Meredith Polsky: Good afternoon, good morning, depending on where you are joining us from. On behalf of RespectAbility and our panelists today, I'm really glad to welcome you to today's webinar, "How to Advance Disability Inclusion in Jewish Education." My name is Meredith Polsky. I'm with Matan. I'll be moderating this webinar as well as participating in it. So we're really excited that you're all here today. We have two other really amazing presenters with us. I'm happy to welcome my colleagues, Lianne Heller from Sulam and Debbie Niderberg from Hidden Sparks. We are three organizations that have related, but different approaches, in terms of how we bring inclusion to Jewish education. It used to be that kids with disabilities just didn't have access to a Jewish education, and some people may still assume that, and so we're hoping today to really debunk that myth, and help everybody on this webinar understand how you can make inclusion a reality in whatever type of Jewish educational setting you are in. I know that RespectAbility would like to thank all the sponsors that have made this webinar series possible, including the Jewish Community Foundation of Los Angeles, the Diane and Guilford Glazer Philanthropies, the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, among the other ones that you can find on your screen, and you will also be able to access these slides after the presentation is done. RespectAbility has round up an impressive list of co-promoters for this webinar series. Again, you can read through this list after the webinar is complete. As I mentioned this is one webinar that's part of a much larger webinar series - you'll see Tuesdays through all of July and most of August, each week, addressing a different piece of disability inclusion, and we hope that you'll be able to join for all of them. So according to the United States Census, 1-in-5 people in the United States has a physical, sensory, cognitive, mental health or other disability. RespectAbility actually conducted a landmark study of more than 4,000 people in the year 2018 and found that more than 90% of the people who responded said that this was a priority for them. So in a sense, that's great news for our Jewish community. RespectAbility's nonprofit survey, though, showed that this inclusion is actually practiced by less than one-third of nonprofit organizations. The studies show that while the will was there, the knowledge was not. And I know I'm speaking on behalf of all of the organizations that are contributing to these webinars, that this free new series that RespectAbility has pulled us together for, aims to address that gap along along with the work that all of these organizations are doing to try to fill this need. Like I said, my name is Meredith Polsky, I'm with Matan. Lianne Heller is joining us as the executive director of Sulam and Debbie Niderberg is the executive director of Hidden Sparks. I'm going to start by telling you a little bit about Matan, and then our two panelists will have the opportunity to share the over all mission and vision of their organizations, and just so you know, the structure of our webinar, we're first going to share information about each of our organizations and help you understand a little bit about what makes them similar and what makes them different, and then we're going to be in conversation with one another with some prepared questions and then we will leave time for your questions as well. One in five, that's the number of people with disabilities in the united states today. Matan enables Jewish professionals, communities, and families to create and sustain inclusive settings in educational, communal and spiritual aspects of Jewish life. We do this in a few different ways and I just want to highlight our main activities so you will get a sense of what Matan does as an organization. we work with communities to understand their inner workings and priorities - especially, of course, when it comes to inclusion. We try to identify local expertise and resources, so that nobody is left to reinvent the wheel and spend precious dollars where they don't need to be spent. We work with communities to identify areas of strength and challenge when it comes to jewish inclusion. and we serve as an independent, expert voice in bringing various local agencies to the table. At the end of our community consultations, we create and submit a report of recommendations which outlines short-term and long-term goals, based on the information gathered from a cross-section of professionals and lay leaders in that particular community. We understand the need for free and low-cost and no-cost recommendations: we offer those as well as sort of intermediate cost items and higher level, longer-term ideas as well. The Matan institutes, or flagship training program, and hopefully, there are some people on this call that are part of them, our cohorts are geared towards specific groups of educators or leaders that receive deep inclusion training over ten months. They're nationally and regionally based. Typically they're a blended learning experience of in-person and online, though our applications are currently open for our first-ever, totally online Matan Institute experience, where everybody will still receive 1-to-1 mentorship and nationally renowned Jewish and secular trainers. And finally, we offer conversation, curricula and consultation through our free webinar series, curriculum materials that are posted on our website and on-site and remote training sessions and consultations-- [ alarm sounds ] with teachers - that's my alarm - teacher training sessions, consultations with teachers, boards and other organizations, and my contact information is there at the bottom and of course, you can access it after this webinar as well. I'm happy to invite Debbie from Hidden Sparks to share Hidden Sparks's mission and vision as well.

Debbie Nidenberg: Thank you. So as I started thinking about this, we've been zooming along and so I highlighted key sections because I felt that would be easier for all of us to focus. So true to our name, Hidden Sparks, our goal is to help uncover the hidden sparks - I'm not reading from the mission statement. I'm talking it through with you - so specifically, those children who might otherwise fall through the cracks in Jewish day schools and through helping the hidden sparks, ultimately we believe all students succeed to their fullest. We do this through a powerful educational vehicle, through on-site coaching and teacher training. This is site-based, to help understand - to help the teachers understand struggling learners and strategies to help them, and we built capacity in Jewish day schools by nurturing teachers and school leaders with expertise. You can just go to the next slide. So our key audiences are clearly, obviously, the student and we feel the best way to reach the student is through teacher training, developing internal school expertise - those are our faculty peer coaches, and ultimately, leaving teachers and schools better equipped to work with a variety of students. Okay. go to the next slide, please. So our five C's are, we try essentially when we were creating, when we were launching Hidden Sparks, and I was one of the co-founders, to combine best practices into one package. So our focus is on the student - it's on the whole student, it's a strength-based approach. I'm just going to jump for a minute to curriculum and understanding the whole student and we do that, if you can see the three icons, we do that through a unique curriculum that combines understanding children through neurodevelopment, temperament and ecology. it's a coaching model that is sustained in school every week, involves collaboration, building teams, teacher teams, and student collaboration between student and teacher, teacher to teacher, teacher teams across schools and finally building the capacity of the school and building nurturing peer coaches so that they can turnkey it in their school. And finally, the next slide. So this is our infographic with, again, our four key audiences. Reaching diverse learners and through them, whole classroom - through the work with teachers and whole school change. We reach an average of 8,800 students per year. We're now an international program as well, we've worked in 110 Jewish day schools, plus at this point, about 15 schools in Israel, Israeli-Arab, and Israeli [ audio difficulty ] and Teachers of the Year recognized by New York State continuing education, as well as the ministry of education in Israel, and we are proud to have won several awards and recognition. Just to sum up, it's basically a multiyear coaching and teacher training program, site-based in schools, but in addition, we have all kinds of - we have a robust webinar series that's completely free, available to schools nationwide, and we have other programs for schools and I'll share that on our chat.

Meredity Polsky: Thank you so much, Debbie. Lianne.

Lianne Heller: Hi. Thank you so much. So Sulam is a school within a school. We are actually serving students directly who would not be able to access general education in a Jewish school, and we bring in students from kindergarten through 12th grade, into our host school - currently Berman Hebrew Academy, and we create individualized programs for them. They each have their very own personal program where they are going into Berman Hebrew Academy classrooms and often with an instructional assistant or a form of support to ensure that they're accessing the content that's being offered. Our goal is to ensure that they do truly experience a full inclusion education. We know that, in special education circles, we talk about special education is not a place, it's a service, so we believe very, very deeply that putting students into the general education classroom and not segregating them and putting them into their own self-contained classroom and teaching them there is no longer the way we view special education. So our students are being integrated into classrooms. We work very, very closely with the general educators and with our host school to ensure a true inclusion experience, and we also provide professional development to the school, to the host school that we're in, in the framework of universal design for learning, which is considered the framework to use for inclusion. If you can just move on thanks, to the next slide. Our vision is really to create an educational approach where learning differences are actually celebrated which is something that we do very effectively with our students. We teach our students to embrace who they are, to self-advocate. Our goal is that our students leave their senior year feeling very strong and very powerful and recognizing who they are and feeling comfortable to self-advocate and to go onto college and to be successful there. Our vision is also to ensure that the rest of the school community understands that differences can be celebrated and should be celebrated, and everybody, the diverse group makes an impact on the difference on their entire group. Okay, if you could just move on from there. Thank you. It is a lot of information, we're obviously a school doing a tremendous amount of work. We have a team of special educators working with our students that includes clinical psychologists, social-emotional learning specialists, reading specialists, math and Judaic specialists, all creating together a very unique program for every one of our students so that they can have a successful inclusion experience at Sulam. Thank you.

Meredith Polsky: Wonderful. Thank you to both Debbie and Lianne. So, we're going to frame the rest of this webinar as really a conversation between myself and Lianne and Debbie, and I believe you were sent these questions - our participants were sent these questions in advance. We just wanted to give you a little bit of a sneak peek, but I'm actually going to stop my share so that the panelists and I can see each other and be better able to converse with one another and share our experiences with you. So Debbie, I will ask you, first, to tell us a little bit about - I know you're a founder of Hidden Sparks - can you tell us the story behind your organization?

Debbie Niderberg: Sure, sure. I actually came from a foundation role. I was previously running the - had the privilege to previously run the Nash Family Foundation, and we had done a lot of work in teacher training with all kinds of minds, for example, to bring teacher training toward Jewish day schools, then some donors approached me with a special interest in Jewish day schools, and struggling learners and we knew that, based on our experience, we were not looking for one-off, we were not looking for stand-alone, professional development, but really looking for more of a sustainable high-impact program - and prepared to go outside of what was existent in the Jewish community to find something that would really be sustainable and change the landscape in Jewish day schools. So we went out, we conducted due diligence, we ran focus groups with school leaders. We met with educational experts, and what we saw - and now, Hidden Sparks started 13 years ago - what we saw 13 years ago was that diverse learners was really not on the radar, that, in fact, to this day, there is very little research that exists in this field specifically within Jewish day schools, that although what we heard was there was a quite a large number of diverse learners or children struggling from learning disabilities in Jewish day schools, the estimates are that there's close to 20% of students that struggled with some sort of disability, and in some settings, for example, some of the yeshivas that we where English is a second language, like Brooklyn yeshivas for example, in some of those schools, we are finding that number - it's been reported to us that number could be as much as 40%, but the recognition was that this was widespread. We also find that schools did not have the expertise in working with struggling learners. They didn't have the resources that struggling learners not identified, they were pushed from grade to grade level through the system, there was no coordinated way, necessarily. I'm not talking about the top schools, I'm talking about all the schools in between, that there was no coordinated way - and coordinated discussion between general studies that would come in the morning - sorry, Judaic studies would come in the morning and general studies in the afternoon - there's no conversation between them about how to reach these students, and we all know that for struggling learners, school can be very demoralizing and lonely and hard. And we realized that there were very few resources and a lack of professional development in this area, in general, but also very specifically in Judaic studies So we founded Hidden Sparks with the premise is that there are large numbers of struggling students and children with learning disabilities in mainstream settings, and if we could bridge the gap between the skills and knowledge in the field of learning disabilities and special education and bring that skill set and that knowledge to teachers on the frontlines in Jewish day schools, then that would be - and strategies -that would be a game-changer. We also wanted to - again, we were staying away from the aha- [ technical difficulty ] that would really enhance the mindset of a teacher, that's why we chose the coaching model, which is to work with a teacher. If we were looking to shift mindset then we recognized that needed to be - that all schools are different, that all classrooms are different - schools that work with - we were in Bukharian schools and we were in - schools serving Bukharian children and lower-income children and top-tier schools and a full range - I'm finishing up. So that was why we chose a coaching model. And finally coming from the foundation world where it was so important to us to build a program that showed sustainability and capacity building, that this was going to be a very core piece of any program that we built. So that was how we got to this.

Meredith Polsky: Thanks so much, Debbie. Maybe I'll share my story next and then I will ask Lianne. So like Debbie, I am also a founder of Matan. We began our work in the year 2000. Debbie, I think you were one of the very first people I met with when you were at Nash Family Foundation, and for those of us who are missing camp these days, my story is a camp story. I had just graduated from college. I was a division head at the Jewish overnight summer camp where I had grown up and the buses rolled in on the first day. I know actually today would have been the first day of this particular camp. And you know, I got on super excited, like rah, rah welcome to camp attitude and I got on the first bus that pulled up. I climbed up onto the steps and I said, "hi , everyone, welcome to camp! I'm Meredith!" And a little boy from the front seat looked up and said, "like I care!" And I sort of knew in that moment that he was going to be my most challenging camper, but he was also going to be my favorite camper. I was responsible for the youngest age group, so my youngest campers were nine years old going into fourth grade and they had special shirts coming in which is why I knew he was one of mine. And I was right really on both counts. He was my most challenging camper and we're not supposed to have favorites but he was my favorite camper. And we were in this situation where Josh had significant ADHD, learning challenges, some deficits that made it difficult for him to interact socially with the other boys in his bunk, and of course, as we all know, coupled with 17 and 18-year-old counselors who didn't really receive training in how to accommodate campers like this, Josh and I ended up spending quite a lot of time together and we built a really close relationship really quickly. And as it turned out, that really quickly piece turned out to be really key because after just six days of camp, Josh was actually sent home. The camp administration he was taking too much time from one particular staff member, myself, who was supposed to be in charge of a whole group of campers and counselors and I was really devastated when he got sent home, but the summer ended. Josh and I actually wrote letters back and forth throughout the rest of that summer and around October, I called a friend of mine who I knew was a teacher n the Jewish day school that Josh attended and I said, "hey, I just really wanted to see how Josh was doing." And my friend said, "oh, I don't know. He got kicked out." and it was sort of like this light bulb moment. I had just finished college. I was living on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. I really didn't know what I was going to do next in my life. But I thought here is this family that tried to give their children the best of what Jewish education has to offer and were rejected at every turn, and doing some research, I discovered that actually wasn't so much of an exception as a rule, more than 20 years ago, and I decided I was going to go to grad school and really set my sights on trying to bridge this gap and solve what I thought to be a real crisis around this issue in the jewish community. S that's the story of Matan. I'll tell you more about what we do currently and I will let Lianne go ahead and tell us a little bit of the background story of Sulam.

Lianne Heller: Thank you. So unlike Debbie and Meredith, I'm not a founder of Sulam. I've come onto the scene a little later. Sulam was founded 21 years ago by a group of parents who had children with intellectual disabilities mostly with Down syndrome, and felt very, very strongly that their children had the right to participate in the local Jewish day school and with huge courage and determination, formed Sulam, a very, very small program. They did form it initially as being a somewhat more self-contained program than, by all means what it is right now. Right now we really are an inclusion program. But my personal story in Sulam comes also of a mother of a child who was at that very same community day school and by third grade was rejected from the school, unable to be successful there, had to leave, was accepted into a program for the gifted and talented, lost his confidence within the Jewish community, didn't feel that he could participate in synagogue any longer and in the end, truthfully, he was able to go to college at a very, very young age and be very successful there. So I came into the field wondering why is it that our Jewish students can be successful in other places, but we haven't found a place for them in our Jewish day schools? With that idea, we began opening up to a greater range of students at Sulam. We now serve students who have autism, who are gifted and talented that have learning challenges, who have language-based learning disabilities, ADHD, all disabilities that can be served in Jewish day schools, but our students are impacted to the level that they really aren't successful without a significant amount of support and help to be included. So we developed a team of educators who now ensure that our students can participate in the classroom, they're going into general education classrooms - they can participate there because because they are getting the support they needed. We bring students into our program who have very often suffered from extreme failure in their Jewish day school or in a school. They come feeling very, very bad about themselves. We've created social-emotional learning team and clinical psychologists who really provide a wrap-around support for our students so that they can recover what might have been a very negative experience for them and can turn themselves around with our support and begin to embrace their Judaism, and get the joy of being part of a community and at the same time, participate at a level that they are actually giving something of themselves to the community. What we know is that there's no such thing as the average learner, everybody's a diverse learner - we learn differently at different times of the day, we each learn differently different subjects - there are so many differences just within ourselves let alone to each other. And so when you have an inclusion program in your school, you are elevating instruction so that everybody in the classroom can learn from the strategies and the techniques that special education has to offer. I'll just end with the one line that we often say that special education is just really good education. And so we're providing really good education to our students and the result is that it trickles out to the rest of the community and so actually I know that the schools that we're in, that we're participating in, are actually benefitting from Sulam's presence, from our students' presence as much as we're benefitting from them. I'll leave it at that. Thank you.

Meredith Polsky: Thank you so much, Lianne. I notice there are questions coming up in the chat box that we'll get to a bit later on, as well. Debbie, I'm going to go back to you and ask, what were some of the questions that have come up during the life of your organization?

Debbie Niderberg: Okay. So, one key question revolved around knowing who we are. We constantly get requests from schools and from institutions to run stand-alone PD, and yet we believe in a sustained coaching model where we're in the schools week after week, and it's not a short-term kind of thing but something that goes deeper. So we'd rather stick with going deeper in a school and reaching more teachers When we replicate expansion in replication, we really believe in partnering with other - we do a lot of partnering with other agencies and other communities and to work with them to strengthen the local resources so that they can then work with their team of Jewish day school teachers. This has necessitated sometimes altering the model a little bit and more recently being known to do some stuff online, even pre-COVID and certainly when we considered expansion to Israel, working with different cultures, international replication and expansion, there were lots of issues and there remain, with a completely different system, different issues to work with. When are we ready to expand into new programs? For a long time, we were wondering, when is the right time to begin working with parents? And we felt we needed to really - for a while, we really needed to just strengthen our- there's a famous thing around cheesecake, doing one thing really well. So that was our motto - we're going to really do teacher training and coaching well before we start working with parents. But certainly with what we've always had, we have a webinar series also for parents - it was more recently the DOE, for example, in New York approached us to begin working with parents, and so now we're considering opening up a parent engagement center and post-Covid, we ran many workshops for parents on how to negotiate these challenging times. So that was - those were some touch points and finally, we always struggled with - since one of our goals is school change, we've always struggled with our expectations. When should - when is just reaching lots of students and reaching lots of teachers, when is that - what's appropriate for the school? and when is it more appropriate to really work with them on a full school change model. So those were some of the more organizational growth.

Meredith Polsky: Thank you, Debbie. Lianne, I will ask you next. What are some of the questions that have come up during the life of Sulam or during your tenure at Sulam? You have to unmute yourself, Lianne.

Lianne Heller: There's a lot, and I will try to keep it brief. You have your typical questions, such as are children stigmatized in a school setting when they are different? And I think back in the day, there was stigmatism, and that is something that we had to address and the one thing that I will say is I believe truly by bringing students in with differences and allowing students who so-call don't have differences, to intermingle and mix, and they get to see that everybody has their differences and yet everybody is the same, too. We break stigmatism down that way. So in other words, exposure breaks down stigmatism. We have programs for all of the students to talk about learning differences and challenges, and we've increased that programming over the years and it's been very successful, and I can honestly say that the students at Berman Hebrew Academy where we house our program now, they filmed a very beautiful video, telling - you can actually go onto the video, it's in this PowerPoint, you can click on it - and it shows those Berman students talking about their experience with many of our students and it's a really beautiful and eye-opening video to watch. So stigmatism is something that we've addressed and it's a continual practice of addressing. The cost of our program is high. It is high. Special education is expensive. We're constantly looking at changing models and collaborating more with schools to share the financial costs of special education, but it is just an expensive undertaking. We also have the challenge of really having true partnership with - general educators are as important as special educators, and having the time to truly partner with one another, to bring a very appropriate experience to all of the students, can sometimes be challenging and addressing that head on with authenticity and sincerity can resolve that challenge, but one has to be aware of the challenge all the time and work on it continuously. And then the last piece and again, we are kind of getting beyond this, but initially, the question of inclusion was often - well, what is the student getting out of being in this classroom? If a child has a significant intellectual disability and we're placing them in a fourth grade social studies classroom, the question would be, but what are they getting out of it? And we had to teach the teachers that being included, setting a student's personal goal meant that they were getting plenty out of being in the classroom, maybe just not exactly the same as everybody else, and that's okay. One issue that we dealt with is really laying the groundwork at a school for bringing a student in with a disability, helping the whole school understand what is it that the child needs and how can you address the needs best. We discovered that many Jewish day schools don't know about universal design for learning, which is a framework that lays the groundwork for inclusion and so we have begun providing professional development to schools in the framework of universal design for learning. Thanks.

Meredith Polsky: Thank you. So on behalf of Matan, I will answer some of the questions that have come up during the life of our organization, which I have been at since the very beginning, and when we first started back in the year 2000, we were very much a direct service organization. We were knocking on the doors of synagogues and schools and JCCs and basically saying, listen you have this really big problem that you don't know about. you know, which is disability inclusion, and we want you to hire us to help you solve that problem. We were very much synagogue to synagogue, school to school, family to family, and we did that, mostly in the New York tristate area for the first ten years of our organization's life. And at the ten-year mark, we underwent a strategic evaluation, and basically what we found was that we were having a really significant impact on a really small number of people, and we had really set out when we started the organization to really change the fabric of Jewish life in terms of disability inclusion, and so we really pivoted at that time and as an organization, we morphed into much more of a training organization, thinking that if we could train leaders and educators throughout the country, we would really be creating ripple effects towards greater Jewish disability inclusion. So that is probably the biggest question that came up for Matan and now, we're able to do training of all different kinds of educators, both formal, informal, from religious school educators to camp professionals, whatever the case may be, and I would say the other big question that's come up over the last 20 years is, what exactly do we mean by special needs and disabilities? Right? So when we started out, we were thinking, really, things that could impact or interfere in a classroom. Back then we were thinking about learning disabilities and we were thinking about autism spectrum disorders, though that actually grew in prevalence after the first few years of Matan - we were thinking about things like dyslexia and things like auditory processing disorder and I think as we've grown as an organization and as we've expanded our trainings and our offerings, what we've really come to understand is that a special need or a disability is anything that affects a person's ability to successfully participate in the parts of the Jewish community that they would like to participate in. So whether it's a physical barrier, whether it's a mental health challenge, whether it's a developmental disorder or delay, anything that there's potentially a barrier towards in the Jewish world, that's what we want to address. So Lianne, maybe we'll start with you this time. and we have a little bit less time for this question, about two minutes to answer this one. From the perspective of Sulam and your work, what does success look like? I'll remind to you unmute yourself.

Lianne Heller: Thank you. Success for us is a student who ends high school with a full set of tools to self-advocate. Having self-awareness, able to say freely and comfortably what their disability is and what they need to get to where they need to go. So that could be for a child who goes to college who knows that they have to - on day one, has to walk into the student support services department and let them know what the requirements are in order to be successful, it could be a student with an intellectual disability who starts work, who goes - we help our students go through interview processes and help them explain what their needs are in order to be successful. Jt could be a student who is going to Israel, to seminary or to a yeshiva, wherever they go, they're proud of who they are, they're self-aware, they know the disability doesn't taint them in any negative way, it's just who they are, and they can ask for help and receive the support they need to be successful and properly included in society. That's our big, long-term goal. Obviously the work that goes into producing that is a step-by-step process with the family and with the student and with the educational team altogether, working together.

Meredith Polsky: Thank you so much, Lianne. So I think f rom Matan's perspective, I think that success looks like having ambassadors in every community, in every Jewish community across the country and beyond, who are advocating for inclusion - not because this is what they do for a living, but because they've been trained in some way by Matan, either through an intensive institute or professional development, through a webinar they found online, and that they've decided that inclusion really is important and really is something to keep at the forefront of people's minds, and that they recognize that inclusion can't simply rest on the shoulders of those of us who do inclusion for a living - it really has to be a communal responsibility. One that everybody recognizes as important because why should we be able to decide who can be included and who can be excluded when it comes to Jewish life. And I think success also looks like inclusion that is proactive rather than reactive. So I think success looks like people who know when they're starting to create a program or an event or in an organization, whatever the case may be, that we need to look at inclusion right from the beginning of those building blocks and not try to build it in as something after the fact. And Lianne talked about this in terms of universal design - it's a very similar concept - it's much more difficult to figure out how to make something inclusive when inclusion wasn't part of the initial intent And so I think the more people we train, the more communities we do sort of full community consultations with, the greater chance we have that we have of making sure that inclusion remains a priority because we have many more ambassadors out there helping it remain so.

Debbie Niderberg: So first of all, it's inspiring to hear how, clearly, we have a long way to go, but it's inspiring to hear as a field, with my colleagues and really it's how far we've come. But just in terms of success for us, we look at success on three different levels. Clearly for the students, we're hoping and what we want to see is students who have teachers who uncover that spark, who are able to align with them and feel compassion and who are discussing and seeing the whole student, discussing and seeing them from a strength-based approach, celebrating them, finding their - whatever their case may be, finding the areas in which they excel, and these are stories that we hear from all of our schools all the time - finding those areas in which they excel and then helping shine the light so that student feels empowered and that they feel more successful at school. It's ensuring that that teachers are collaborating with each other, that they're also not globalizing a problem. This child has ADD or ADHD, but really pinpointing - maybe it's a memory issue, maybe it's a language-based disability and that they have the skills and expertise and strategies to respond. Finally for schools, we have a school that just graduated and they have, for example, they have a trained, internal coach - we call them internal coaches - working with every single grade in the school. They have ongoing professional learning community meetings. They have monthly meetings between Judaic studies and general studies teachers to really drill down and see where the student is and a coordinated plan of action, and that the principal is onboard and using the Hidden Sparks language and lens to, in non-judgmental discussions across the school and the faculty room and so it's multi-tiered, but the moment that a child feels that a teacher is aligned with them and understands them and that's the heart of what we're getting to, then that student immediately changes and they're invested and by all research accounts, that's when the change begins to take place.

Meredith Polsky: Thank you. Debbie, we're going to stick with you if that's okay, give you the first pass at this next question. I'm wondering what your advice would be for a community that is trying to address people with disabilities and disability inclusion more effectively?

Debbie Niderberg: So I think there are a few things and there are plenty of resources in this space right now. It's really important to do due diligence with key stakeholders - we learned from focus groups, hearing from the schools and hearing from different models, when we started, change takes time. We were very successful, for example, in beginning a pilot with seven schools. I mean, obviously, it's a lot larger now, but beginning with seven schools, tweaking, reflecting and so I would just say, do the research and then I would also leverage the resources that you have in the community in which you're in, cultivating the expertise that you have, whether it's local organizations that you can tap and local partners and it's been really important for us, for example, to involve the schools in the strategic plan. So we feel that that's key to have the buy-in from the school leaders and invest them in every stage of this, so that they own the process.

Meredith Polsky: Thank you. Yeah. I totally agree with everything you said, Debbie. I'll just add, I would say don't be afraid to get things wrong, right? I think that's really important. sometimes we don't start because we don't know where to start or because we're afraid we don't have it quite right. I think it's important to get started and take risks and ask questions and involve people who are going to be affected by your decisions, right? Making sure to involve people with disabilities, with special needs. There's a quote in the disability world, nothing about us without us, and I think that's so critical because we're not going to get it right until we really involve all voices and make sure that we're asking the right questions. Lianne, what would your advice be?

Lianne Heller: I think we have to stop viewing inclusion as an option. I think that if we view it as an absolute necessity and if we recognize how beneficial - basically, it's the diversity question, bringing in diverse learners into a school elevates education overall. The thing that I am - I wonder about and I'm taken aback by is, in so many of our Jewish day schools, the percentage of children who require some kind of special education support in their environment is very high. It ranges between 30 and 40 and sometimes even more percent of the entire school and that's a lot of children who need additional support. I think what very often happens, that's one piece that I wonder about and I'm curious about and I believe school leadership needs to think about that very carefully and invest in very strong professional development in special education if they've got that high percentage of students needing special education. So that's one thing that I think about. The other thing I think about a lot is what schools do when they are confronted with students who learn differently and they believe that they're not going to be able to support the student effectively. I've spoke to many, many heads of schools and they fall into two different buckets. One bucket will say, we're a community school and therefore, we must accept every student we possibly can. And they do, but they don't have the supports in place and very often the child fails and when they fail in a Jewish day school, very often, very sadly, the Judaism gets linked with that failure and we therefore lose exactly what we're trying to do - we lose that feeling of community for the child because they experienced failure in that environment. So the importance of making sure that you do have the support in place if you take the student is absolutely essential. And then the other bucket is schools who say, well, we know we can't support the child, we don't want to fail them and we don't accept them. My advice is to find ways make it possible. It's a very tough road and very often comes down to finances, I do understand that. But again, if we believe that inclusion is not an option, we will find a way. That's it. Thank you.

Meredith Polsky: Thank you. So we're running out of time and I want to make sure that we have some room for questions. I believe Matan Koch of RespectAbility has been monitoring those questions and will pose some of them to us. I wanted to acknowledge maybe the elephant in the room, which is that we're in the midst of a global pandemic and just to sort of put it out there, but I think one of the concerns, those of us who work in disability inclusion in the Jewish community is, where will this emerge on the communal list of priorities, both during and after this crisis. And the way that I'm really thinking about it is that we have sort of experienced a collective access issue during the time of this pandemic. certainly, perhaps even more so for people with disabilities, but in some ways, we've really leveled the playing field, right? We're all having our own access issues, whether it's through work or through school or through family or whatever the case may be, and I think we need to remember what that feels like and as we move forward, I think what Lianne was saying, all the more so, inclusion can't be optional. We've seen over the past three or four months that inclusion is not optional, right? That if we had not all pivoted, no matter what field you're working in, then exclusion would have been the norm over inclusion for all of us. I think that's going to be really important for us to remember. Matan, I know there are some - there were some things in the chat. there's a separate box called Q&A. I'm not sure if you want to fire some questions at us.

Matan Koch: Well, so, thank you, Meredith. I'm not turning on my camera so I will be the voice and not distract from our panelists. There are questions in the Q&A. We probably won't be able to get to all of them. The powerpoint has email contacts for our panelists and please feel free to reach out. One question that was offered here is, how can we ensure that inclusion doesn't simply mean that a student with a disability is in the classroom but they are receiving a substantive education that is designed around their need?

Meredith Polsky: Debbie or Lianne?

Lianne Heller: I can go. At Sulam, the academic aspect of our students' work is paramount. We actually look into different curriculum for different students. We really design and create a very unique and customized program for the child. Our goal is to maximize the academic success. Our students do go to college. We put in instructional assistance so we're previewing academic work, we're reteaching academic work, if necessary. We hold really high standards. We're a data-driven organization. We are checking to see that there's growth in progress. We don't have a legal document that the IEP is, because we're a private school. We have something called a formal education plan. But we're a data-driven organization that holds high academic, social, emotional and behavioral standards - all of them wrapped into one. Having said that, we know that cognition and emotion can't be separated, so we're addressing both all the time, and so I believe that it is very possible. It is not an impossible equation.

Debbie Niderberg: I know the teachers who our coaches work with at Hidden Sparks, the students are not - are getting the same, they're in mainstream classrooms. They're working with the rest of the students getting the same academic - their academics are not shifting in any way. It's a matter of working with the teachers to understand what stumbling blocks are and identifying that so that they can help them with strategies to be able to succeed in the academics, but not mussing with it in any way.

Matan Koch: Is anyone else - I think that has been answered. I'm going to say this will be sadly, the last question that we can pose because we need to do some close-up things so the question has been posed and I see Meredith has answered in text so if anyone wants to add anything in in voice. Religious school teachers aren't necessarily education professionals with training and opportunities. How can we best support them in supporting students with disabilities? I'm paraphrasing.

Meredith Polsky: Yeah. I think it's really - I answered it in the text, as you said. But I think it's a really important question. I think 80% of children who receive a Jewish education do so in supplemental school settings, and so it's a really critical piece and many religious school educators are not trained in education - certainly not special education and I think we do need to do more to support them. Children who go to religious school pose many different kinds of challenges than in a day school setting, right? they're coming after a full day of school. They're coming after a weekend after a sleepover or whatever. There are a lot of challenges there. At Matan, we do offer, partly because Hidden Sparks is doing such a wonderful job in the day school realm, we have really focused our efforts elsewhere in terms of religious schools, JCCs, camps, early childhood programs, things like that. We do do one-off professional developments for religious school teacher because their time is so limited. We also offer Matan institutes specifically for religious school directors so that they can better support their teachers and I gave a couple of other ideas in my written response. I know that Matan has a couple of words of closing. I just want to say thank you on behalf of myself and Matan, Debbie Niderberg and Hidden Sparks and Lianne Heller and Sulam, for inviting to us participate in this webinar series. We're looking forward to hearing the webinars of our colleagues moving forward. and Matan, I will re-share my screen so you can share the final slides.

Matan Koch: Perfect. And so first, I want to thank all of the panelists for giving of their time and of their expertise and I want to say that you will be able to access this presentation, including the interpretation and the captions and the accessible PowerPoint on our website shortly after this completes and in perpetuity. You will also be receiving a link to a quick survey to fill out to tell us how you liked it. It should take you no more than three minutes and I wanted to, as we say farewell, say that we at RespectAbility are actively looking for the next cohort of engaged Jewish community members - we call them Jewish leaders but leadership is a very broad definition - with disabilities, and please feel free to direct them to Project Moses on our website, either if they're in Los Angeles or willing to participate remotely on LA time. If I can get to the next slide, please. We can pass that, we've actually happily hired a Jewish Inclusion Fellow today. [laughter] And now I will say that next week at this exact same time and this exact place, we will be talking about how to recruit, accommodate and promote Jewish leaders with disabilities - it's going to be great. Please join us then. Thank you and have a good day.