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OPENING THE GATES OF TORAH: INCLUDING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

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INTRODUCTION

Maimonides teaches in *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Berakhot* 10:12: “One who sees...people with disfigured faces or limbs, recites the blessing, “Blessed are You, Holy One our God, Majesty of the universe, who makes people different.” One who sees a person who is blind or lame, or who is covered with sores and white pustules recites the blessing, “Blessed are You, Holy One our God, Majesty of the universe, who is a true judge.” But if they were born that way one says, “...who makes people different.”

Why is it that our Jewish tradition, which affirms social justice, inclusiveness and the obligation to treat all people with respect, singles out individuals with disabilities in such a way? How can it be that Judaism teaches that we are to highlight differences between human beings in a negative manner by saying these two blessings?

As we think carefully about these two blessings, we may struggle to find the positive messages in these words. Our tradition teaches that the purpose of saying *berakhot* is to help us, on a regular basis, to step back and appreciate all that God has created. The first blessing, “...who makes people different” is easier to interpret in a positive way. Being aware that this blessing is an integral part of our tradition creates the opportunity for us to appreciate differences among people. Mishnah *Sanhedrin* 4:5 teaches that, “A human being mints many coins from the same mold, and they are all identical. But the Holy Blessing One strikes us from the mold of the first human, and yet each one of us is unique.” This well-known teaching highlights the fact that God created differences. It is our responsibility as a community to both celebrate these differences and to welcome those with differences into our midst.

But what about the second blessing? It is traditionally recited when we hear that someone has died, and has traditionally been interpreted as an acceptance of God allowing suffering to happen. Why would Judaism guide us to feel pain when we see someone with a disability? Can we discern the mandate of respect and welcoming at first glance when we look at this text?

Perhaps, though, we can incorporate both these blessings into our world today in the following way. The first blessing can remind us that as Jews, we always need to be thinking about ways in which we can create caring communities, so that all people will be valued and part of our spiritual families, despite their differences. The second can serve as a call to action: it can remind us that individuals who are included in an integral way in our school communities, synagogue communities and Jewish community organizations will no longer be seen as “suffering” but instead will have an opportunity to play a central role in the growth of our Jewish community. Study and analysis of Jewish sources about disabilities such as these teach us that it is our obligation to appreciate the gifts that differences bring to a community, and to allow us as a just community to be blessed with the gifts of difference.

INCLUSION

As we begin to explore our obligation as a Jewish community to “Open the Gates of Torah” and to provide opportunities of inclusion, it is important that we first answer the question – What is inclusion? “Inclusion is the opportunity for people of any and all abilities to participate in meaningful ways within their community.”¹ An inclusive community includes both an understanding of who people with disabilities are and an understanding of how to talk about and communicate with someone that has a disability. It is important to realize that anyone can become a person with a disability. Some people are born with disabilities, while others acquire one later in life. Some disabilities can be seen because one’s appearance, behavior or cognition are visibly impacted. Others are considered invisible, and are not as readily apparent - disabilities in the area of learning, paying attention, interpreting social cues and emotional well being are examples of these.

¹ Shelly Christensen, *Jewish Community Guide to Inclusion of People with Disabilities, Minneapolis Jewish Community Inclusion Program for People with Disabilities, 2007, page 14.*



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Words are very powerful in terms of defining both our current attitudes about disabilities and our actions as a community. Using words that reflect dignity to a person with a disability and highlight that individual's potential to the community at large, and specifically the Jewish community, is critical. Many words used to describe a person with a disability are no longer accepted, such as the words "retarded", "handicapped" and "crippled". Instead, the word "disabilities" is commonly used as part of "people first language". This means that the person is always mentioned first and the disability is mentioned second. For example, it is appropriate to say "a person who has autism" instead of "an autistic person." In addition to being sure to use correct terminology, it is important to communicate directly with a person who has a disability. Always talk directly to the person, not to his or her parent, companion or interpreter. Do not make assumptions about what the person can or cannot do or the type of assistance they may need. The main mantra to keep in mind when discussing communication with a person that has a disability is, "how about just saying hello"?! Words have the power to change the perception of how people with disabilities are valued in the Jewish community.

SPECIAL NEEDS IN THE JEWISH TRADITION

Before we begin to explore specific ways that we can say "hello" and fully welcome people with disabilities into our Jewish communities, let us take a brief look at how our tradition has viewed people with disabilities in the Tanakh, in Jewish law and in Midrashic literature.

Many of our great leaders and teachers in the Bible are thought to have had various disabilities. Isaac became blind in his later years - "When Isaac was old and his eyes were too dim to see..."². Jacob had difficulty walking and also became blind. Our matriarchs were also not portrayed as being perfect; Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel were all barren and Leah is described as having had weak eyes. Even Moses, the leader of the Jewish people, is portrayed as having some type of speech disability:

Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that you have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue."³

In the next verse God answers him:

Who gives man speech? Who makes him unable to speak or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, The Holy One? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and will instruct you what to say."⁴

God encourages Moses to be successful in leading the people of Israel, even with his disability, a powerful example of how individuals with disabilities can not only be included but can make significant contributions to our community. These are just a few of the many Biblical references which serve to highlight God's positive attitude toward people with disabilities. They emphasize that a great leader does not need to be seen as physically perfect.

In addition to the many examples of Biblical leaders with disabilities, there are also textual examples guiding the community of Israel to treat people with disabilities in a respectful way. "You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind. You shall fear your God: I am The Holy One."⁵ This example provides textual support for the critical importance of making our schools, congregations and Jewish communal institutions physically accessible to those with disabilities. Modifying our physical environments with ramps, and making accommodations for those with visual and hearing impairments are important paths to take when approaching the inclusion of people with disabilities in Jewish life. A further verse in Leviticus states, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."⁶ In the Babylonian Talmud, the rabbis emphasize that all Jews are responsible for each other.⁷ These texts speak to the value of respecting,

² Genesis 27:1

³ Exodus 4:10

⁴ Exodus 4:11-12

⁵ Leviticus 19:14

⁶ Leviticus 19:18

⁷ Babylonian Talmud, Shevuot 39a



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accepting and empowering people with disabilities. The message is clear - our tradition emphasizes that the barriers of architecture, communication and attitude must all be broken down for real change in the area of inclusion to occur.

Many of the examples about the status of people with disabilities in Rabbinic legal literature portray the conflict that the Rabbis might have had between strictly interpreting certain aspects of Jewish law and taking into consideration the possibility of being more lenient in other instances. An example of this can be seen concerning the validity of a person who is deaf reciting the Shema. “If one recites the Shema without hearing what he says, he has fulfilled his obligation. Rabbi Yosi says he has not fulfilled it.”⁸ The discussion in the Talmud which follows this statement provides a counter argument by Rabbi Meir which focuses on the phrase, “And these words shall be on your heart.”⁹ The *Mishneh Torah* and the *Shulchan Arukh* both reach the conclusion that one who can speak but not hear can recite the Shema: “One must hear what one says when he recites (Shema), but if he did not hear, he has nevertheless fulfilled his obligation.”¹⁰ “One must hear with one’s ears what one utters with one’s mouth, but if one did not hear, he still fulfills the obligation as long as his lips utter [the words].”¹¹ However the interpretation only goes so far, since the conclusion is that one who is both deaf and unable to speak, and one who is simply unable to speak are exempt from reciting the Shema.

Another interesting example involves *shehitah*, ritual slaughtering, in which an animal must be cut firmly and quickly. The Mishnah prohibits the *heresh* (the person who can not hear or speak) and the *shoteh* (the person who has an intellectual impairment) from slaughtering because of the fact that they might make some type of mistake which would cause the animal to be non-kosher. However, the Rabbinic literature reflects some leniency. “All may slaughter, and their slaughtering is valid, except a *heresh*, a *shoteh* or a minor, lest they invalidate their slaughtering. But if any of these slaughtered while others are watching them, the slaughtering is valid.”¹²

A third example relating to someone who is blind and reading from the Torah is interesting to examine. The Talmud states, “The written Torah must not be recited from heart.”¹³ Based on this, the *Shulchan Arukh* forbade a person who is blind from reading the Torah: “A person who is blind may not read (from the Torah) because it is forbidden to read even one letter by heart.”¹⁴ After the custom changed to have people read directly from the Torah and others be called up to the Torah for *aliyot*, a more lenient position was adopted, which allowed people who are blind to have *aliyot*. In a responsum adopted by the Committee of Jewish Law and Standards in 2003, Rabbi Daniel S. Nevins has now concluded that Jews who are blind may lead the congregation in prayer, receive an *aliyah* and chant a haftarah. Because the law is explicit in stating that the Torah must be read for the congregation directly from a Torah scroll and not from a printed text or from memory, Jews who are blind may do one of three things: read the *maftir* in Braille since it has already been chanted from the Torah scroll, receive an aliyah and then chant the Torah portion softly after the reader or serve as a verse by verse translator of a section of the Torah portion.

Finally, let us take a brief look at what the Rabbis had to say about disabilities in Midrashic literature. We find that, as today, the Rabbis had differing opinions and attitudes about people with disabilities. Some offered interpretations pointing to the fact that disabilities were part of God’s overall plan, focusing on the ultimate justice of God. It was also believed that certain righteous individuals could intercede and change the plight of people with disabilities:

The birth of Isaac was a happy event, and not just in the house of Abraham. The whole world rejoiced, for God remembered all barren women at the same time with Sarah; they all bore children. At that time all those who were blind were made to see, all those who could not use their legs were made whole, the ones who were non-verbal were made to speak, and the intellectually impaired were restored to reason.”¹⁵

⁸ Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 15a

⁹ Deuteronomy 6:6

¹⁰ Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh K’riyat Shema 2:8

¹¹ Shulchan Arukh, Orach Hayyim, Hilkhoh K’riyat Shema 62:2

¹² Babylonian Talmud, Hullin 2a

¹³ Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 60b

¹⁴ Shulchan Arukh, Orach Hayyim, Hilkhoh K’riyat Sefer Torah, 139:4

¹⁵ Pesikta Rabbati 42, on Genesis 21:1



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Others believed that those who had disabilities were to be pitied for their plight in life, though elsewhere the literature highlights the value of individuals beyond their disability and displays both compassion and understanding. Following is a beautiful Midrash about sensitivity to the blind:

A blind man came to the city of R Eliezer ben Ya'akov. [Rabbi Eliezer b Ya'akov invited him to dinner,] and he sat him in a position at the table even more honored than his own. The people of the city said, "This must be a great man, or R Eliezer would not have placed him above himself at the table." They awarded him a considerable sum. "To what do I owe this?" the man asked them. They replied, "Because R Eliezer placed you above himself at the table." Then the man prayed for him as follows: "You have shown loving kindness to him who is seen, but cannot see, May the One who sees you but cannot be seen receive your graciousness, and show loving-kindness to you."¹⁶

Despite the varied Rabbinic opinions and attitudes towards disabilities that can be found throughout Midrashic literature, we can see that the Rabbis of the time struggled to understand the causes of various disabilities and to find meaning in what they interpreted as the suffering of people with disabilities.

SPECIAL NEEDS IN OUR COMMUNITIES TODAY

Now that we have looked at a sampling of texts from our tradition that deal with disabilities, let us now turn our focus to the obligation that we have to help create a full Jewish life for all members of our community. In Isaiah 56:5 it is written: "For my house shall be a house of prayer for all people." This text is a call to action for the Jewish community to ensure that people with disabilities and their family members have access to a full life of faith which includes worship, study, service to the community and leadership. As we consider this obligation, we should begin to ask ourselves the following questions:

- Have our Jewish institutions eliminated all barriers which stand in the way to full participation for all people?
- Is each and every one of our Jewish institutions architecturally, programmatically and attitudinally accessible to all Jews?
- Can every child with special needs attend a Jewish preschool, be accepted to a Jewish day school and attend Jewish summer camp?
- Can every teen with Asperger's Syndrome fully participate in our movement's youth groups?
- Can every family that has a child with autism comfortably attend Shabbat services without feeling that all eyes are focused on them when their child makes noise during Shabbat services?
- Do all people with physical disabilities have access to ascend their synagogue bimah to receive an aliyah during services?
- Do our institutions provide sign language interpreters so that people who are deaf can participate in Jewish communal events?

According to the National Organization on Disability, 54,000,000 of us have a significant disability.¹⁷ Yet still, unfortunately, the answer to many of these questions is "no" and many of our fellow Jews still feel unwelcome because they cannot participate fully in worship, study, and social activities in their own congregation or greater Jewish community.

How can we begin to turn barriers in our community into bridges so that people with disabilities can be fully welcomed and included in communal Jewish life? Fostering dialogue between people with disabilities, their family members, religious and educational leadership and the larger Jewish community is an excellent way to begin. The Partnership for Jewish Life and Learning in the Washington Jewish community runs a yearly conference called, "Opening the Gates

¹⁶ *Jerusalem Talmud, Peah 8:9*

¹⁷ See www.nod.org



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of Torah: Including People with Disabilities in the Jewish Community.” This conference is designed to bring together synagogue and community professional staff and lay leaders with individuals with disabilities and their family members. The dialogue focuses on raising the level of awareness about inclusion and providing concrete ideas about various paths that can be taken in our schools, synagogues, youth groups, camps and communal agencies to increase the level of inclusion opportunities for Jewish people of all ages with all types of disabilities.

Once consultation has taken place, what are the possible ways to proceed? Having synagogues, schools and agencies participate in Jewish Disabilities Awareness Month on a yearly basis can make all of us more aware of people with visible and invisible disabilities. Adult education programs can be planned to focus on text study of biblical and rabbinical literature in this area. Rabbis and congregants can speak about our community’s responsibility to include all, and disability awareness programming can be planned for the preschool and religious school. Synagogues can establish a disability taskforce or inclusion committee that can be made up of staff members of the synagogues, people with disabilities, family members of people with disabilities and professionals in the field to assess the congregation’s current level of accessibility including programmatic and attitudinal areas and to focus their efforts in taking concrete steps to become more welcoming and accommodating. How many congregations have a statement about accessibility and inclusion on their websites? An example of such a statement can be found on the website of Adath Israel, a Conservative congregation in New Jersey:

Adath Israel is especially committed to being an innovative and “open congregation” accessible to all. Facilities are on a single floor, special education needs are addressed in our educational system; we have an augmented sound system for the hearing impaired, a wheelchair seating area, a ramp to access the bimah, and large-print and Braille prayerbooks.¹⁸

What other concrete steps can your synagogue take to make your community accessible to all Jews? Include information about accommodations that your synagogue can provide on each piece of literature that is sent out to the congregation. Place second *mezuzot* at wheelchair height on doorways throughout the synagogue. Have a preschool or religious school class lead and sign a prayer that they have learned with the help of a qualified interpreter at a Shabbat service. Have teens and pre-teens serve as buddies to youngsters with disabilities in the congregation. Provide educational resources concerning Judaism and disabilities in your synagogue library. Educate ushers, greeters, receptionists and others who welcome and guide visitors about the various accessibility features offered by your synagogue. Encourage and make people with disabilities comfortable to request accommodations they may need to make the synagogue accessible to them. Make an ongoing commitment to break down structural, communicational and attitudinal obstacles to worship and study.

This is one of my favorite teachings:

Do not disdain any person; do not underrate the importance of anything – for there is no person who does not have their hour, and there is no thing without its place [in the sun].¹⁹

It is imperative that as committed Jews, we continue to further our understanding about issues of social justice and continue to educate ourselves about the obligation we have to ensure that all Jews are part of *Klal Yisrael*. As more Jewish communities begin to identify barriers that people with disabilities endure and work together with Jews with disabilities to eliminate and modify these barriers, we will be well on our way to welcoming and including everyone in our community with joy.

¹⁸ www.adathisraelnj.org/id2/htm

¹⁹ *Mishnah Avot* 4:3



OPENING THE GATES OF TORAH – TEXT 1

שמות ד:י-טו

י וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְיָ בְּנִי אֲדַנְלִי לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים אֲנֹכִי גַם מִתְמוּלִּי גַם מִשְׁלִשָׁם גַּם מֵאִזְ דִּבְרָךְ אֶל־עַבְדְּךָ כִּי
כָבֵד־פֶּה וְכָבֵד לְשׁוֹן אֲנֹכִי: יא וַיֹּאמֶר יְיָ אֱלֹהֵי מִי שֵׁם פֶּה לֹא־דָבָר אוֹ מִי־שׁוֹם אֵלֶם אוֹ חֵרֶשׁ אוֹ פֶקֶח אוֹ עוֹר
הֲלֹא אֲנֹכִי יְיָ: יב וְעַתָּה לָךְ וְאֲנֹכִי אֶהְיֶה עִם־פִּיךָ וְהוֹרִיתִיךָ אֲשֶׁר תִּדְבֹר: יג וַיֹּאמֶר בְּנִי אֲדַנְנִי שְׁלַח־נָא בְיַד־תְּשַׁלַּח:
יד וַיַּחַר־אַף יְיָ בְּמֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר הֲלֹא אֶהְרֹן אַחִיךָ הַלֵּוִי יִדְעֵתִי כִּי־דַבֵּר יִדְבֹר הוּא וְגַם הִנֵּה־הוּא יֵצֵא לְקַרְאֲתְךָ
וְרָאֶךָ וְשָׁמַח בְּלִבּוֹ: טו וְדַבַּרְתָּ אֵלָיו וְשָׁמַתְּ אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים בְּפִיו וְאֲנֹכִי אֶהְיֶה עִם־פִּיךָ וְעִם־פִּיהוּ וְהוֹרִיתִי אֶתְכֶם
אֶת אֲשֶׁר תִּעְשׂוּן:

Exodus 4:10-15

Then Moses said, “Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that you have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” The Holy One replied: “Who gives man speech? Who makes him unable to speak or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, The Holy One? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and will instruct you what to say.”

But Moses said, “Please, O Lord, send by the hand of someone else!” Then The Holy One became angry with Moses, and said: “Do I not also know Aaron the Levite, your brother? He is a speaker among speakers – and see! he is coming out to meet you, and his heart will be glad when he sees you. You can speak to him, and put the words in his mouth; I will be with your mouth, and with his mouth, and I will instruct you both what to do.”

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Why do you think Moses uses so many words to describe his disability?
- Why do you think Moses does not accept The Holy One's first answer?
- Why do you think The Holy One becomes angry with Moses, and do you consider that anger to be justified?
- What difference does it make that Aaron will be involved in the way that is described?



OPENING THE GATES OF TORAH – TEXT 2

תלמוד בבלי חגיגה ה.ב

רבי ורבי חייא הוו שקלי ואזלי באורחא, כי מטו לההוא מתא אמרי: איכא צורבא מרבנן הקא, גזיל וניקביל אפיה. אמרי: איכא צורבא מרבנן הקא, ומאור עיניו הוא. אמר ליה רבי חייא לרבי: תיב את, לא תזלזל בנשיאותך, איזיל אנא ואקביל אפיה. תקפיה ואזל בהדיה. כי הוו מיפטרי מיניה. אמר להו: אתם הקבילתם פנים הנראים ואינן רואין - תזכו להקביל פנים הרואים ואינן נראין. אמר ליה: איכו השתא מנעתן מהאי בירכתא.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD, *HAGGIGAH* 5B

Rebbe and Rabbi Hiyya were once going on a journey. When they came to a certain town they said: If there is a rabbinical scholar here, we will go and pay our respects. The inhabitants told them: There is a rabbinical scholar here, but he is blind. Said Rabbi Hiyya to Rebbe, You remain here, do not degrade your position of Nasi;¹ I will go and pay my respects. Rebbe bested Rabbi Hiyya and went along with him. When they were departing from the blind scholar, he said to them: You came to pay your respects to one who is seen but does not see. May you merit to pay your respects to the One who sees but is not seen. Rebbe said to Rabbi Hiyya, Had I now [listened to you] you would have prevented me from this blessing.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- What do you think motivated Rabbi Hiyya?
- How do you think Rebbe 'bested' Rabbi Hiyya?
- What is so important about the blind scholar's blessing?
- What do you think Rabbi Hiyya might have learned from this experience?

¹ Rebbe was Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Nasi, the president of the Jewish community in the second century CE and the editor of the Mishnah.



OPENING THE GATES OF TORAH – TEXT 3

מתוך פסיקתא זוטרא בראשית א

תנו רבנן אדם יחיד נברא, מפני מה נברא יחיד, שלא יהיו המינין אומרים רשויות הרבה בשמים: דבר אחר מפני הצדיקים ומפני הרשעים, שלא יהיו צדיקים אומרים אנו בני צדיקים ורשעים אומרים אנו בני רשעים: דבר אחר מפני המשפחות שלא יהיו מתגרות זו בזו, ומה עכשיו שנברא יחיד מתגרות, אם נברא שנים על אחת כמה וכמה: דבר אחר מפני הגזלנין ומפני החמסנין. ומה עכשיו שנברא יחיד גזלנין וחמסנין אם נבראו שנים על אחת כמה וכמה: מתניתין, ולהגיד גדלתו של מלך מלכי המלכים הקדוש ברוך הוא שאדם טובע כמה מטבעות בחותם אחד, וכולן דומין זה לזה אבל הקדוש ברוך הוא טובע את כל האדם בחותמו של אדם הראשון, ואין אחד מהם דומה לחבירו, שנאמר תתהפך כחמר חותם ויתיצבו כמו לביש (איוב לח יד), ומפני מה אין פרצופותיהן דומות זו לזו, שלא יראה אדם דירה נאה לחבירו, ואשה נאה לחבירו, ויאמר שלי הן, שנאמר ומנע מרשעים אורם וזרוע רמה תשבר (שם שם טו). תנא הנה רבי מאיר אומר בשלשה דברים אדם נשתנה מחבירו, בקול, ובמראה, ובדעת, בקול ובמראה משום ערוה, בדעת מפני הגזלנין ומפני החמסנין.

FROM PESIKTA ZUTRA, GENESIS 1

Our rabbis taught: the first human being was created alone. Why was that? So that heretics should not say, there is more than one power in Heaven. Another explanation: because of the righteous and the wicked – so that righteous people could not say “we are the children of the righteous” and the wicked, “we are the children of the wicked”. Another explanation: because of families, so they should not argue with each other. And what about now, when even though the first human being was created alone, families argue? – If there had been two created originally, how much more so! Another explanation: because of thieves and violent people. And what about now, when even though the first human being was created alone, people steal and are violent? – If there had been two created originally, how much more so!

And a Mishnah states: to tell of the greatness of the King, the King of kings, the Holy Blessed One – for when a person casts coins in a single mold, they all look the same, but the Holy Blessed One cast every human being with the seal of the first, and yet not a single one of them is the same as any other, as it is said: “It changes like clay under a seal: and they stand like a garment [Job 38:14].” And why do people’s faces not look the same? So that a person should not see that his neighbor has a better dwelling, or a prettier wife, and say, “That’s mine”, as it is said: “And from the wicked their light is withheld, and their arm shall be broken [Job 38:15].” It is taught in a Baraita: Rabbi Meir used to say, “People are different from each other in three ways – in their voices, and their appearances, and their intelligence.” In their voices and their appearances, because of propriety; and in their intelligence, because of thieves and violent people.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- How does the first half of this text relate to the second half?
- What do the quotations from Job add to the argument?
- Which of the explanations for difference do you find the most convincing? Why?
- What is your own understanding of the image of the coins?



OPENING THE GATES OF TORAH – TEXT 4

תלמוד בבלי חגיגה ג.א

וּתְנִינָא: לְמַעַן יִשְׁמְעוּ - פָּרְט לְמַדְבַּר וְאִינוּ שׁוֹמְעִי, וְלְמַעַן יִלְמְדוּ - פָּרְט לְשׁוֹמְעִי וְאִינוּ מְדַבְּרִי. לְמִימְרָא דְכִי לֹא מִשְׁתַּעֵי לֹא גָמַר? וְהָא הִנְהוּ תַרְי אֵילְמִי דְהוּוּ בְּשַׁבְּבוּתֵיהּ דְרַבִּי, בְּנֵי בְרַתֵּיהּ דְרַבִּי יוֹחָנָן בֶּן גּוּדְגֵטָא, וְאָמְרִי לָהּ בְּנֵי אַחֲתֵיהּ דְרַבִּי יוֹחָנָן, דְכָל אֵימַת דְהוּוּ עֵייל לְבֵי מְדַרְשָׁא הוּוּ עֵיילִי וְיִתְבִי קַמֵּייהוּ, וּמְנִיִּידִי בְרִישׁייהוּ וּמְרַחֲשִׁין שְׁפוּתֵיהוּ. וּבְעֵי רַבִּי רַחֲמֵי עֲלֵיהוּ וְאִיתְסוּ, וְאִשְׁתַּכַּח דְהוּוּ גְמִירִי הַלְכְתָּא וְסַפְרָא וְסַפְרֵי וְכוּלָּהּ תִּלְמוּדָא.

BABYLONIAN TALMUD, *HAGGIGAH* 3A

It says [in a Baraita]: “So that they will hear” is to exclude those who can speak but cannot hear, and “So that they will learn” is to exclude those who can hear but cannot speak.¹

Is this to say that one who cannot speak cannot learn?! Consider the case of these two mutes who were in Rebbe’s² neighborhood, who were the sons of Rabbi Yohanan ben Gudgeta’s daughter (some say they were the sons of Rabbi Yohanan’s sister). Whenever Rebbe would enter the study hall, they would enter and sit down before him, and they would nod their heads and move their lips. Rebbe besought mercy on their behalf, and they were healed. And it was found that they were well versed in halakhah, Sifra, Sifri, and the entire Shas.³

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Why is the example of the two mutes brought?
- Why do you think Rebbe asked for mercy for them?
- What does the example prove?
- Could the story have ended in a different way? How?

¹ This is part of a discussion of Deuteronomy verse 31:12, from which the quotations are taken. The rabbis are trying to work out exactly who is obliged to come up to Jerusalem for the festivals.

² Rebbe was Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Nasi, the president of the Jewish community in the second century CE and the editor of the Mishnah.

³ Sifra and Sifri are sources for Midrash; ‘Shas’ is another word for the whole of the Talmud.



OPENING THE GATES OF TORAH – TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

OPENING THE GATES OF TORAH KEYNOTE

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. 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.

Although I have often felt invisible because I can't speak, I have also learned that autism is not entirely negative. For example, I get a VIP pass at Disneyland, and I also get to kiss all the beautiful counselors at camp and pretend I don't know any better. On a serious note, not being able to speak means that you spend lots of time listening. In fact, most of what I know I've learned from listening to conversations that other people didn't think I could hear. I've also observed that people with autism support each other in ways that typically developing people do not. My friends and I have all known the horrible embarrassment of having an autistic episode, so we really understand and support each other through triumphs as well as tribulations. Finally, because I have had to struggle every day of my life to do things that other kids take for granted, I think that I have experienced God's love in a way that most kids have not.

All of you here made a commitment to come today and spend an afternoon and evening understanding what it is like to live with a disability. To be honest, it is hard. It is an enormous effort for me to do the simplest tasks like writing my name or tying my shoe. In my daily struggle, Judaism has been a constant source of hope, comfort and guidance. I have had wonderful peers who have seen me as a person made in God's image, with the same dreams and concerns as other kids. And while everyone else may be sleeping during the rabbi's sermon, I am always listening because I need all the help I can get in finding the strength to make it though each day.

I want to thank all of you for inviting me to participate today and for being pioneers because I have never been a keynote speaker before. It has often been my experience that people with disabilities, especially those of us who are nonverbal, don't get an opportunity to speak for ourselves. By including me as a presenter today, you are already light years ahead of many other communities. So thank you for believing in me and all the other kids like me.

For the past two years, I have been part of a musical theater program for kids with special needs called the Miracle Project. It was very aptly named because many miracles happened there that make the parting of the Red Sea pale in comparison. For one, I met my wonderful girlfriend Lexi, who also has autism and has the most beautiful voice and smile in the whole world. For another, I wrote a song that we used in the show and Lexi sang it. Most miraculously of all, we all accomplished far more than we ever expected because we were a team – autistic kids, siblings, volunteers and acting coaches. People with special needs don't need to be spoken to like dogs with good job and good listening and similar phrases used to train animals to do tricks. All we need is someone patient who believes that we can fly and notices our hard-earned little accomplishments. When all those little accomplishments accumulate over days and weeks and months and years, the results can be truly miraculous!

- Jacob Artson

Keynote Address to "Opening the Gates of Torah: Including People With Disabilities In the Jewish Community", Washington DC, 2007



SESSION SUGGESTIONS – OPENING THE GATES OF TORAH

INTRODUCTION

In this session the group will consider social justice from the viewpoint of people with special needs. This could well turn out to be a tachlis session about disability practice and policy.

Introduce the session. Ask participants which parts of the essay resonated with them and why. It's possible that participants have personal experience of dealing with disability – if so, this needs to come out as early in the session as possible.

CHAVRUTA STUDY

Hand out the texts for chavruta study. You might wish to pair groups 1 and 4, since group 4 is studying the Midrash to group 1. Beware of outrage at text 2, which is the least accessible – it might be that participants need assistance to look beneath its surface language and detail and discuss what principle the rabbis are trying to teach. Bring the groups together at the end to report back on 'their' texts and what they learned from them.

GROUP STUDY

The text supplied is a transcript of Jacob Artson's keynote speech at the conference, "Opening the Gates of Torah: Including People With Disabilities In the Jewish Community" organized by the Partnership on Jewish Life and Learning in Washington DC. It bears close reading. Use it as the basis for a discussion – has it changed participants' views of/understanding about disability? If so, how? This could lead spontaneously on to a discussion of the material in the second part of the essay – how the synagogue can best open itself to those of its members who have special needs. You might wish to have paper handy to record the brainstorm. If participants want to write a whole new policy – how would that look based on the sources they have studied?

Other options for this session would include opening the focus to look at and discuss other types of special needs. There are multiple websites which can assist you here (google 'association disability'). Or you could take the session in a halakhic direction - for example, Rabbi Reuven Hammer has written on the halakhah of bar and bat mitzvah for people with special needs, and the Masorti movement in Israel runs a dedicated program, and produces a very moving DVD – see <http://www.masorti.org/programs/specialneeds.html> for information.

For a creative option – would participants write other *brakhot* to those cited in the essay? Or – if they were to write another example to illustrate the way people with special needs should be treated (such as the one in Text 4) – what would that be?

How you draw the discussion together in this session will be important. Where is your group, your synagogue, going to concentrate its energies, and how?

CONCLUSION

Allow time for participants to update and amend their personal manifestos. Hand out the essay for next time and conclude the session.



CONTRIBUTORS

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INTRODUCTION

See the various essays on social justice at www.bradartson.com

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Also see the AJWS website, www.ajws.org

SPECIAL NEEDS

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Jewish Funds for Justice website, www.jewishjustice.org



MUSICAL PLAYLIST TO ACCOMPANY EACH SESSION

Compiled by Noam Raucher

You can use any or all of the songs in the suggested sessions. They are listed in the order of title-artist-album, and all are available on iTunes. Please note that one or two have explicit lyrics – these are clearly marked.

Introduction

How Come – Ray LaMontagne – Trouble
For What It's Worth – Buffalo Springfield – Buffalo Springfield
If I Had A Hammer – Peter, Paul and Mary – The Best of Peter Paul and Mary
What's Going On – Marvin Gaye – What's Going On

The Prophets and Social Justice

Fuel – Ani DiFranco – Little Plastic Castle
Chimes of Freedom – Bob Dylan – Bob Dylan: The Collection
Keep On Rockin' In The Free World – Neil Young – Greatest Hits

The Ethical Impulse in Rabbinic Judaism

Talkin' Bout A Revolution – Tracy Chapman – Tracy Chapman
Blowin' In The Wind – Peter, Paul and Mary – The Best of Peter, Paul and Mary
Down By The Riverside – Waste Deep In The Big Muddy And Other Love Songs

A Torah of Justice – A View from the Right?

Hands – Jewel - Spirit
The Times They Are A Changin' – Bob Dylan – The Essential Bob Dylan
We Are One – Safam – Peace By Peace

A Torah of Justice – A View from the Left?

He Was My Brother – Simon and Garfunkel – Wednesday Morning, 3AM
Oxford Town – Bob Dylan – The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan
A Change Is Gonna Come – Sam Cooke – Ain't That Good News

Environment

The Horizon Has Been Defeated – Jack Johnson -On and On
Holy Ground – The Klezmatics – Wonder Wheel
Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology) – Marvin Gaye – What's Going On
Big Yellow Taxi – Joni Mitchell - Dreamland

Business Ethics

Working Class Hero – John Lennon – Working Class Hero: The Definitive Lennon
Carpal Tunnel – John O' Conner – Classic Labor Songs From Smithsonian Folkways
We Do The Work – Jon Fromer - Classic Labor Songs From Smithsonian Folkways

International Economic Justice

We Are The World. – USA For Africa – We Are The World (Single)
Outside A Small Circle of Friends – Phil Ochs – The Best of Phil Ochs
El Salvador – Peter, Paul and Mary – The Best of Peter Paul and Mary

Special Needs

What It's Like – Everlast – The Best of House of Pain and Everlast – **EXPLICIT LYRICS**
Mr. Wendall – Arrested Development – 3 years, 5 months, and 2 days in the life Of...
The Boy In The Bubble – Paul Simon – The Essential Paul Simon

Kashrut

All You Can Eat – Ben Folds – Supersunnyspeedgraphic, The LP – **EXPLICIT LYRICS**
Mr. Greed – John Fogerty - Centerfield
We Just Come To Work Here, We Don't Come To Die –Anne Feeney - Classic Labor Songs From Smithsonian Folkways

Israel

Hope: Pray On – Sweet Honey In The Rock - 25
Yihyeh Tov – David Broza – Things Will Be Better, The Best Of David Broza
Misplaced – Moshav Band

Afterword

With My Own Two Hands – Ben Harper – Diamonds On The Inside
Living For The City – Stevie Wonder – Number 1's
Redemption Song – Bob Marley - Legend



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