevent anyone from being separated from the community against their will.

Furthermore, in Leviticus 19:14 we are commanded, “You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind.” Stumbling blocks come in many forms, from less-than-accessible buildings, Shabbat services, prayer books and web pages to health care that is harder to access or isn’t sufficient for people with disabilities. We are obligated to remove these stumbling blocks; this is why Judaism cares so deeply for the rights of people with disabilities.

### **Jewish Texts to Inspire Inclusive Practices**

- "For my house shall be a house of prayer for all people." (Isaiah 56:5)
- "And God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...' And God created man in His image in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." (Genesis 1:26-27)

*o On "let us make man" – As long as God is still creating, He does not in fact say 'I,' He says 'we,' an absolute, all-inclusive term which does not refer to an I outside the self but is the plural of all-encompassing majesty. It is an impersonal I, an I that does not face another Thou, that does not reveal anything but lives, like the metaphysical God of pre-creation, only in itself." (Franz Rosenzweig)*

*o On "in the image" - "Beloved is man for he was created in the image of God. Still greater was God's love in that He gave to man the knowledge of his having been so created." (Pirke Avot 3:18)*

- Two translations/interpretations from Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5:

*o "A human being mints many coins from the same mold, and they are all identical. But the holy one, blessed by God, strikes us all from the mold of the first human and each one of us is unique."*

*o "(An individual man was created) to show the greatness of God. While a person stamps many coins from a single die, and they are all alike, the King of kings has stamped every person with the die of Adam, yet not one of them is like his fellow."*

- "One who sees...people with disfigured faces or limbs, recites the blessing, 'Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who makes people different.' One who sees a person who is blind or lame, or who is covered with sores and white pustules (or similar ailment), recites the blessing, 'Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who is a righteous judge.' But if they were born that way (with the disability), one says, '...who makes people different.'" (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot B'rachot 10:12, based on B'rachot 58b)

- "But Moses said to the Lord, 'Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.' And the Lord said to him, 'Who gives man speech? Who makes him dumb or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?'" (Exodus 4:10-11)

- "Every member of the people of Israel is obligated to study Torah—whether one is rich or poor, physically able or with physical disability." (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Talmud Torah, Ch. 10)

- Two translations/interpretations from Pirkei Avot, Ethics of our Fathers, 4:3:

- o *"Ben Azzai taught: Do not disdain any person. Do not underrate the importance of anything for there is no person who does not have his hour, and there is no thing without its place in the sun."*

- o *"Treat no one lightly and think nothing is useless, for everyone has a moment and everything has a place."*

- "Do not look at the container, but what is in it" (Pirkei Avot 4:27)

- "Speak up for those who cannot speak...speak up, judge righteously, champion the poor and the needy." (Proverbs 31:8 )

- "Hinei ma tov u'ma na'im shevet achim gam yachad." - "Behold how good and pleasant it is when all people live together as one." (Psalm 133)

- "Rachmana leib'i." – "God wants only the heart."

- o *"The Mishnah tells us, 'Don't look at the flask, but at what it contains.' In teaching ourselves to see the inner sparks that light a person's soul, rather than merely glancing at the casing that holds those precious assets of personality, aspiration and caring, we can act like God in the wilderness, healing when we can, and transcending limits when we cannot." (Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson)*

- "Do not curse a person who is deaf and do not place a stumbling block in front of a person who is blind." (Leviticus 19:14)

- Deuteronomy 24:17 and 27:19, and Jeremiah 22:3 teaches us "not to oppress the stranger, the orphan and the widow." These three are offered as examples of the weakest, least well-

protected members of society. The Torah repeatedly delineates that protection and help must be afforded such members of the group.

- "Teach a child according to his way." (Proverbs 22:6) (according to his needs and abilities)
- "All Israel is responsible for one another." (Mishnah Sanhedrin)
- "We may sell a synagogue, and, similarly, all holy objects – even a Sefer Torah – in order to provide for Torah students and orphans." (Shulchan Aruch, Orech Chaim153:6)
- "Rabbi Yochanan said: 'Each of the 40 days that Moses was on Mount Sinai, God taught him entire Torah. And each night, Moses forgot what he had learned. Finally, God gave it to him as a gift. If so, why did God not give the Torah to him as a gift on the first day? In order to encourage the teachers of those who learn in a non-traditional manner.'" (Jerusalem Talmud)
- "Human beings were created as a single individual to teach you that anyone who destroys a single life is as though that person has destroyed an entire world, and anyone who preserves a single life is as though an entire world has been preserved. The creation of an individual human being was done also for the sake of peace among humanity, so that no person could say to another, "My parent is greater than your parent.'" (Talmud Sanhedrin4:5)
- "And God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good." (Genesis 1:31)
- "Oh God, may all created in your image recognize that they are kin, so that in one spirit and in one friendship, they may be forever united before you." (Traditional Liturgy)
- "When a person insults someone else, it is own defect that he is revealing." (Kedushim70a)
- "If there be among you a person with needs, you shall not harden your heart, but you shall surely open your hand." (Deuteronomy 15:7)
- "Anyone who deprives a student of being taught Torah is as if he robs him of his father's legacy." (Sanhedrin91b)
- A student should not say — "I have understood" when s/he has not understood. Rather, s/he should ask again, even several times. And, if the teacher gets angry and abuses the student verbally, she or he should say to the teacher, —Teacher, this is Torah and I must learn it, even if my capacity is inadequate. (Maimonides,Mishne Torah, Hilkhos Talmud Torah, 4:4)
- The decency of a society is measured by how it cares for its least powerful members. (Etz Hayim, commentary ed. by Rabbi Harold Kushner)

<http://www.rac.org/hineinu-jewish-texts-disability-inclusion>

[The Impossible Bar Mitzvah](#)  
[Rabbi Efrem Goldberg](#) July 2, 2015

Five years ago, I was in a store when an eight-year-old boy from our community saw me, came over, and said one word: “Rabbi.” I didn’t think anything of it until later that evening when the boy’s mother texted me to say that I had witnessed a miracle. I didn’t know what she was referring to until she explained that her son, Joe Greenbaum, is autistic.

Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder that often includes social impairment, challenges with communication, and repetitive patterns of behavior. On top of that, Joe also has a form of apraxia, an uncommon speech disorder in which the brain struggles to develop plans for speech and as a result has difficulty making accurate movements when speaking.

The combination of autism and a form of apraxia meant that for Joe, learning to speak and communicate would be nearly impossible. And yet, through incredible tenacity on his part, and with the boundless love, encouragement, and support of his family, at eight years old, Joe successfully learned how to speak. When he said the word “Rabbi” that day, an insignificant event for most people, was for Joe and his family an absolute miracle.

Interacting with Joe, it is clear that he understands that there is a world around him that he is connected to, but yet not fully part of. He desperately wants full access and full interaction, but his primitive receptive language skills simply hold him back and deny him that full access.

## **MAKING THE IMPOSSIBLE POSSIBLE**

While at times it can be hard to fully know what Joe is thinking or feeling, there are times when it is clear what he loves and cherishes. At the top of that list are his beloved family members, who have shown incredible devotion, dedication, patience, love, and care to him and his siblings, including two others with autism, throughout his life. In a close second place is Joe’s love for Judaism. Since his early childhood he has been drawn to the sound of the Shofar, enjoys listening to Jewish music (Shlock Rock in particular), loves coming to Shul and kissing the Torah, and most recently puts on his *Tefillin* with more enthusiasm and excitement than most Bar Mitzvah boys.

This past Shabbos was Joe’s [Bar Mitzvah](#) at Boca Raton Synagogue. While other parents struggle to choose a venue for the party, select a caterer, narrow down the invite list, and finalize a menu, for the last few years, Joe’s parents were struggling with the question of if – and how – he would have a Bar Mitzvah altogether. It is hard enough for an autistic child with apraxia to learn one language, but to read and speak a second is practically unthinkable and unimaginable.

And yet, rather than be fatalistic or resigned to their son not being a candidate for a public Bar Mitzvah, Joe’s parents chose to imagine, to envision, to dream, and ultimately to make the

impossible possible. With the help of Dr. Harold Landa as a Bar Mitzvah teacher, and Joe's Aunt Nina, who worked tirelessly to help him learn Hebrew, they set a goal of Joe receiving *analiyah* on the Shabbos of his Bar Mitzvah. Almost everyone around this devoted group told them it was impossible, unattainable, and an unrealistic and perhaps even unfair expectation to set, as receiving an *aliyah* involves the recitation of two blessings on the Torah. Nevertheless, with the support of Joe's team, which includes his amazing grandparents, incredible therapists, as well as Rabbi Gershon Eisenberger and Rabbi Matan Wexler, Joe's parents defiantly shut out the voices of negativity and of defeatism and tenaciously persisted towards the goal of Joe learning how to receive an *aliyah* and recite the blessings.

The next piece of the puzzle was Joe's cooperation. An autistic young man will typically not do something that he doesn't want to do. Over the last few months, Joe not only cooperated in the pursuit of his parents' goal, but he has far surpassed it. With God's help, this young man, who did not learn to speak until he was eight years old, not only received an *aliyah* this past Shabbos, but read the *maftir* as well. Watching Joe kiss the Torah, say the first blessing, recite the Torah reading and articulate the second blessing like any other Bar Mitzvah boy was to literally witness a miracle before our very eyes. As Joe was called to the Torah, the entire Shul without instruction, spontaneously stood and with tears in everyone's eyes, every person listened attentively and supportively. Joe did fantastically and after we shared a few words about him, we sang and danced as he jumped up and down with unbridled joy and excitement.

## RELENTLESS

There is so much for us to learn from this extraordinary family and their outstanding son. Firstly, as the Chida famously taught, "Nothing stands in the way of will." Joe has worked relentlessly overcoming all odds to be able to achieve what almost all of us take absolutely for granted. He has taught us that if we dedicate ourselves to achieving a dream, we can make the impossible a reality.

This accomplishment for Joe far surpasses almost anything any of us have done far beyond the age of thirteen. The Chazon Ish and the Steipler Gaon stood up in honor of special children as they entered a room. While others saw children with special needs labeled by society as disabled or even handicapped, these Torah giants saw only special souls capable of extraordinary things whose lives brought out the best of those around them.

Joe's team has taught us to never stop believing in [every single child](#), no matter his or her limitations. They have modeled how to never stop dreaming or setting the bar high, even when others tell you it is impossible, unrealistic, and unachievable. They have taught us how to persevere, despite being physically and spiritually tired, how to keep going, even when at times you desperately want to give up. They regularly remind us how to be grateful for the things that almost all others take for granted.

This past Shabbos, there was one last piece of the puzzle necessary to complete the picture for Joe and his family: the role played by us, his community and Shul. Enabling Joe and anyone like him to experience his Bar Mitzvah is not only the responsibility of his family, but is a duty of our entire community. Facilitating a Bar Mitzvah for an autistic young man requires patience, flexibility, and cooperation. We adults can learn from Joe's classmates who just completed 7<sup>th</sup> grade at Hillel Day School. They, too, are part of his loving team and regularly make accommodations to enable his participation.

Every special needs child and their families deserve our unwavering support, love, patience, inclusiveness, and, when necessary, accommodations. Raising special children requires superhuman strength and sacrifices that are beyond our imagination. Lessening their challenges, being supportive and encouraging, are not extra acts of kindness. It is our responsibility, duty, and obligation to fill in our piece of the puzzle.

If you don't believe in miracles, speak to anyone who was present at our shul this past Shabbos for Joe's bar mitzvah and they will testify that we witnessed one together.

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**<https://www.ou.org/life/inspiration/the-impossible-bar-mitzvah/>**