

Inclusion Shabbat by Cantor Roytman, 2/3/18

Shabbat Shalom!

Here at BHBE when we use the word inclusion we mean a certain level of openness, welcoming and acceptance by the members of our community of those who are in some way different in their appearance, sexual orientation, gender and level of physical and mental ability. We believe that every Jew, child or adult should have an opportunity to participate in the life of our congregation; not withstanding their individual strengths, preferences, and beliefs.

The culture of inclusion is important to us. We have made great strides to fully include members of the LGBTQ community, families with one Jewish parent, and others. We have also made great strides to welcome individuals with special needs. We created Inclusion services and other services and events so people with different disabilities feel comfortable and welcome. As a member of the HUGS consortium, an organization that includes thirteen north suburban congregations, our synagogue has participated in the Chicago wide ritual and educational programming for those with special needs.

We surely try our best to be an inclusive congregation. Many of our members are compassionate and caring individuals who work hard to make Beth Hillel Bnai Emunah a warm and inclusive place for all. And yet, to paraphrase my daughter's favorite childhood cartoon character Olyvia: we are not there yet.

Yet today, when we look around we see many of our differently abled members and guests being present, participating in the service and leading Torah. But is this the case every day?

Does every Shabbat at BHBE feel like an inclusion Shabbat? And does there have to be a special Shabbat to highlight inclusion or rather all of our services should be inclusive at their core?

To answer some of these questions we should first look at the statistics to see the common trends as far as the inclusion is concerned. Here is some data provided by a survey from the 2015-2016 Chicago Synagogue Inclusion project funded by the JUF's Break Through Fund.

The survey states in part, and i quote

“Twenty percent of all people (and Jews) have a disability”

In other words, 20% (and there some other source that use a higher number of 25%) of all Jews, have a disability of one kind or another. This includes not only those diagnosed with intellectual, cognitive, and physical disabilities but also those with hearing and vision problems and, in particular the elderly.

I am going to digress here for just a moment to highlight the fact that our older congregants are not often seen as individuals with special needs. We perceive them as self-sufficient or able because of their relative financial security and their ability to pay for certain services. But in reality this is not the case as their age related problems often make them disable and unable to participate fully in the life of our congregation.

So how do the elderly and others included in the 20-25% feel as far as the inclusion is concerned? Sadly the survey informs us that the majority of Jews with disabilities do not participate in synagogue life and here are some of the reasons why.

Households touched by a disability report feeling invisible, left out or perceived as disruptive.

Congregations don't always know who has disabilities.

Synagogues are inconsistent and ad-hoc in their approach and ability to be inclusive of individuals with disabilities and their families.

So clearly, there is a problem as the majority of those with different abilities and their families do not feel comfortable, accepted, and welcome in the synagogue. To them not every Shabbat feels like an Inclusion Shabbat. And I believe that this needs to change.

Making a change is never easy and it is often unclear how do we get from where we are to where we want to be?

In the Talmud, we find a story of one of the greatest scholars of the tannic period Rabbi Simeon Ben Eleazar who once happened to be upon a disfigured man. In seeing the man Ben Eleazar was repulsed and when a man greeted him Eleazar did not respond with a greeting but retorted with a comment demeaning a disfigured man for his unattractiveness.

“Rabbi,” said the man, “if you find my disfigurement so repulsive why not go to the artisan who made me and complain to him?”

Hearing this Rabbi Eleazar realized that he was wrong. He got off his donkey, fell at the man’s feet and asked for forgiveness. “I will not forgive you” said the man, “until you go to the artist who made me and tell him: ‘how unattractive is the vessel that you made.’”

The artisan or the artist the story was of course God who, as we’d like to think created human beings B’tzelem Elohim-in God’s own image.

And the moral of the story is: no matter what we look like and what we are able to do there is something divine and sacred in each and every one of us.

This divine connection between God and the human beings can be traced to the story of creation. In it God formed the first human being from the dust of the ground. But then the being was just a vessel until God breathed into him the *neshamat chaim* the breath of life. Once the first man, Adam received his soul he became fully human.

We do not know what the first human being looked like or what he was able to do. After all, how much can you make from dust? But we do know that he was a product of the divine design and what is more importantly the recipient of God's own inner essence, his breath. This means that in a sense Adam was not only God's creation on the outside but also God's extension on the inside. Technically speaking, he was granted a piece of God when God breathed God's soul into him.

In Jewish mystical tradition this connection is further emphasized as we are told it was not just Adam who was the recipient of the God's essence. All of us have a special connection to God for it was Adam's very soul, given to him by God, that we inherited, as it was divided into smaller sparkles and distributed to the generation that followed. How cool is that to know that there is a little bit of God in each of us both in our appearance and in our spiritual essence?

Taking this very special connection we can now go back to the question that was posted earlier: "how do we get to where we want to be" To me, the answer is very simple. We need to start by recognizing the sacred origins of every human being and in doing so treat each

other accordingly. Each person, though different is a blessing from God.

The next step is to be responsible for one another as it is stated in Babylonian Talmud, Shevuot 39a- *Kol yisrael arevim zeh bazeh*. This means that we need to treat each other with compassion and respect one another independent of our appearance and/or our ability to participate in the creation of our world

And this is where another line from Talmud Bavli comes handy as it states: *Da Lifney Meata Omed: Know Before Whom You Stand*. In the context of Jewish religious teaching this phrase refers to God and our knowing that at all times we are standing in the presence of the Holy Blessed One and should act accordingly.

For me, knowing before whom I stand also means not prejudging the abilities of child or adult standing before me. It means taking the time and the effort to learn about those before whom we stand and in doing so to encourage their abilities to be revealed for the benefit of all.

To follow up on this precept I recently interviewed several individuals, members of our congregation each of whom had a family member with special needs or who themselves are considered as disabled in one way or another. I was given their permission, to share with you what I've learned in order to enable better communication, understanding, and ultimately, inclusion.

I will begin with Devorah Fisher, the daughter of our member Sheila Fisher. Devora is 32 years old and is severely disabled. She has the Agenesis of the Corpus Collosum, which is a rare birth defect and as

a result, Devorah is missing the bridge between the two halves of her brain. This affects Devorah's ability to process and transfer information.

Devorah is also legally deaf and blind and is also affected by epilepsy. In addition, she has central sleep apnea which means that she can stop breathing at any time. Because of this specific condition Devorah is permanently connected to a pulse oximeter to monitor her oxygen rate.

Finally, Devorah has uncontrolled lymphedema and only has three quarters of her lung to breath. She is chair bound and g-tube fed and this is how she lives.

Devorah lives at home with her mother Sheila who loves her very much. To Sheila, Devorah is not broken and in a number of ways very much able in her own ways. Sheila sees her daughter as a blue eyed, curly haired angel who smiles indiscriminately and loves to interact with the world around her.

One of Devorah's ways of interacting is through music. This was discovered early on in her life and it came as a surprise for according to her diagnosis she is not able to hear sounds. As it was discovered later Devorah reacts to the sounds of music specifically when she hears it at a higher decibel.

I personally can attest to it for I have seen how Devorah's demeanor changes in reaction to my singing. She becomes agitated and begins to make her own very special sounds. Does she sing? I don't really know but when I sing and I hear Devorah's voice joining me I surely want to believe that somewhere deep inside she really does.

And there is more to Devorah's ability to interact with the world. For example, when she gets to know you she rubs your hand. And when she has to go—she wiggles; which as I am told is a sign of a higher function. According to Sheila, Devorah used to be able to communicate in sign language. Unfortunately over time she lost some her ability. In addition, Devorah can perform certain tasks. For example she bakes using an adapter switch. Devorah bakes at home on Tuesdays and brings what she makes to Wilmette's Park District's Adult ceramics class on Wednesdays.

Finally, Devorah is a business owner. Her business is called Frames by Devorah and if you google it or search it on Facebook it will surely come up. Devorah paints her frames with specially adopted mittens that have various textures sewn on them. Her frames are very popular and I encourage all of you to check them out or even to buy some. It would bring Devorah and her loved ones great joy.

There are many things that Devorah enjoys to do but there are some experiences that she does not particularly like. She does not like it when people stare at her or when she is hushed while singing. She also gets upset when people don't come over and she sits alone with her mom either at the kiddush table or in the sanctuary. And she does cry when she gets upset. She cries like any one of us would if we were avoided, stared at or lonely.

So when you see Devorah after the service, please greet her. She really likes that. You can even touch her hand, that let's her know that you are there and that you care. Devorah is a human being and like other human beings she wants to be included and loved.

Devorah's story is an amazing one but it is only one of the stories that I wanted to share with you today. My next one is of Daniel Miller, the son of our congregants Anita and Michael Miller.

Daniel is 34 and he has autism with a certain degree of neuroplasticity that allows him to learn and to grow intellectually. Daniel loves Judaism!

It all started with his Bar Mitzvah in 1996. His mentor, Cantor Wasser whom many in this congregation still remember fondly, devised a plan of communicating with Daniel in his own language. Cantor Wasser tutored Daniel for three months non-stop and in the end officiated at his Bar Mitzvah ceremony. At his Bar Mitzvah Daniel was able to demonstrate basic Jewish knowledge by choosing several ritual objects and by correctly identifying them by name.

Since that time Daniel has grown and matured and he now lives in a community that is a part of Little City Foundation. Daniel is surrounded by many friends and he enjoys many of the activities offered there. In particular, he loves the therapeutic horse riding.

Daniel's room is decorated with pictures that he made of the menorah, sukkot, and other Jewish themes. For Daniel, Judaism is an essential part of his life both at his home at Little City and his parents home here in Wilmette. Daniel actively participates in his family's Shabbat observance and he understands and identifies specific parts of the ritual and many ritual objects including the Kiddush Cup and Shabbat Candles.

In addition to his home observance Daniel loves coming to BHBE for services where he enjoys wearing his kipa, using a prayer book,

listening to the liturgical music and generally seeing people, welcoming them and being welcomed by them. Daniel easily follows the flow of the service and he can identify many of its parts including repetition, blessings, and the Torah readings.

Daniel used to come to the shul sporadically but since the inclusion at BHBE gained a momentum he has been coming very often. This is due not in a small way to his mother Anita's many efforts and her leadership of the inclusion committee here at BHBE.

The committee's work made it possible for many individuals like Daniel to be included in the life of our congregation. But TO BE included is not always enough. Daniel and his family want him TO FEEL included and that means being greeted and welcomed by those around him.

Daniel feels included when he is acknowledged with a greeting and a smile. He will respond to a greeting and wave back though he is not comfortable shaking hands. Sometimes when greeted Daniel will not make eye contact but he knows you are there and he can feel the goodness and the warmth of others.

Daniel's way of reacting to friendliness is smiling and if you see him smile you can be sure you've done a good job of reaching out. I really look forward to seeing Daniel smile more both on this Shabbat and for many Shabbatot to come.

Welcoming and greeting people on Shabbat has become an essential part of our congregation's experience. Many of you know that I personally go around the room during the Kiddush luncheon and try to greet everyone and wish them Shabbat Shalom.

But there is also another time during Shabbat morning when I do some of my greetings. This takes place during the Hakafa, the processional, in the beginning of the Torah service. I usually go that way (point) and as I reach the back of the sanctuary I am often greeted by Sam Pfeffer, our long term congregant, a founding member, and a past president of our congregation.

I always look forward to being greeted by Sam for his presence gives me confidence and makes me feel proud of our congregation and the many years that we have been functioning as a warm and welcoming Jewish community.

To me Sam represents the past of our congregation at its best. He also represents our future for I believe that a solid future cannot be built without recognizing and respecting the past.

When thinking of Sam, it is hard to imagine that either disability or inclusion would be the issues he has to deal with. And yet, he too is often challenged and inadvertently excluded because of where he is now in life.

Until about 8 years ago Sam was in a very good place. A successful businessman he made a couple of very sweet deals that allowed him to look forward to his and his wife's comfortable retirement. And then the disaster struck.

His wife Paula, a former professor of history at Loyola University was diagnosed with Parkinson's and Sam's entire plan for the future came crushing down. Whatever he saved was now needed for treatment and care for Paula's Parkinson's and later for dementia that gradually deprived his beloved Paula of all joys of life.

Sam too began experiencing health problems. This included stenosis of the spine, two strokes that resulted in a condition that affects his ability to swallow food, and macular generation of both eyes combined with glaucoma. In just a few years Sam turned from a prosperous care free retiree to an individual with special needs whose every day became a struggle for survival. Last year Sam and Paula had to sell their home and move to Gidwitz where they now live together.

Those of you who know Sam also know that he is not a complainer. He is a thinker and a fighter and loves to be active in the world. Sam loves BHBE, a community to which he dedicated much of his life as its leader and advocate. Sam comes to meetings and events and does his best to continue to be an active member of our congregation. Sam is 92 but many of us listen and heed to his wise council. Personally, I am grateful for his continued guidance and advice.

To be active at BHBE Sam has to first get here. He does it by asking several different people to give him a ride. On Shabbat, the time of the week that he really looks forward to, he is driven to shul by Paula's caretaker who lives in the city and gives him a ride on her way home. After services, Richard Espe and sometimes David Penzell give Sam a ride home. Without them Sam would not be able to attend service.

Sam is grateful to BHBE for the place it has given him both at the table and in the sanctuary where a special vision enhancing device is installed; one that allows him to follow the prayers on the screen. He feels included and to some extent satisfied with his lot.

And yet there are others like him, elderly congregants many of whom are founders and former leaders of our congregation. Some of

them are not able to come to services because they cannot drive and don't have anyone to drive them. Others have difficulty walking, hearing, seeing, and even speaking. Many of them have a need to be and feel included. Reach out to them, offer them help. Let them know you care.

After all we are all members of Beth Hillel Bnai Emunah; The Children of Faith of the House of Hillel. And as such we should be following the commitment that our ancestors have made in this week's Torah portion. Namely, *Kol Asher Diber Adonai Naase*-all that God hath spoken We Shall Do. We should strive to be a holy community *Kehila Kedosha* through our observance of mitzot and our enactment of the acts of loving kindness for the betterment of our world. And if we are successful in our efforts, kindness, compassion and inclusion will happen not just today, not once a month but every Shabbat and every day for many years to come.

Amen

- Hope you will behave differently
- In the end we are all differently able and we can get in that category.