[Music on Guitar: Hineh ma tov]

>> Aaron Seglin [singing]: Hineh ma tov uma na'im Shevet achim gam yachad. Hineh ma tov uma na'im Shevet achim gam yachad. Hineh ma tov Shevet achim gam yachad. Hineh ma tov Shevet achim gam yachad. Hineh ma tov uma na'im Shevet achim gam yachad. Hineh ma tov uma na'im Shevet achim gam yachad. Hineh ma tov Shevet achim gam yachad. Hineh ma tov Shevet achim gam yachad. [Guitar]

>> Beth Mitchell: Welcome. Thank you Aaron for reminding us through our shared music that yes, it is so good for all of us to be here together in this zoom room, and how good and how pleasant it is when we can all be together for real. Welcome to our webinar in honor of Jewish disability awareness acceptance and inclusion month, more commonly known as JDAIM. My name is Beth Mitchell. I am a white woman with long brown hair and my pronouns are she her and hers. Our virtual backdrop reads "From Moses to Marlee: Celebrating Jews with disabilities and diverse identities through conversation, creativity and music." It has musical notes and logos of our sponsors. Using our disability inclusion lens, I invite everyone to think about why I described this visual information, so please feel free to share your thoughts in the chat box. As the director of inclusion and disability and diversity here at the JCC of central New Jersey, I welcome you this evening as moderator and as host. Before I thank our incredible sponsor and our partners and get our program going, I just want to cover some accessibility tips. We will add these tips to the chat box now and periodically through the evening for those that arrive later. First, today we have live captioning and ASL interpreters to maximize this experience for everyone. So if you'd like to view the closed captioning, please click on the CC, closed captioning below. To view our ASL interpreters, please use the gallery view. Click on the grid icon in the upper right corner of your zoom window. Next I want to thank our evening's generous sponsor, Encon, and our incredible partners at Jewish Federation of Greater Metrowest New Jersey, and of course RespectAbility. I have had the tremendous pleasure of working closely with Debbie Fink, RespectAbility's Director of Community Outreach, to create this evening's experience. All of the panelists this evening are speakers in the new and growing National Disability Speakers Bureau: Jewish Division. Check out this amazing resource to the Jewish community and the community at large. Last, our celebratory program this evening will go beyond the hour, ending closer to 8:45 after our interactive Q&A with our incredible panelists and Aaron serenading us with Eli Eli, which you can sing along to as long as you're muted. Okay, so let's let the storytelling begin and the music continue. Our first speaker tonight opened our evening with his beautiful and relevant music to Hineh Ma Tov. Here is what is good and nice, all of us gathered together. And it's still good and nice to be gathered together, even virtually during a pandemic. Aaron is a freelance musician who lives in Portland Maine, that was raised right here in New Jersey. Welcome Aaron. We will be putting Aaron's bio link in the chat box. Aaron, what do you say we open with your YouTube storytelling?

>> Aaron Seglin: A lot of things don't come easy to me. But just like that kid who feels out of place until they get on that basketball court, everybody has their place. Music was mine. This was something that I could share with the world and shine with. Like, this is me, people, pay attention. The reason I don't see is because I was born three months early. I was under two pounds and I could have fit in the palm of my own hand. And this was back in 1971 when medical technology was not what it is these days, and that made for an interesting life. I grew up in New Jersey, a great area to grow up to learn to be a musician. 19 years ago I met my friend Bill. He helped me get back on the sidewalk after almost getting run over by about five cars. And so about 45 minutes later, he walked into the guitar shop and he saw me there. He's like "dude, what you doing?" But he was playing and singing, and I just pulled out a harmonica and took a solo. And he was like "this is it, you know, we've got to do something with this." And I liked it too. We couldn't think of a band name, and one day he just said, "dude, 13 Scotland Road." I said "yeah, that's where we live." He said "no, that's the name. That's the name of the band." And eventually it just stuck. My first gig happened to be Christmas in Hudson County prison. My father was a psychotherapist so he worked there, and he got us the gig -- play something for the guys on the tier. And they were some of these guys, scary as they were, all this "man what they gonna do, what they're playing?" They loved it, and that was when I realized how powerful this music was. We had what looked like there might have been some starts but we were never quite able to get it off the ground. We had a lot of personnel changes. Bill was like "I gotta get out of Jersey dude, this isn't working." He calls me and says "I'm living in Portland, come up to Maine." And I said "how would I get around?" He said "there's a place up here and they have services for blind people, so I won't have to worry about you falling down a hole in the middle of the street again." I was like "dude, I am ready to commit to whatever we got to do to make this happen." And it's been amazing. Today is Make Music Portland, which is an event to celebrate the solstice, so there's music all over town. I'm teaching a harmonica workshop and then I'm going to be performing as part of 13 Scotland Road. It's an honor to be asked to teach something. You have to learn what people's mistakes are likely going to be and anticipate them. There's nothing to see, so you have to say "okay, my students are probably going to get this right and they're probably going to not quite get this. So let me be ready to guide them." And a concept that I learned growing up being Jewish is Tikkun Olam, which is stitching the world together using my talent and abilities to help make the world a better place. Music keeps me inspired and inspiring. The best moments come when things are almost going wrong, like I played a wrong note but then I salvaged it and turned it into an amazing solo. Moments where as a band it's -- we just did something amazing and the people all felt it and saw it, and that's us up there making their food taste better and their day better. [Harmonica Solo] [Applause]

>> Voice: Give it up for Aaron Seglin! [Applause fades out]

>> Beth Mitchell: Wow, Aaron. Please expand on your story and share with us --

>> Aaron Seglin: Thank you. Okay.

>> Beth Mitchell: -- about your life and how COVID has affected you in Portland as a freelance musician.

>> Aaron Seglin: All right. Well okay, so this is sort of where things -- that's where things were a year ago, and the origin story, how do I come to be sitting here with a guitar in my hand singing? I grew up in New Jersey, and -- I'm sorry, my phone is talking to me. It's a little bit distracting but let me just deal with this. So anyway, sorry about that. I have my own personal techie difficulties. So how do I come to be sitting here playing guitar and singing Hineh Ma Tov? Because I grew up in Jersey and I grew up biracial and Jewish and blind, all of which made for some interesting life experiences. So for example -- I realized that I was -- well that's -- the Americans would call it -- I would realize I was black when my family and I were at a beach and my mother was married to my stepfather at the time. I was legally adopted, so my family was looking all -- was looking white, and my brother and I got separated. And when the lifeguard brought us over to a family that were speaking another language I had no idea what it was. It wasn't Spanish or French or Italian or anything I had ever heard on Sesame Street or anything, and it wasn't Hebrew. And when the mess got all sorted out -- it wasn't really a mess, but I said mom, how come they brought us over to them? And she said "well, because you're very dark like your father was. And they are from India and that's what people look like there." And I said "mom, we're Americans. I mean, we're at the beach, everybody gets a suntan." And she put her hand gently on my shoulder and said "no hun, not like that." So that was the gentle way of learning that I looked -- that I was different. And it was just one of those things. I grew up in a lovely place to be an amalgam of different things. It was Montclair and South Orange New Jersey. So it was where -- near Manhattan, you know, a great place to be from. So I went to Hebrew school when I was -- through the grades and when it was time to do youth group things, I was psyched, because the main thing I always wanted to do in the world was sing and play music, along with all the other things I wanted to do. But this was something that kept -- was my center in a lot of ways. It just -- it's where I live. So I started doing that and ended up at at Kutz camp. And one of the things that, as I alluded to in the video, about Tikkun Olam, stitching the world together, we would hear we would talk about the Parsha of the week, and we would just learn to be together in a community of all different sorts of Jewish ways of being together as teenagers. And --

>> Maya Cohen-Shields: One minute Aaron --

>> Aaron Seglin: Okay. And one of the things that -- one of the stories I remember was a story about a king who had a diamond, and this diamond got scratched, and it was so beautiful, he didn't know what he was going to do. So all the other people, all the jewelers looked at it and they all said "I can't do anything but cut it into two and make two nice diamonds for you." Except one who said "I'm seeing something here." So he took it, he lived with it, he came back with this diamond. And that scratch on that diamond was a stem with thorns and leaves and the most beautiful rose. And that is ultimately sort of what I think we are - at our best - meant to do with our abilities and our disabilities: become that beautiful -- unlikely beautifully carved work of art.

>> Beth Mitchell: Thank you Aaron. Thank you for sharing with us music and your journey and your thoughts, it's really incredible. Our next speaker, our incredible keynote is none other than Matan Koch, a long time leader in disability advocacy who we are very fortunate to have with us here tonight. Matan was a senate confirmed Obama appointee to the National Council on Disability, and is currently the Director of RespectAbility California and Jewish leadership. We have put his very impressive bio in the chat box. Matan, the zoom room is yours. We can't wait to hear your story and also how COVID may have affected your life as a person with a disability.

>> Matan Koch: Thank you. And it's really a pleasure to be here. It's really exciting to to join with you all, albeit virtually. I only wish that it could be more interactive and not, you know, limited by the medium that is zoom. But I'm glad that we will have Q&A time. You know, it's interesting -- and I'm not sure that I'm going to touch too much on the COVID angle, just to manage expectations -- but it's also interesting that the run of show says that I'm here to tell my story, but that can mean so many things. Stories can start in so many places. What does it mean to tell my story? Stories connect. Aaron is a part of my story. We actually met at that same locale that he talked about, at Kutz camp. I'm a little younger so I was 15 and he was 25, or something like that. And you know, I was afraid to move around on my own because a few years earlier I'd managed to drive my wheelchair off a cliff. Different part of my story, we're not going to dwell on that part today. But I didn't like going around alone, but I was really comfortable if someone relatively strong and stable footed was holding on to the back of my chair. And as you may have caught from Aaron's story, despite all his wonderful talent, he can't see. So it's helpful sometimes for folks to be leading him when he's going somewhere new, and so we were like a match made in heaven. I swear, right, like, he was strong, he was stable and whatever my faults with navigating, I could see where I was going. So we would sort of make our way to where we needed to go, to pagodas and what have you, and it's really exciting to be here today. And Aaron, thank you for sharing so much of your story and setting the stage and bringing us here for this, it's really a treat. But now, what am I going to do with the rest of my story? Well often stories are biographical,, but I'm not going to do that. You can read my resume if you really want to know what I've done in my life, and there's the bio in the chat box. It's just not -- it's not that important, right? Or, you know, some stories start at the beginning, and I could tell you that I was born on a cold winter's night, erev Shabbat November 1981. But that's really not all that exciting either, and besides, you can google stalk me if you really want to know my bio specifics. I think we're here instead to talk about my story as a participating member of the Jewish world. And so I want to start with an unusual story. It's a story of the one and only time that I led reform Friday night services at Tufts Hillel. Now you might be saying, "well, why is that notable?" Right? You know, it's important to note that I was never a student at Tufts university. I was just someone who didn't particularly enjoy the services at where I was in law school a few miles down the road, so I prayed at Tufts. And one night they called me up a few hours before service time, and they said, you know, if there's a combination of illness or whatever -- I'm not really sure what led to the situation -- they said that they didn't have anyone to lead services, and could I do it? And, "sure," I said. "Yeah." Because I'm what I like to think of in the Jewish world as a utility player. Now we're here with a Jewish audience tonight. We all know what a Jewish utility player looks like - one of these folks that just led so many things that you can just sort of jump in naturally when the situation demands. But it's really not a foregone conclusion that I would have become that utility player. I could only be that utility player -- as someone who was both born quadriplegic and used a wheelchair, because I had the rare fortune in the 80s to be included from the earliest age at the synagogue at the Kutz camp where I met Aaron, at other camps, at Hillel, and on birthright. And only because people found those places for me, either because my family was Jewish involved or for whatever reason, was I able to become a utility player. You can only become comfortable leading services in strange places if you've led services in a lot of places. And in each place where I did attend, I could do it because of barrier removal. But barrier removal isn't just about opening doors. It's not just about ramps and getting me into spaces. I was born physically and metaphorically with one wheel in the door. As the child of a Rabbi and a Jewish educator, I attended Jewish events from infancy. Actually, most likely I attended them in the womb. And yet the question is more about letting me carve out a place to be a part of the community in the way that I envisioned being a part of the community. And for me, that was in a way somewhat similar to Aaron's. While I lack his raw talent, I certainly was fascinated by song sessions: the magic of those moments when everyone was drinking in, absorbing the music, inviting the lesson. Even before I knew what the words meant, there was something about those melodies, things like [Sings in Hebrew] that sort of spoke to me, right? I knew there was something that I needed to hear, something that I needed to know, and I was captivated. I was certain that I wanted to be a song leader. I wasn't a very likely song leader in the way that I knew about. I only have one working hand, and it turns out that no matter how many creative people put their mind to it, you really can't play a guitar one-handed. It just doesn't work. We'll leave my adventures in auto harp for another time, when I was looking for other instrumental options, but that would have been a little bit awkward to swing around at a song session. But I persisted in my passion, right? I signed up for song leading class after song leading class, and slowly it went from "you can't do this" or "we don't know what it means for you to actually song lead" to a situation where in my tenth grade year I was actually lifted onto the stage at the York J Eisner camp to lead a song session. And you know -- that same one that I've been looking up at from childhood. Now the thing is, 25 years later - and I don't really want to think about the fact that it's been 25 years since I was in the 10th grade - but 25 years later, I don't actually view that experience as a key point. Rather, it was the steps that got there, being included in class after class, that gave me the skills that I would need to command a room, to lead others in song and to get them to sing. Got to tell you, so much did this become ingrained in my blood that the first time I got up to sing karaoke, it just didn't feel right until I got the whole bar singing with me. There's nothing quite like a bar full of strangers belting "sing us the song you're the piano man" to make a memory, not just because the song says so, but because it's memorable. But what if? What if instead of letting me into all those classes, even when people couldn't quite see how my leadership would develop, what if I had been turned away? What if, despite my love of music, I'd been pushed to the side? Sure, we might have lost my leadership in the Jewish community but in some ways that's the smallest hit. See, my love of Jewish music has sustained me at every moment. When life gets a little too hard, I hear [singing in Hebrew] telling me not to be afraid. When I felt that it was time to embrace an inclusion mission in my life, it was the lyrics of Debbie Friedman, another iconic Jewish leader who lived with a disability, reminding me that [singing] we have to make the way for generations come and go. I have to teach them what I've learned so they will come to know. [speaking again] Her music also reminded me of the spiritual command to be a blessing in the sweeping and yet soothing tones of Lechi Lach, that pushed me to take that plunge, to leave the law, to work inclusion. I don't know if I ever would have engaged in my advocacy had I not been included in the wonderful tapestry of Jewish music. But I hope you take away more tonight than the idea that the Jewish world molded me to be a leader. That wouldn't have been enough. I could only help out on the day that I did because of my inclusive community. When I moved to the Boston area, and my friend who had just graduated from Tufts -- a NFTY friend, by the way -- knew I was looking for a place to pray, he worked hard to find an accessible walking path so that I could roll in my chair, the three miles from my law school to Tufts' Hillel. And once there, was a community that made me feel so welcome that, despite being a graduate student in a wheelchair from another school, I quickly became a weekly attendee long after my friend had graduated. Oddly enough, I remember the time when someone was pushing me to vote in the Hillel elections. I had to remind them, you know, I don't actually go to school here. I don't have a vote. I can't vote for you although -- you know. So it was that moment of being truly included, this truly inclusive community, that gave me the space to answer the call to lead when a leader was what they needed. This, I think, is our real lesson tonight. Don't practice inclusion because it's nice to let people in. Practice inclusion so that when the Jewish world needs that utility player, we with disabilities have been connected enough to the community to gain and own the skills, or at least a sense of connection to help out. Practice inclusion so that when you need that player, you know them, they're there. We called this night "from Moses to Marlee" to highlight a chain of great Jewish leaders with disabilities, beginning with our first, Moses, who had a speech impediment, and leading to the present day with the great Marlee Matlin, who continues to push limits in the entertainment world as a proudly deaf Jewish woman. The theme is not entirely, however, even that people with disabilities can be leaders. Rather, it is that if the people of Israel had rejected a leader with a speech impediment, we wouldn't have had Moses, we wouldn't have had our greatest teacher. If the Jewish community in America at large gets to benefit from the leadership of Marlee because at least some communities have made opportunities to avail themselves of the talents of Jews and others who are deaf. I want to ask you a question, and I hope it haunts you. What are we missing out on? Who in your community and in the Jewish community writ large are we missing out on? Indulge me in my favorite hypothetical. Think of the most important leader at your synagogue. Now assuming that they were not born in your community, imagine the day that they moved to your town. Imagine that when they moved to your town they had a few options of where to go and they made a list. Schul shopping, we called it when I was growing up. And that, in engaging in that schul shopping, they got to your schul, and they liked it so much they crumpled up the list. They just stayed. But imagine now a different scenario. Imagine that on the day they were going to come to your schul, they got a flat tire. Now imagine for a moment that they're someone who really likes to follow their list, so the next week they went to the next schul on the list, absolutely intending to double back at the end of the list to you, but they really liked that other place too. So they crumpled up their list, they never came back. But for that flat tire, not only would you have not had your great leader, you wouldn't know that they might have been there. I posit for you, my friend, that a barrier to inclusion is like that flat tire. Imagine if a great leader who happens to be in a wheelchair rolls up but can't get inside, if a great leader who happens to be deaf or hearing impaired goes up but there's no way to communicate with them, and they stay for a while but they feel unwelcome, they walk away. Imagine someone comes who expresses themselves a little differently in whatever way, maybe involuntary movements or a different way of presenting, and they feel ostracized, unaccepted and they leave. Just like that flat tire, you might never know about the leader that you are missing. And so that is the thing -- you'll never know if they could have been your Moses, your Marlee, your song leader, your utility player, that person that you need. Now, we don't have time tonight for me to go into detail about all of the different ways that you can make that happen, but I'm proud to say that we at RespectAbility do have resources for that. You can visit www.respectability.org -- can someone drop that in the chat for folks that might want to see it? And you can see all kinds of training and resources for making your community more accessible. But remember, it's just as important to communicate a sense of welcoming -- it's just as important today to make it clear that your community is a place to be, and to make what steps you can. You can't be perfect right away, but you can be welcoming right now. JCCs across the country are working hard to make their camps accessible, to hire and train inclusion counselors, and to offer programs and classes that are inclusive and accessible. Progress takes time. Progress takes intention. Progress to be truly inclusive takes commitment, both to the value of inclusion and to the cost that it incurs. And step by step, you'll get there. Most organizations may not have an usher that can sign waiting at the door, but they can certainly keep a pad and paper nearby to greet someone who uses signs, even on the high holidays. And then you can get the money for interpreters. Many JCCs have welcomers in the front door, and that's an opportunity for engagement and inclusion. You know, there are so many steps you can take. You could move your Torah table off the bimah, since nothing says that you have to pray from an elevated platform. But the bottom line is start, because you don't know who you're missing. Just to drive it home and to take back our musical theme, I leave you with this little gem, excerpted from my friend Craig Taubman. [singing] For every person there is a time, and for all of creation it's a way to shine. [speaking] Thank you everyone, a wonderful evening, and I turn it back to you Beth.

>> Beth Mitchell: Matan, thank you so much for sharing of yourself, and your thoughts. We've learned so much from you. It really resonated with me that inclusion is not limited to a program, it's a mindset, in a sense of extending a welcome. Thank you. I am so happy now to introduce you to Eric Ascher. Eric, we're so glad you're here with us, not only running all of our tech behind the scenes, but also to share your story with us. Eric is the Communications Associate for RespectAbility and is here with us tonight to talk about his intersectional identities. And the link to his bio is in the chat box, so Eric, I'm gonna hand the zoom room over to you.

>> Eric Ascher: Hello everyone, happy to be here. I'm Eric Ascher, and I am the Communications Associate here at RespectAbility. I'm wearing a gray polo shirt. I have glasses and an Apple Watch on, I have short brown/blackish hair, and I have the same visual backdrop with everyone else on this panel. So I'm on the autism spectrum and I'm openly gay. I'll go on a quick tangent and say that, because I'm on the spectrum, I have a small number of things I'm very passionate about. Thankfully music happens to be one of them. I absolutely love live music, and this year has been rough for me, because I haven't been able to go to concerts. So I'm hoping that best case scenario later this year, worst case scenario next year, I'll be back in the front row at some local shows again. So I'm going to tell you a quick story from my past that hopefully will illustrate why I'm so passionate about the work that I do. When I was in eighth grade I posted a silly video messing around with the effects on my iMac's webcam to Facebook. I intended it just for my friends, but being in eighth grade I did not understand what privacy settings were. And I hope that parents watching will make sure their kids understand privacy settings before they join social media. So the school bullies found the video, downloaded it, uploaded it to YouTube. By itself that wouldn't have been an issue, but they allowed people to comment. And one of the other bullies wrote this guy is an "r word" that goes to my school. I won't say the actual word. People quoted lines from the video to me all year to mock me at school, and it was a really rough year. Fast forward now to 10th grade. I'm starting to realize that I'm gay. My school has a gay/straight alliance and I would have loved to have joined. But I didn't, because I was afraid of more bullying. I was already being bullied because I'm different - read, autistic. I don't want to make it worse by being openly gay as well. But I did start coming out in 11th and 12th grade. First to my mom, which was a fun story. I came out to her while she was driving home from from a theme park in Virginia. Thankfully she was accepting and the car did not leave the road. Then I came out to my dad, my siblings, grandparents and my last test group was my BBYO chapter. For those who don't know BBYO is a Jewish youth group organization -- I heard Matan say NFTY earlier which I recognized, and I noticed that the captioner spelled it wrong which made me laugh a little bit. But anyway, BBYO is a Jewish youth group organization of chapters, of young men and women -- Jewish young men and women who meet two days a week for events. One of the few saving graces of my high school experience was the time I spent in BBYO. The connection I have to my Jewish identity, as a matter of fact, can be traced to how accepting those guys were when I came out to them. I was bullied in Hebrew school as well, so I might not even consider myself a Jew had my AZA experience not been so positive. I came out to everyone else on the first day of college, fulfilling a promise I made to myself in 11th grade. So how does any of this connect to the work that I do today? Because I don't want kids to be afraid to come out as gay because they're being bullied. I don't want people being bullied period. Be you Jewish, gay, autistic, anything else, you shouldn't be afraid to be who you are. By being here, I'm assuming that you all want to learn, grow, and make this world a safe space for everyone to live their truth. And I think that the work that RespectAbility does fighting stigmas is critical to changing the culture so that people treat differences the right way: as strengths, as what makes us unique. I've worked with RespectAbility -- one of my jobs is updating our website, and I'm gonna put a link in the chat box after I'm done speaking to some great resources on LGBTQ+ inclusion that we've collected over the past couple years, and I highly encourage you to look at them. Thank you everyone for your time.

>> Beth Mitchell: Eric, thank you so much for sharing of yourself and your own very personal lived experiences, as well as the resources that you are providing to us tonight. Thank you. Our final speaker tonight is Jen Fink, who is here to share her personal journey following a car accident, illness, trauma, and how she lives a very meaningful life with resulting anxiety and depression. Jen is a management consultant between gigs, and a mental health advocate. Jen's bio is in the chat box. You know, at this time so many people can relate to Jen's story. COVID has really pushed mental health issues to the surface for many people: anxiety, depression, suicide, agoraphobia, germaphobia, xenophobia, and more. It's been said that our mental health crisis is a rising parallel pandemic, so Jen wants me to make it clear tonight that while she brings her lived experience, she's not a mental health therapist, and RespectAbility has provided links to mental health resources in the chat box for anyone that needs them. Should you or someone you know be experiencing any mental health discomfort or know someone that is, please feel free to copy and to paste those resources that have been provided in the chat box. Jen, we're so happy you're here. We'd love to hear from you, and I'm going to turn it over to you to have the zoom room.

>> Jennifer Fink: Thank you Beth. Good evening everyone and I guess good afternoon everyone on the west coast. And I first want to start out and say Aaron, Eric, Matan: thank you so much for sharing your stories and being willing to be vulnerable. I know it's never easy, as I approach doing this, and you each individually and collectively are always an inspiration to hear, so thank you for always motivating me to continue sharing my story, and just -- I think I can speak on behalf of everyone and say you just continuously inspire just by being you, so I want to thank everyone for welcoming all of us, me, especially tonight to kind of have a really difficult conversation about mental health. I'll start by talking about kind of my Jewish identity. I am a Jewish young professional, female, I am caucasian, I have long brown slash black hair right now, and brown eyes, and my preferred pronouns are she her and hers. And I have been anxious since I came out of the womb. I am what I would call the stereotypical anxious American Jew. And I have been very involved in the Jewish community in the Washington, D.C. area. I was the youngest founding member of my jewish a capella group at our conservative synagogue called maracayom, and I went off to have a very anxious Bat Mitzvah. I went to Jewish day school. Apparently I went to JCC preschool, I believe. I went to University of Maryland. I was involved with the Hillel, I was on the University of Maryland Hillel Board of Directors as a student. Been to Israel many times, did high school in Israel, and really my identity -- well, my Jewish identity, comes down to Friday night services, the music. It's the one place -- the musical services is the one place kind of that I really relaxed. And I want to say that my anxiety, until my mid-20s, really always pushed me to be the best version of myself. You know, back when I was growing up, I guess anxiety wasn't necessarily something we knew about. I think it was -- worry was normal. It inspired me to do, to study longer and harder and be the best that I could be in school and extracurriculars. And what I didn't know is that anxiety is something that if you're predisposed for, and we don't take care of it and we don't learn coping tools, right -- trauma or something can trigger it and can really make it debilitating or crippling. And the reason why I started talking about this now is because I had a trauma -- a series of traumas as Beth said, an accident, followed by illness, sexual assault and then COVID, right? And my traumas ended up bringing my anxiety to a debilitating state, and now I live with anxiety which also manifests in depression sometimes now. But also we are dealing with this global pandemic, right, and this global pandemic is a universal trigger. So just as we all are wearing masks trying to prevent ourselves from and protect others from getting COVID-19 -- I have asthma, I am at higher risk for my lungs to be impacted by COVID. So I say just like I have asthma, I also have anxiety, so I'm predisposed to -- be triggered, to have a more intense response by this national or this global trigger of COVID-19. And so I feel that it's really important that we're having these conversations, and that we're getting all the tools that we can to make sure that we are doing everything we can to take care of our mental health. So we talk about mental health, right? We talk about uncomfortable emotions. We talk about okay, take care of your mental health, right? But how do we do that? There's therapy, there's psychiatry, there's getting help, which is all so important. And I believe if we haven't already, please, let's enter into the chat box all these resources that we have. And I know that JCC has additional resources available, but one -- I wanted to provide you a really helpful actionable activity that we can do when we deal with these uncomfortable emotions. So all of us experience uncomfortable emotions, whether it's anger, fear, worry, sadness, hopelessness, shame, embarrassment, resentment. It's not a matter of if, it's a matter of when, and it's a matter of duration and intensity and frequency, right? So what happens is when we handle these, when we experience these uncomfortable emotions, it's how do we deal with these in a healthy way, so when we're experiencing them, we don't necessarily have access to the parts of our brain that say, "oh, I know what makes me happy, I know what makes me feel calm." Right? So I provide this activity because it really is very helpful to actually write these down, so that you can have access on your refrigerator, on your phone, right? So that when you're in these bad emotional states or these unhealthy emotional -- not unhealthy, but these difficult emotional states, so that you can come back to these activities that you've identified when you are in a less trying time, and you can get some relief. So if everyone can just get involved in the chat because, you know, sometimes, hopefully you can inspire somebody else to have some ideas. What makes you feel happy? So for me, I know that petting my dog, cooking, or doing a yoga flow, or calling my grandma. Those make me feel happy. Any ideas? Going for a walk and getting away from the computer - great one. Not rushing, relaxing - exactly. So these are all -- fresh air, those are awesome. So these are all really really great activities, and so I'm not kidding, I have it on my refrigerator right there. I should have brought it over. But please write these down and have them. These are really really really great, and this is a great activity to do with your loved ones, your family, your significant other, because sometimes if you can't access this list but you've had this conversation with someone you know, they can maybe spark your memory, right? Because when you're in this state it's so hard to remember. So we're not going to go through all of this. What makes you feel angry, you know, but start thinking about these because it's really really helpful to kind of do that analysis. What makes you laugh? Stand up comedy, always a good one. Let's go to the next one, I love these, guys. And please if you're not already, read through the chat because sometimes - I've been learning so many good ones, as people have you know in past -- okay what makes you feel worried? I'm getting all excited for your insight, thank you guys. What makes you -- I know that -- what makes you feel worried? Yes these are really -- COVID-19, difference, deadlines, yes. So there are so many things that are going on right now that makes me feel worried. So the key about what makes us feel worried -- and I think that this is just a matter of pandemic life, right? A lot of people are in an anxious state right now, and also if you're not, that is also totally normal. There's a lot of people who feel numb right now, there's a lot of people who feel no emotions, one emotion, overwhelmed with emotions, a million emotions at the same time, happy, sad, happy and sad, right? But I think that when we feel worried it's really helpful to say what makes you feel calm, right, and have this list. So for me getting a big hug from someone I love. That's really hard right now, unless you're socially -- you know, if you're quarantined with someone. Taking a walk with my dog or a loved one, sorry, I'm reading these chats, I'm not very good at multitasking. What makes me feel calm? Playing guitar. I only know three chords, but strumming those three guitars, and like, writing poetry or taking a bubble bath, meditation, that's a really really good one. Praying - that works for some people. So I think that if you're able to write these down, and if you go -- come away from this with one thing it's -- I hope you're able to take away really thinking about what makes you feel happy, what makes you feel calm, right? Because feelings of sadness, whether it's diagnosed depression or not, right, or what makes you feel anxious, whether it's diagnosed anxiety or not, or even if you're not feeling those things but you just want to do something that makes you happy or something that makes you feel calm, having them actually written out is so helpful and can only benefit. Like self-care is not underrated. So I really hope that you can take this activity and try it. I have to say, I've tried it with a number of individuals and there has been a great response. And the next thing is this -- and I don't believe I mentioned this in the beginning but I have non-visible disabilities, right? Many people who see me wouldn't necessarily think that I had remnants of a head injury and that I struggle with anxiety and depression. And I think the key takeaway for me is that I battle every day. Some days are much better than others, but every day, there's some sort of struggle. And looking at me, you'd never know. And looking at many people, you'd never know. And I think a lot of us are experiencing some sort of that right now with COVID-19. And I just hope if this teaches you anything, like, respect and kindness go a long way. Give people the benefit of the doubt, because we have no idea what's going on for them and in their lives. And I can't imagine being a parent right now, like, watching people homeschool -- I mean it's -- I have the utmost respect and I'm in awe of everybody doing their part and doing what they can, because it's hard enough to just take care of ourselves. So we will get through this. We will all get through this, individually, collectively, six feet apart from each other. But I wanna -- just keep going -- and please also, get help. Don't be afraid to get help. I think the one great thing that's come out of COVID is I feel like the stigma of mental health has just kind of been wiped away, and people are just like -- I feel like it's totally normalized now to get mental health help. So, you know, it's a sign of strength. So please -- we have these resources I think in the chat box. And yeah. And then lastly -- I wanna play a little song for you. I actually wrote it in the depth of my depression. By no means a guitar player by the way, as I said, I only know three chords. But I wrote it based on a poem that someone really special to me wrote. And he sent it to me during a really bad day and to just kind of give me the motivation to get up and get out of bed. And sometimes we need that, and I would play this on really tough days, and I still play it on really tough days. So hopefully maybe it resonates with you. Okay. By the way, someone -- Maya or Jake, tell me if you can't hear me, okay? [Singing] The sun is up, soon you will be too. You have many great things to do today. Start by putting on your shoes. Start by putting on your shoes. Today could be the day or it may be an off day. The rain will go away and come back another day. I hope you see yourself how I see you someday. Today could be that day. The world turned upside down, ground is where the clouds should be. Worry not, soon you will find your way. So ease your mind. Today could be the day or maybe an off day. The rain will go away and come back another day. I hope you see yourself how I see you someday. Today could be that day. Adventure behind that door just waiting to be explored. Worry not, soon you will find confidence, so ease your mind. Today could be the day, or maybe an off day. The rain will go away, and come back another day. I hope you see yourself as I see you someday. Today could be that day. Today could be the day, or maybe an off day. The rain will go away and come back another day. I hope you see yourself how I see you someday. Today could be that day. The sun is out, so are you, you have many great things to do today. Start by putting on your shoes. Start by putting on your shoes. [Speaking] Thank you for having me, we'll get through this.

>> Beth Mitchell: Wow Jen, I don't even have words to say. You know, your story is so relatable and your song -- and I start my day by just making the bed, and if nothing else has gotten done at least I've accomplished that. So thank you for sharing that with us. Really incredible, thank you. So at this point we are going to open up the room for Q&A with all our panelists. Please don't be shy. Pop your questions or comments into the Q&A feature on the bottom, and you can post questions, comments, we'd love to talk - it's a conversation. So please feel free to ask us whatever is on your mind. Okay so let's get started. There's a couple things coming in already. Okay so Aaron, this first question is for you. Aaron someone wants to know if there are any instruments that you wouldn't attempt, and also how do you know what tone the drum is supposed to be?

>> Aaron Seglin: Ah. So instruments that I wouldn't attempt. Only because I have neighbors, I have always wanted to play the violin. But it's one of those things that there's no -- it sounds like there's really no good beginning, you know, since some instruments you can kind of get away with, you know, you can sound pretty enough doing something nice and simple, like three chords on the guitar. You do a great song. Amazing voice, by the way. So yeah that gets -- but the violin, not so much. So I would like to do that, but my neighbors have been very tolerant with all the drumming that I do, but there's somebody down the hall from me who's also a drummer. We used to -- and we used to do a drum circle in my building. Actually, my girlfriend came up with it as a volunteer activity and from her work, because you could do that sort of thing. And it just became this huge thing. People have bought drums because of it. But because of COVID, we -- it changed it but it didn't stop us. We did it outside. But then, because I live in Maine, came winter, and there's no drumming when it's cold. It's not to be done, I don't recommend it for anyone who doesn't wish to get arthritis. So yeah -- but you got to practice and stay sharp for when things -- and the tone, tone on a drum, that depends on what kind of drum it is. but like on a Jen day, you sort of -- you find the sweet spot and you feel it. You can kind of, once you learn your tone, your bass and your slap, you can sort of feel under your hand this bounce. That's the drum saying come on let's dance. And it's very subtle at first, but once you start looking for it, you can you learn to pick it up. And it's hard to explain what it does, but it's kind of like -- I guess I think of it like it's one of my wands. All my instruments that I know how to play, it's like if I was going to Hogwarts, that would be my wands, you know? And -- when the wand is -- when you wave it and it's supposed to, it's doing the right thing, it's like wow, that -- it really does feel strange, like, I don't know what just did that, but my hands start doing things because it's designed to do things, designed to help that happen. So it's like your hands are sort of on a trampoline, and when that happens you gotta go with it and be ready for it. It's crazy. Thank you.

>> Beth Mitchell: Thank you for sharing. As a harpist, I can relate a little bit. I played for many years, sort of dropped off in motherhood, and recently took it up again. And I wasn't able to read the music but my fingers somehow remembered where to go, so I can sort of relate to to what you're saying about the drum tones. Jennifer, here's a question for you that came in. Do you do mindfulness meditation for your anxiety? Somebody else practices the same, so they were wondering if you did that?

>> Jennifer Fink: I do. That's a great question. And I actually only learned it this year and it is one of the most helpful tools that I've learned. However, I've had to learn a couple of different variations because sometimes -- I can't meditate all the time, so I do a lot of poetry writing, I do a lot of just random painting that is not real painting, but it's just very therapeutic. I'll do some stretching, I will do some drawing. I find -- kind of different mediums and different types of mindfulness activities. I think there's -- some people think of meditation solely as mindfulness, there's a lot of different methods.

>> Beth Mitchell: I guess anything that you enjoy, that brings you peace is mindful.

>> Jennifer Fink: Yes.

>> Beth Mitchell: Thanks Jen. This is actually a question for all of our panelists. What are the things that other people do that make you feel included and make you feel comfortable being you?

>> Matan Koch: Happy to start. And I'm going to start by, in classic rabbinic slash lawyer fashion, questioning the question, and to say I'm not sure that anyone can do things to make me comfortable being me. I think perhaps the hardest lesson I've had to learn -- and I'm about 40 years into this adventure of being me -- is that ultimately the only person who can truly help me to be comfortable being me is me. Now, other people can support me, other people can encourage me, but if there's one thing that I've learned over time it's that until I'm ready to hear it, doesn't matter what they say doesn't matter what they do, doesn't matter how sincere and earnest they seem. Until I'm in a place where I can be comfortable with who I am, with how I present, with how I come across, there's nothing that they can say to me that will get me there, if that makes sense. Now, people can make me less uncomfortable by not making my needs seem to be a burden, by not creating barriers so that I can't join in activities. But that's about doing no harm. To really get the comfort, I think that is an internal journey that folks can, at best, support. But that's just my opinion.

>> Aaron Seglin: I would second that. There are a lot of -- just as Matan said, there are a lot of things that people do to -- sometimes people sort of overdo it because of their own nervousness creeps in. Like, I've seen, I've had people watching my footsteps while they're guiding me and by turns, trip and fall. And I've had to brace them up, like, don't you know it's kind of a metaphor for the whole -- watch your own footsteps, just walk along and have a great time doing it. But I got -- I got the footsteps going on. You know, you just helped me get there, and I have to watch out for my own footing. And it's really about knowing myself in the same way. I have to know and be confident about what I can and can't do, and how I can say I'm having if -- it's a straightforward thing, I'm having difficulty with this because A B and C. And again, COVID has been interesting because it's really made all sorts of things front and center, so it's sort of been a little bit easier for people to understand what some difficulties are in anyone's life. But it's made some things really just a pain -- just a pain. But again, it's really being comfortable and balanced with whatever is going to happen. You know, it's like Mike Tyson, everybody's got a plan until you get hit in the face. We all got hit in the face, so our backup plan is how do we be kind to each other and make sure we wipe off the blood? And go, "you all right?" [Laughs] That's where we're at.

>> Beth Mitchell: Thank you Aaron.

>> Eric Ascher: I'll go next I guess. My big thing is that I don't want to be treated differently than anyone else in a social situation. I want people to treat me like I'm just another person, and treat me with respect, treat me with dignity. That's basically it.

>> Jennifer Fink: I'm gonna say something I think that -- I mean, I think what you all said definitely holds true. I can hear what most of you are saying, I can only empathize with some of it. I think that from a different standpoint, I would say I've had an interesting experience opening up and being vulnerable about my true struggles. And I've realized how eager people are to have conversations about their real experiences, just how they're hurting or how they're struggling with anxiety or depression. And while it's -- I didn't necessarily feel like I had people I could be very real with outside of my family, I would say, and my psychologist and my psychiatrist. But I feel like after I kind of went through this journey and I started finally being confident and recognizing it didn't -- it didn't define who I was, right? They were just diagnoses that were things I dealt with in life. And I -- as part of coping with it, I recognize that part of -- that raising awareness and realizing that so many people are probably dealing with similar challenges and that it's so lonely. And as I started talking about it, realizing how many other people were kind of going through it and were craving a friend to talk about it with or these kind of emotional challenges, I realized kind of that opened up this belonging or inclusiveness, that I didn't realize that I was craving from a recipient. And I don't know if that makes sense at all, but I feel that now I'm able to receive it and to provide it. So I try to be really authentic in my social interactions -- and kind of be transparent in what I'm experiencing. Not over-share, but really be real.

>> Beth Mitchell: Thank you Jen. Authenticity is so important on both ends. Thank you. Matan, I think you might be a wonderful person to answer this next question, which might be our last just for the sake of time. Do you have any suggestions about how we as people can activate our sense of compassion in order to inspire our actions?

>> Matan Koch: So that's an interesting question because I actually -- and I'm gonna refer back to my talk, I actually tell people not to act from compassion. And when it comes to inclusion, be compassionate, compassion is very important, I'm not down playing the importance of compassion in interpersonal relations, I think we all need to see the humanity in each other and we need to hear it. And I think what Jen said about being real is so very important. But our topic tonight, inclusion - it isn't about compassion. It is about a much more simple calculus. It's about saying I want the greatest amount of human richness in my life that is possible. I want the greatest variation of talent, of wonder, of personality, of vibrance. And in order to do that, I need to make sure that I am doing what I can to remove the barriers that keep people from being able to be there and be a part of it. And so don't ask yourself how can I be compassionate for this poor unfortunate soul, because I don't think anyone you've seen on screen tonight's a poor unfortunate soul. I mean, you know, my fashion choices might inspire some sympathy, but that's about it. I think instead what you have are interesting people, people you want to know, and so fire up that sense of excitement, and use that to drive your impulse for inclusion.

>> Beth Mitchell: Thank you Matan. Such wise words. It's so important that we recognize everyone's value and contributions. It's more than acceptance, isn't it? So with that, just as we started with song, we are going to close with song as well. So please join Aaron in the old Jewish song, lyrics written by our poetess Hannah Sanash, called Eli Eli, my god, my god. The transliteration and the translation in the chat box, and I think if you'd like to sing along please just mute yourself. [Aaron plays Eli Eli on guitar]

>> Aaron Seglin (singing): Eli, Eli, Shelo yigamer le'olam Hachol vehayam Rishrush shel hamayim Berak hashamayim Tefilat ha'adam Hachol vehayam, Rishrush shel hamayim Berak hashamayim Tefilat ha'adam Oh lord, my god I pray that these things never end, the sand and the sea, the rush of the waters, the crash of the heavans, the prayer of Man. The sand and the sea, the rush of the waters, the crash of the heavens and the prayer of man. Eli Eli.

>> Beth Mitchell: Thank you Aaron, that was beautiful. Thank you. I feel so privileged to have been a part of this incredible evening highlighting all of the talents and your individual journeys that have been shared by our panelists. We hope you've all been inspired by the beautiful music and the conversations that we've had here tonight as much as we have. I'd like to thank Matan, Aaron, Jen and Eric for sharing their stories with all of us, and extend a special thank you to Debbie, Eric, Jake and Maya, and the whole RespectAbility team who made this event possible through collaboration and technology. It was an incredible undertaking. I'd also like to thank our very generous sponsors at Encon for supporting this important program honoring JDAIM, and especially to our partners at the Jewish Federation of Greater Metrowest for their unwavering support of our JCC, especially throughout the pandemic. We hope that you have enjoyed our evening celebrating Jews with disabilities and diverse identities through conversation, creativity and music. It was absolutely musical and magical. I'd also like to invite you back to participate in future programming with us. We're going to pop a link into the chat to register for upcoming events and programs that honor JDAIM and support community inclusion. Thank you all and have a wonderful night.