

DISABILITY AWARENESS SHABBAT
February 20, 2009

Itzhak Perlman is one of the greatest violinists of the last century.

At age 35, Perlman was performing more than 100 times a year,

all over the world. He began his career at the age of 3,

when he asked his parents for a violin.

The next year he came down with polio.

Ever since he has had to wear braces on his legs and walk with crutches.

As a child prodigy, Perlman said, he was very aware of his disability.

"I could show you reviews when I first came to the United States,"

he remembered. **"Handicapped violinist pretty good,**

despite disability."

"Or 'Crippled blah, blah, blah, dah, dah, dah.

And as he went on the stage, hobbling on his shining aluminum

crutches and very heavily sat down, but afterward

we forgot all about it and it was just music.' And so on.

And, every, every single review had to mention that," he added.

Perlman didn't like this kind of attention and thought it took away

from the music itself.

The Torah tells us we are not to curse the deaf or

place a stumbling block before the blind.

What this means beyond the obvious is that we should not vilify or mock any disabled person. It also means that we should be inclusive, welcoming people with disabilities into our congregation as much as we welcome someone who is not disabled.

Just because someone can walk only with the help of a wheelchair, or can't talk as clearly as you or I because of cerebral palsy, doesn't make them any less worthy of our respect and admiration – nor any less intelligent.

All too often, we shrink away from those who are differently abled.

Hear the story of Cantor David Unterman:

“I have lived most of my life as a member of that class we call ‘the handicapped’ or ‘the disabled.’

I contracted polio at the age of twenty months. It wasn't until I was six that I could walk, with the help of full length heavy iron braces supporting both legs.

Before that my older sister would wheel me about in a stroller, and we would be met with looks of pity or of disapproval by the adults.

Many of them shrank away from me so as not to be contaminated

by my disease. My parents, Orthodox immigrants from Poland, told me God would heal me if I prayed, so I prayed and prayed - until ultimately I rejected God when no miraculous healing occurred.

Children in our neighborhood called me a variety of nasty names when their parents weren't present. I cried.

My brother and sister tried to assuage my very real emotional pain with the bromide, "Sticks and stones can break your bones but names can never harm you." How wrong they were! Names can hurt. Broken bones can heal, but the degrading labels, cripple, limpy, crybaby, and others that I can't repeat here, particularly when heard over and over again, left a broken self-image leading to disastrous consequences in my behavior and a vacuous personality devoid of any feeling.

Children my age would not let me play with them.

By sixth grade I could finally walk without braces, although with a noticeable limp.

And I had learned that I could command favorable attention with my singing. But it required many decades of therapy and help from many friends before I could finally feel whole and

start making peace with the physical and emotional traumas
of my childhood.

Gradually, over many years, muscular strength has left my legs,
and I am now confined to a wheelchair.

Because of the Americans with Disabilities Act,
I can now access most synagogues and theaters,
which a few years ago would have been impossible.

Yet I still cannot enter most private houses for shivah services, sick calls,
or even to visit friends.

In conclusion, I urge you all to consider:

how do you respond to the disabled,
particularly to their insistence on accessibility?

How quickly do stereotypical labels surface in your brain,
even though you are sophisticated enough not to actually say them?

And finally, are you consistently aware that the power of words
goes far beyond the physical to heal or to hurt?"

As Cantor Unterman says, even those of us who think of ourselves
as concerned, caring folks, often are not very sensitive to the way we,
even inadvertently, shun the differently abled.

For many parents of children with disabilities, community can become the very occasion for the most acute pain. | In community, difference and discomfort often become exclusion, and not because others mean to exclude.

To give a personal example, there are no other children in my synagogue community who would, at this point, naturally seek out a play date with my son. Families with “normal” children of the same age invite one another over so children can play and adults can talk, but my family has not yet been figured into that equation.

This is not malicious, and it actually, on some level, makes sense—my son, at this point, does not know how to play appropriately with his peers. But it yields the unwitting exclusion of our family from certain webs of connection. Or at least I experience it as such. And this exclusion can be painful for families like mine who yearn for their community to be their home, despite disabilities, despite differences, despite discomfort.

How do we, as a Jewish community, begin to address this, the fact of strangeness in our midst? I believe we need to start by asking a range of questions—religious, personal and communal. How does each of us feel about disabilities, physical or otherwise?

How do we then respond? What might we learn about ourselves from contact with others who have disabilities?

How might we see the world differently if we consciously begin to use the lens that each human being is created in the image of God?

Denise Jacobson was one of my congregants in Oakland.

She and her husband, Neil, both have cerebral palsy and both use wheelchairs.

It takes focused attention to understand them when they speak.

Yet Neil is a senior vice president at Wells Fargo bank, and Denise is a gifted writer and advocate.

A few years ago, Denise chose to have a Bat Mitzvah in her 40's.

She took singing lessons for a year and was able to lead us in prayers as well as chant her portion from the Torah.

In her drash, Denise described the isolation she felt growing up:

“From the time I was little, the whole idea of segregation bothered me.

Having a disability and being Jewish, I knew first-hand about the harm of segregation whether it was self-imposed or imposed by society.

I went to segregated schools, camps, and programs.

I was told it was for the best—since I moved too slowly

to keep up with other kids; I would hold them back,
or they wouldn't have patience enough to listen to me, and, of course,
kids would be cruel (I never understood that one because
I thought if only I could be around other kids,
we'd all learn how to be kind and accept one another—
but I was young and knew no one would listen to me)...

Yet, my disability gave me the opportunity to be exposed
to all different kinds of people. I got to see that people had value
not just because of who they were, or what they did, or believed,
but because of their experiences. I began to appreciate
that my life had value, too.

[The] experience of most of us who have disabilities [is that]
we see concerned people all around us working us to eliminate poverty,
fighting for human rights, bring peace to the world,
but many times those of us with disabilities get separated
out of the mainstream. We get put into our little box
because we're said to have "special needs."

We don't get counted among those who need affordable housing or
job training. We don't get counted among those who are victims of hate
crimes and domestic abuse. We don't even get counted among those

who have something to offer to the betterment of the community.

We still get set apart and segregated,
so that community doesn't get used to seeing our faces.

Even the most considerate and caring people can forget
to set a place for us at their table.

This is troublesome especially for the Jewish community,
because of Jewish history and understanding of oppression,
and our commitment to social justice.

As Jews, we know how much accepting people who are different
can benefit a society in so many different ways.”

Yitzhak Perlman puts it this way: “A lot of people think access means
the ability to get into a building no matter where or how you get into it,
whether you get into it through a back alley,
or through an elevator that usually carries garbage or food.

But shouldn't it mean that you can get into the building
through the front door with everybody else?”

In other words, we need to set a place at our table
for those with disabilities in our community.

Denise concluded her drash by saying:

“...being welcomed by the people in this community enabled me to discover that I had a place here, and I became willing to learn about a Judaism I knew very little about. I realized how my values are very much compatible with its principles. I discovered, too, that to fulfill my role as a Jew, I had an obligation to join in, speak up, and voice my perspective. It was my Jewish obligation to become part of the community that makes room at the table so that people like me can take our place and contribute to the community, as I am doing here today...”

She then proceeded to offer some thank you's, including one to her son David.

“David, you have a lot to do with me being up here.

Over the years I've watched you run around this place like you belonged and it made me feel like I belonged here, too.”

Needless to say, there wasn't a dry eye in the Sanctuary.

Denise and Neil had adopted a baby boy and brought him up together.

David was given to them because the adoption agency thought that he, too, had cerebral palsy – after all, they wouldn't have given a perfectly healthy child to a couple in wheelchairs.

But it turned out that David was perfectly healthy, and his parents,

perfectly capable of raising him.

Here is how Denise describes dealing with diapers in her wonderful book,

The Question of David:

“It wasn’t uncommon for a diaper change to take me up to forty minutes, but through it all – the jostling and jiggling, my sweating and absent-minded drooling – David cooed or sucked his pacifier, played with his fingers or his rattle. Intermittently, I’d stop my labor and talk to him. He’d smile and blabber back. His patience made my effort possible. And when it was over—the diaper snugly on (more or less), the sleeper zipped, and our energy exhausted—I’d turn him on his stomach and rub his back. He’d sleep for two hours!”

God's Gift in an Unexpected Package, by Michael Kaplan

On February 9, 1994 my son, Brandon, was born.

Dina and I immediately recognized that something was different about this child, as he had a visible disability.

Within an hour the pediatrician walked into Dina’s hospital room and told us that there was a problem with the baby.

I listened as he described Brandon’s rocker bottom feet, short neck,

wide set eyes and a simian crease on his hand.

Through the fog that just settled upon us, Dina and I observed
a parade of specialists who examined Brandon,
each radiated an aura of doom and gloom,
and each gave us the comforting three word report, "I don't know."

Months later, as the High Holy Days approached
I was prepared to go the synagogue to ask God why he did this to us.
Why did he take a child, who was supposed to be perfect,
and burden him – and us – with so many disabilities?

But then a very pivotal event happened at the Kaplan household.

I awoke one morning and looked up at Dina's smiling face.
Dina looked at me and said "Michael, I finally realized
that Brandon didn't happen to us. Brandon happened for us."

At that point, I realized that Brandon was God's gift.

It is just that this gift arrived in an unexpected package.

I recognized that when gifts arrive in your life,
you better take them and approach them in a positive way.
Otherwise you lose, and if the gifts involve your children,
your children lose too.

That day my world, Dina's world, and my family's world began to change. And change for the better. On Yom Kippur, instead of asking God why he did this, I thanked him for the gift that he had given to us.

Last Yom Kippur I was standing at the back of our sanctuary. I was photographing a mother and infant child who were attending the service. As I stepped back and I lowered my camera, one of our ushers, walked over to me and whispered: "If you want to get a great photograph, there is a kid in a wheelchair in the front row, hugging his Torah." I looked at him and I smiled. I said "That kid with the Torah, is my son."

Several years ago I was at a social gathering at which I had the opportunity to qvell about my family and tell the story of Brandon.

When I finished, the gentleman sitting next to me said, "Michael, I feel your pain." I turned to him and responded, "There is no pain. Please understand that we are totally blessed to have this child."

Yes we are all given God's gifts, and yes, sometimes gifts arrive in unexpected packages.

My gift arrived in the form of a child with many special needs.

Your gift may have arrived in another unexpected package.

The important thing is how we deal with them.

It is ...for each of us to look around at the gifts that we have been given
and ask "What have I done with these gifts?"