

Inclusion Initiative in Sharon

By Andrew Warren

At Young Israel of Sharon, a warm and vibrant Modern Orthodox congregation, Jodi Saltzman noticed there were children with special needs that were nonetheless not well engaged in synagogue life. She felt more needed to be done. "There are things we cannot do alone, and a team is needed to be proactive about reaching out to help those that might not ask for it," she told synagogue personnel.

The congregation launched the "Inclusivity Initiative" as its focus for the New Year, with Saltzman as its chair. The goal, explained synagogue President David Katz, is to ensure that each member of the *kehillah* (congregation) feels connected and valued when they come, regardless of any physical, mental or social challenges. During his Rosh HaShanah address, Rabbi Meir Sendor challenged the congregation to "open our hearts and our minds; to become sensitive. It's a really important moral and spiritual lesson for us all," he said.

Special guest Shelly Cohen, a national leader in the Modern Orthodox community on issues of disability and inclusion, also came to share her story with the *kehillah*. Speaking from the heart about her son Nathaniel's challenges to become accepted in Jewish schools and camps, her topic was "Blow a shofar for inclusion: How a communal inclusion committee can affect the *Teshuvah* process." Her son eventually succumbed to muscular dystrophy, but her campaign for inclusion for other children and families continues. Everyone in the filled social hall was touched by her vision and dedication.

Member Joshua Levin, who has a son with special needs who attends shul every Shabbat, said, "the initiative is a good start and going in the right direction. It's hard for people to relate to what it's like, but now there is greater awareness of the situation, and the need to consider and involve special needs kids and their families."

Member Julie Galler, who organizes Tefilat Nashim, the women's prayer group, noticed congregant Dan Rosen's daughter in the back of the small sanctuary, who appeared to be somewhat restless. Galler invited the young woman who also has special needs to open up the *Aron* (the ark) to display the Torah. Afterward, she stood at the *bimah* as the Torah was read, and was "beaming" with joy. "One thing I know about Shoshana is that she is no different than the rest of us," said Rosen. "She comes to shul because she loves being Jewish, and loves being with her friends and family as part of the Jewish community."

He continued to place himself in his daughter's position. "And I imagine - though who can know these things," he pondered, "that shul on Shabbat is a place where Shoshana feels close to G-d. To watch her open the *Aron* at *Tefillat Nashim* and stand at the *bimah* for 25 minutes in front of the open *Sefer Torah* so peacefully, the smile on her face reaching from ear to ear, without any prodding or encouragement from teachers, aides, family or friends, well, that seems to me what the word *Shekinah* is meant to describe."

Guest Larry Hollander has recently begun visiting Young Israel for Shabbat. Larry brings his son Rafi by wheelchair, and says that he understands everything. Although Rafi cannot communicate verbally like other teens, after entering the main sanctuary and receiving wishes

for a "Good Shabbos" and handshakes, his big smile speaks volumes. Hollander is not surprised by the support. He related that when he received an aliyah, the *gabaim* (assistants) at the *bimah* still had his card and Hebrew name from his last visit. "You don't understand," said Hollander. "My first and last visit was when I myself was a teen like Rafi. That was 36 years ago!" he recollected, adding, "This is truly a special and welcoming community."

Andrew Warren is a Board Member of Young Israel of Sharon



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