

Culture of Inclusion
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This past year, I spoke to you from the pulpit about the wisdom of the Torah. It was through this sermon that I introduced to Beth Or Torah To Go, in which families explore the wisdom of the Torah in the comforts of their own home. It has been a most personally powerful program for Craig, David and me, as we've had opportunities to have dinner with you, discuss meaningful text and to learn from you what your Judaism and the torah mean to you. We are again making appointments for next year's visits. If you are interested in having us bring the Torah you your home, please call Barb, or me in the office.

As wonderful as the Torah is however, it is not always easy to hear. Listen to the words of Leviticus, chapter 21, beginning with verse 16 and continuing to the end of the chapter. It is a long list of those priests, or kohanim who because they have a physical defect of some kind are not allowed to officiate in the sanctuary. There are a dozen defects listed. Just as there are 12 defects that make an animal unfit to be offered as a sacrifice, so there are a dozen defects that make a kohen unfit to offer up a sacrifice. "If a kohen is blind, or lame, or if he has a limb that is too short or too long, or if he has a broken leg or a broken arm, or if he is a hunchback or a dwarf, or if he has a growth in his eye or if he has a scar or

scurvy... he is not qualified to offer in the sanctuary of his God. He may eat of the food that the rest of the kohanim eat — he may eat of the holy food and of the most holy food as well -- but he may not enter behind the curtain or come near the altar, for he has a defect. He shall not profane these places that are sacred to Me, for I the Lord have sanctified them.”

For centuries people with disabilities were thought to be helpless, indigent citizens, and were forced into isolation. Even in our beloved tradition, the disabled were marginalized. The deaf and blind could not serve as witnesses. The deaf/mute were thought to be mentally impaired, and were classified in the category of children who could not testify in a court of law.

The ancient Greeks, by contrast, make Judaism look wonderful. They, who celebrated beauty, thought that the disabled should be euthanized. Great luminaries like Plato and Aristotle had some shocking thoughts about how we should treat people with disabilities.

Plato says: “This is the kind of medical provision you should legislate in your state. You should provide treatment for those of your citizens whose physical constitution is good. As for the others, it will be best to leave the unhealthy to die, and to put to death those whose psychological condition is incurably corrupt. This is the best thing to do, both for the individual sufferer and for society.” And

Aristotle was in complete agreement with Plato. He wrote, “Let there be a law that no crippled child should be reared to adulthood!”

Plutarch goes so far as to provide details on how the decision should be made as to who should live and who should die. He says that the decision should be made by the leaders of the community and not by the father, because the father may not be objective. Its harshness is astounding.

Did you know that the Nazis wanted to kill not only Jews but also the handicapped? As early as the summer of 1939, Nazis were euthanizing the physically and mentally disabled in order to build their “master race.” At first, medical professionals and clinic administrators incorporated only infants and toddlers in the operation, but as the scope of the measure widened, they included juveniles up to 17 years of age. Conservative estimates suggest that at least 5,000 disabled German children perished as a result of the child "euthanasia" program during the war years. The disabled had no place in their utopian society.

Demographers are speaking about the growing presence of minorities in America. They tell us that within 25 years, whites will be in the minority, as our country becomes increasingly diverse. But consider this. The largest minority in America today is the disabled. They make up one-fifth of the population and cut across multiple lines of identity including race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and age.

My friends, there are many in our community, who are not really a part of our community. They are our **invisible members**. Do you know that there are parents who will not bring their children to services because they cannot sit still long enough? Their children might make noises, and we have in the past, asked them to be quiet and often confronted them with annoying stares. There are parents who won't bring their children to Hebrew school, because their kids have enough trouble reading English. There are children in our shul, who are profoundly lonely, because they have social deficits and our community has not adequately reached out to welcome them. We have members who are mentally ill, who struggle every day to get out of bed. They come to Beth Or, but are barely noticed. They sit alone during services, stand alone eating their pastry during the oneg and finally leave alone. One in particular goes home to an empty apartment. There are members who fight depression, anxiety, who are bi-polar and are schizophrenic. Autism is an increasing problem for our children. On this night of introspection, I wish to ask you, "How welcoming do you think we really are? How welcoming should we be?"

The philosopher, William James, wrote, "No more fiendish punishment can be devised than that one should be turned loose in society and remain unnoticed by everyone."

Listen to the words of a child who has autism. It was written by the son of a colleague, Rabbi Brad Artson, who spoke here at Beth Or a few years ago. Rabbi Artson's son cannot speak, but his parents have courageously taught him to communicate through typing.

You have probably never met anyone like me before who cannot speak but who can communicate by typing. I am a perfect example of how someone can be very impaired in one area but have great strength in other areas.

Actually, I think that is true of all people, but it is especially true about people with autism. When I was diagnosed with autism at age 3, I could not speak or move my body properly, and 12 years later that remains true.

However, if success and worth are measured by being a *mentsch* and giving back to others, then I would classify my life as a success. You can be the judge.

When I moved to Los Angeles at the age of 6, I was a classic case of severe autism. My behavior was so awful I hated myself. Almost everyone I met gave up on me almost immediately and believed I would never amount to anything. But there was one doctor who saw the gem locked inside my prison of autism. She smiled at me in a way that reflected her belief that I was a worthy person with the ability and desire to engage, and she waited the very long time it took for me to smile back. That was the beginning of

my long and wonderful relationship with Dr. Ricki Robinson, who has been my guide as I struggle to reach my goals of becoming a productive member of society and a person worthy of respect.

Many purported experts claim that individuals with autism are not interested in socializing. This is totally ridiculous. I love people, but my movement disorder constantly interferes with my efforts to interact. I cannot start and stop and switch my thinking or emotions or actions at the right time. As a result, I am often very lonely and this is the worst thing about autism. I get very sad when I watch my wonderful twin sister going off to do fun things that I cannot do. At moments like that, I passionately hate autism. So next time you see someone like me at your synagogue or at your event, remember that they probably feel really lonely and you could be the person to make their day by smiling at them and letting them know that they exist.

What a wonderful sentiment. It is true: a person who hears less may see more. A person who sees less may perceive more. One who speaks slowly and with difficulty may have more to say. A person who moves with difficulty may have a clearer sense of direction. The rabbis were right, “Every life is a lesson, and every body has some truth to unfold.”

My friends, the rabbis in the Talmud knew that we often are uncomfortable around people with disabilities. The Greeks, the Nazis, even our ancient ancestors

marginalized them. So as a corrective to that impulse to exclude, the Talmud asks where we can find the messiah. Its answer that the messiah is sitting at the gates of Rome, together with the poor and with those who suffer from dreadful diseases. He occupies his time by caring for the leper by binding up their wounds, as he tends to his own. Think about it. The vision of the messiah is almost the exact opposite of the image of the kohen in the Torah. The kohen cannot serve if he is ritually impure. The messiah is ritually impure by his own choice, by choosing to live among the lepers at the gates of Rome. The kohen cannot serve if he has a physical impairment -- the messiah is chosen because he has a physical impairment. The kohen puts the lepers outside of the gates of the community when he enters the sanctuary. The messiah chooses to stay outside the gates with the lepers instead of entering the sanctuary. And yet it is he, and not the kohen, who will bring the final redemption!

Could there be any more dramatic expression of the dignity and the status of a person with a disability than this -- that the Messiah lives with them, and may even be one of them!¹

I have a dream for this congregation. We are one of the grandest Jewish communities in Philadelphia. We intersect with our members in so many positive

¹ Rabbi Jack Reimer

ways. But we can do better. We can be more compassionate. We can be more inclusive. We can meet the needs of those, who like the lepers are on the outside of the gate, waiting to come inside. I would like Beth Or be a place where all people regardless of physical, cognitive, emotional or behavioral abilities are able to participate in the life and faith of Israel.

Have you seen the movie, “Praying with Lior?” It shows how a boy with down syndrome transformed a synagogue. One Day School boy, with whom Lior went to school, said that he wondered if God introduced him to Lior as a test of his character. He said that being friends with Lior has made him a better person. I almost cried when I heard him say that. That’s what I want for Beth Or.

A few thoughts about inclusion (5 to be precise): 1] Having a disability should never be a reason to exclude someone from involvement in his or her synagogue. 2] The disabled are not our mitzvah project. They don’t need our pity, sympathy or compassion. They need our outreach, acceptance and respect. 3] Many disabilities are hidden, such as learning disabilities, seizure disorders, ticks, ADHD. Just because we can’t see it, doesn’t mean it isn’t there. What if we were to build a community that always gave people the benefit of the doubt before we rushed to judgment? What if a child blurted out during services? Before we rush to shush them, let’s consider the possibility that they can’t help themselves. 4] We need to take the time to get to know each other, so that we can care for each other.

Some carry very heavy burdens. A supportive ear, a loving heart can make all the difference. 5] How we care for the most vulnerable in our community defines our character. Henry David Thoreau wrote, “The worst sin towards our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them: That’s the essence of inhumanity.” In other words, by showing compassion, we save ourselves from our own inhumanity.

It is easy to pass judgment on the laws in the Torah and to claim that we are morally superior to it, but we can only do that if we first face up to our own practices. My colleague, Rabbi Jack Reimer once asked his congregation:

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

If Jacob, who was injured in an encounter with a mysterious stranger and limped for the rest of his life as a result, were to come into our synagogue and want hang with our youth group, would our kids welcome him? Would they make him feel welcome?

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

To address this concern, we have formed an “inclusion committee” chaired by Staci Sklar. We are looking at every aspect of our community from the school to how we pray. This needs to be a safe place for all of our members. We want to do more. We need to do more.

But the work of inclusion, is not only for the committees that are hard at work, it’s for each of us. On this sacred night, I ask you, Do we welcome, or put off? Do we accommodate or insist that they accommodate us? Should we have signers during services to welcome the hearing impaired? I’m so proud of the work that we do in the school in memory of Emily Cara Garbose, that reaches out to those with learning disabilities, but there is more that we can do. In a few days you will receive via email, a survey to assess our needs. Please fill it out and help guide us as we seek to be more inclusive, caring and compassionate.

I conclude with the words of Rabbi Jonathan Eyebeshitz in his 17th century work, Yaarot Debash, “Is not this the chief function of our religion, to engender in us a sense of human worth (and nobility)?” My friends, we must look for that worth and nobility not amongst ourselves. That is far too easy. It is quite frankly, the height of arrogance to look for divinity in people like us. The true test of character is to find it among the lonely, the lost, the forgotten. The ancient Greeks and the Nazis couldn’t or wouldn’t do that. When we do, we will bring about our own redemption. Such acts of inclusion will remind us to be compassionate, not

callous. It will encourage us to be welcoming, not off-putting, accepting, as opposed to judgmental. And if we want our children to be like that, then we have to be like that. It's that simple.