>> Rabbi Adam Raskin: The occasion of Jewish disability inclusion and awareness month, which is really a cause that our congregation is involved in all year long. And in fact, one of the first things that I learned about this synagogue is that with the design of this sacred space in which some of us are sitting right now, there was an early eye toward inclusion of all members of our community: a torah reading table that could be lowered so that people could read while in wheelchairs, ramps and accessibility throughout this room so that people could participate in all ways and at all times. I was so proud to learn that about this synagogue, and communicated a lot to me early on about the values that are held dear to this community. Today we are honored to welcome a very special speaker -- and those of you who are sitting on this side may want to -- if you want, otherwise you can just listen, but if you want to relocate to this side so you can see the screen if that's helpful, otherwise we'll have all have the opportunity, whether tuning in virtually on Zoom or through the live stream or here in person to hear a very special, very compelling speaker, Ava Rigelhaupt. Ava is the Communications Fellow for RespectAbility's national leadership program for the spring of 2021. RespectAbility is a non-profit organization headquartered here in Maryland and Rockville, fighting stigmas and advancing opportunities so that people with disabilities can fully participate in all aspects of our community. But before Ava speaks I want to welcome a very special member of our Har Shalom community and that is Lauren Appelbaum, who is really a leader in this cause, nationally - not just locally but nationally. Lauren is RespectAbility's Vice President of Communications, where she and her team have consulted on over a hundred projects with NBCUniversal, Netflix, Sony Pictures Entertainment, ViacomCBS, Walt Disney Company, among others, to ensure a diverse and authentic representation of disabled people on screen. She is the author of the Hollywood disability inclusion toolkit, and the creator of an award-winning lab for disabled entertainment professionals working behind the camera. Lauren and her husband Jonathan and their beautiful daughter Morgan are active and beloved members of the Har Shalom community. Lauren? Hi Morgan!

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Thank you so much Rabbi. It's always an honor to speak at a Har Shalom service, especially with my daughter by my side. You want to say hi? Okay. It's an even bigger honor to -- oh, she's going to join us for the whole thing. [Morgan laughs] It's an even bigger honor to be able to introduce one of my Fellows to you. As you mentioned, Ava currently is a fellow with RespectAbility, working on my team to advance inclusion in the entertainment industry and beyond. I also want to share to everyone that's on Zoom right now that there is a live transcript available for this part, which I know can can help make it a little bit easier to follow along with everything. In order to do so, you can click on the CC button to turn the transcript on. I’d also like to welcome all the individuals from the Jewish foundation for group homes who are joining us this morning, as well as David Altschuler from JFGH, and I believe RespectAbility board member Vivian Bass, the CEO emeritus of JFGH. Pre-pandemic, we really enjoyed the company of the residents and staff of the K home, and I look forward to the day where we can enjoy lunch together at Har Shalom. Turning to our guest speaker. Ava is a writer, actress and advocate for disability and autism representation in the entertainment industry. She graduated in 2020 from Sarah Lawrence college. During her senior year, she was the college's Ruderman Family Foundation inclusion ambassador, and worked with Hillel and the theater department to produce the school's first sensory friendly performance, along with moderating a panel of industry professionals to discuss accessibility and entertainment. Since then, Ava has presented on different disability and diversity panels and published articles, discussing topics such as autism, accessibility, being a Chinese adoptee and studying abroad in Italy as an autistic college student. And just today, there was a wonderful article that has come out on the Hollywood Reporter - and I'll be sure to send that around this evening - where Ava had a chance to talk about her work in one of the biggest industry newspapers. Ava first participated in RespectAbility's lab this past summer. That's when I had the chance to first to get to know her. And I was really glad to bring her back on as a Fellow for this winter and spring. Ava has been instrumental in helping various entertainment executives learn how to best represent autism on screen, including in animation. So how does the fact that Ava and I are Jewish play into this? Well, there's a big overlap. Inclusion is an inherent Jewish value and Jewish disabilities awareness and inclusion month is a great time to reflect. So let's hear from Ava. >> Rabbi Adam Raskin: Thanks Lauren, welcome Ava.

>> Ava Rigelhaupt: Hello! Shabbat shalom! I'm so excited and honored to be here with all of you at Har Shalom this morning. As Lauren and the Rabbi said, I'm Ava Rigelhaupt, and I'm going to give a brief physical description of myself. So I'm a Chinese woman with long black hair, bangs, and today I'm wearing a yellow turtleneck sweater with actually my gold Jewish star necklace. I'm sitting back in front of the RespectAbility virtual background. So what disability community -- and you can feel free to put this in the chat -- do you think my visual description benefits? In addition, as Lauren just said, we have closed captions. And so we are also benefiting, through putting closed captions, another disability community, and if you wish you can feel free to put what disability community closed captioning could benefit during this presentation and service. So I'm going to start off my story with another question, but you don't have to put it in the chat, you can just think about it. What does autism look like? And to be more specific, what does disability look like? I was diagnosed on the Autism spectrum when I was 18 years old, my senior year of high school. That was a curveball for senior year. This was a late diagnosis, as some people are diagnosed at five or even three years old, thus knowing for their entire lives that their minds work differently than the general population. This typical way of thinking is known as neurotypical, while autistic people are often called neurodiverse or neurodivergent. While I didn't know that I was neurodiverse, or that neurodiversity even existed, I always knew I felt different. I had trouble connecting with my peers. I struggled to understand non-verbal communication and social body language. I explain it as feeling like everyone read the social rules book except for me or others on the spectrum. But imagine not having read the book and still being expected to take the test. That's what life can feel like on the autism spectrum every single day. There are a lot of stereotypes about autism. The first one is that it's more common in boys, and to be even more specific, white boys. That's because during World War II, Hans Asperger was one of the first scientists to discover and name these strange traits he saw while teaching at an all-boys school in Vienna. That's where the antiquated term Asperger's syndrome originated. But please note that Hans Asperger is highly controversial due to his collaboration with Nazis and eugenics. In some historic documents, actually, the white boys from the middle class and upper middle class families were considered by scientists and people who offered supports the quote "important ones" to help. So even back then, it probably wasn't only white boys who were diagnosed or autistic. They're simply the ones found, diagnosed and offered supports. Nevertheless going forward, most of the research, writings and supports centered - and still do center - on how white boys and boys present on the spectrum. In fact, according to the CDC, autism is currently four times more common among boys than girls. But girls often present differently, or teach themselves how to mask, hiding their symptoms and traits. But this masking can lead to higher levels of anxiety and depression. It has been said that quote "girls with autism are hiding in plain sight." When I say I was diagnosed late, some people, mainly women but also men, chuckle, as they were diagnosed even later at 40 or 60 years old. Some people are diagnosed when their children are also going through the diagnosis steps. So it's not surprising that my diagnosis and symptoms also slid by and I remained undiagnosed for so long. The needle has moved only slightly forward today in terms of research participants, representation and writings. Even the demographics of autistic advocates are still mainly male and white. I'm an advocate too, here today, but I'm not white, and I'm not a male. I make eye contact, I enjoy good conversation, and at school I didn't have any other behavioral issues - all, again, stereotypes of an autistic person. The girl who sits quietly in class, gets good grades and does as she's told is not going to be the first child a teacher thinks has any sort of disability or problems, although I did ask an incessant amount of questions. In school I found a safe haven in theater. Artists are often more accepting of quirky people and different minds. During rehearsals I was encouraged to try new things and different reactions. I mean, where in life can you say, "wait, that was an awkward reaction. Let's just forget it happened and start again from the beginning." I also love the scripted nature of theater. Life would be so much less stressful if you knew what you were going to say and how the other person was going to respond. I later learned that theater and acting skills are often taught to autistic people as social skills. Theater helps autistic kids learn how to take someone else's perspective, collaborate with others. And although it can be scripted, performing requires taking risks, and when things don't go as planned, learning how to make the show still go on. So I guess many years ago, I intuitively knew myself and knew what I needed. In addition to breaking stereotypes of autism, my life also breaks stereotypes of what a Jewish woman looks like. As probably all of you realized upon me saying Shalom in the Zoom room, I don't look like the typical American Jewish woman. I was adopted from China at the age of one by my fabulous Ashkenazi Jewish New Yorker single mom. She and my godmother traveled to China to adopt me. And now I have a little bit of a funny Jewish story. So my aunt persuaded and kind of insisted that my mom have me officially converted to Judaism. Let's flash back to when I was about four years old, visiting that aunt in Boston. She took us to her synagogue and arranged for the conversion with her Rabbi. I had the privilege to officially join the Jewish community in a natural Mikvah, in an outside natural lake, in east coast November weather, wearing a bathing suit. But don't worry, because my uncle brought a small thermos of hot water to pour into the lake to try to make it a little warmer. But you know what happens when you pour a small thermos of hot water into a large body of cold water. Let's just say the lake did not turn into a hot tub, and I was still standing there shivering. To be honest I was really hesitant and did not want to be either, nor dunk under the freezing cold water. I probably thought to my four-year-old self that if this is what it takes to join the Jewish community, I refuse to drink the kool-aid. Even the Rabbi, who is dry and wearing a winter coat, sympathized with me, but insisted that if we wanted to make it official, I had to go fully under. My mom was ready to call it off. As a mom, she of course did not like seeing me standing in distress and screaming "no" in a cold lake, especially in relation to something that should be a celebration and a positive experience. She said to her sister, "this isn't necessary, she's Jewish because she's my daughter and that's what matters." Eventually, if you're curious, I did reluctantly dunk under and from then on I'm now an official Jew. Yahoo! My Jewish discovery process, as I'll call it, continued when my mom and I found that the Chabad Jewish summer day camp was the right place for me. I previously attended a larger Jewish day camp, and went there for about two years until I realized that I had a choice in the matter. And I finally told my mom that it was not the place for me, as I had to be outside all day in the hot summer and play contact sports, uh uh, not for me. In fact, one of my friends said "only the great indoors for Ava." And it is true that autistic people often have dyspraxia, which is basically a lack of body coordination and awareness. Our coordination develops later and is still sometimes behind our typically developing peers. Probably again why I didn't like contact sports. Getting back to my story, we are not Chabad, but we found their camp and congregation very welcoming. I continued to be part of their community through attending Sunday school and services. And during my life, I, of course attended many Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, and wearing that bar mitzvah dress -- you all know the style. This skepticism though, regarding if I am Jewish, happens everywhere, even in inclusive spaces where you think it might not happen. It happened during an inclusion training at Hillel international, where everyone was Jewish and many people were part of the disability community. To note, the student didn't ask whether I was disabled or not. The training was part of my Ruderman Family Foundation inclusion ambassadorship. The Ruderman Family Foundation is a Jewish philanthropic organization that advocated for inclusion for people with disabilities. Student ambassadors work with campus staff, faculty and students to create a more accessible school. Then second semester ambassadors complete an inclusion project. I decided to bring my love of theater and inclusion together, producing the school's first sensory friendly musical, as Lauren mentioned. Sensory friendly makes performances accessible to people who might be sensitive to elements such as light, sound, or even smell. In addition, I moderated a panel of industry professionals to discuss accessibility and entertainment. I did all of this because I wanted to show my school and everyone that accessibility is not as hard as many people think. All it takes is conscious awareness, and just asking everyone what they need to do their best work, regardless of whether they quote "look disabled." What I wish my peers knew way back in school, at elementary -- especially middle school -- is, to give a quote "strange kid" a chance. I know when something seems strange or weird we tend to shy away from it, myself included. But that's one of the reasons autistic people and children often struggle with making friends. People don't understand us, and to be honest we sometimes don't understand them. Because of our innate struggle with social cues, we're ostracized by our peers. This starts a vicious cycle of not knowing social cues, and not having the opportunities to practice those social cues with our peers, and so still being ostracized by those same peers. You see where I'm going. So I encourage everyone to get to know someone who might not look, think or react like you. Remember that no one mind is alike. You might find that they add to your friends circle, and broaden your way of thinking, of how you see the world. My friends enjoy my different ways of thinking and quote "autistic quirks." My friends and I can laugh together when one of us is thrown off guard by either one of our behaviors. Both of us work together to understand each other, which is also key. It's important not to put all the bridge building work on the person with a disability. Meet them halfway. Join their world and understand their language. My work with RespectAbility does just this. As our slogan says, "fighting stigmas, advancing opportunities." As Lauren mentioned -- I hope to not be redundant -- but yes, I got started with RespectAbility through their summer lab for entertainment professionals with disabilities. I'm part of the entertainment and news media and communications team, so I work with the entertainment industry on amazing shows to help change the perception, preconceived notions and stereotypes of autism, and of anyone with a disability or part of an underrepresented community. In addition to my Fellowship, I have great opportunities like this one here today, as a speaker on RespectAbility's National Disability Speakers Bureau. So I have some different autism related resources that will be added to the chat, and feel free to check them out. Finally, what I hope all of you take away from today is: if a person identifies as Jewish, then regardless of how they look, they are Jewish. If a person identifies as disabled, it doesn't matter whether they look disabled or whether they look autistic, there is no one look to autism, to disability, to Judaism, to a person. But also, don't forget that when scheduling a Mikvah to perform it in the summer, or use an inside Mikvah, something that I learned existed. Thank you so much for coming and listening. It was wonderful to speak to Har Shalom.

>> Rabbi Adam Raskin: Thank you so much Ava! That was terrific, so informative. Thank you for sharing your story, for reminding me to never schedule a Mikvah for outdoors in the winter, and it would be great to have you come here in person as soon as that's possible. We'd love to meet you and to continue that conversation, and really appreciate all that you do for RespectAbility, for Ruderman, for all of your great work, and for being such a wonderful spokeswoman for Jewish disabilities and disabilities in general. Thank you so much for spending your time with us this morning.