

3/9/2019 DAS Inclusion Talk

Earlier this week, as I began putting together what I wanted to say today, I'm sure that I started out like most of us would in preparation to say a few words on Shabbat - that used to be checking in the parsha to see what you can find, but instead it's now a quick Google search, right? I looked up latin roots for inclusion & exclusion. Inclusion or Inclusionem, is "the act of making a part of". I think we'd all agree that's a nice idea isn't it? Exclusion or Exclusionem, is defined as a "shutting out or keeping out". Naturally, today being what it is, I should be talking about Inclusion. It feels good and ultimately that's what we are advocating for here for today...including and making part of a group or the larger whole. There are also many references that point to areas in the Torah where inclusion is uncovered, learned out, & discussed. But there are also examples found in the Torah that speak about exclusion, and this is precisely the alter-perspective that never really gets discussed, especially at events like a "Disability Awareness Shabbat". We know the idea of inclusion is important; we support it, we insist on it, we know that we benefit from it, and we know it's the right thing to do. However I would argue that to really understand the concept of Inclusion, one needs to understand what happens as a result of **Exclusion** so I wanted to take a few minutes this afternoon to talk about exclusion.

By their very nature, Jews who live in Orthodox communities, modern or otherwise, have already self-induced a measure of exclusion from the rest of the world. For example, I'm not going to live in Ellicott City because of my lifestyle needs of having a shul in walking distance, Jewish schools & shopping, & peers who observe like I do. By seeking out specific places to live and by way of the Shabbat-observant lifestyle with the shul as our epicenter, people like us tend to see a whole lot of each other and naturally create relationships within this microcosm of ours. And that's fabulous...it sustains us, gives us joy & warmth, & it is so powerful that it attracts others who want to move into a community like this. Look around and you'll see beautiful friendships & bonds that last for years between both children & adults.

Now imagine you're a child with developmental disabilities growing up within these social borders or perhaps you're the parent of such a child. Life is very different for families with special needs, but in a place like Potomac, Kemp Mill, or Memphis TN, those differences are magnified 20x because you're operating inside this vacuum of a community. Summer afternoons at the park on Shabbat, youth activities or groups at shul, birthday parties, long days of chaggim like on Succot & Pesach, bar/bat mitzvah's, coping with academic challenges, summer camp, navigating the treacherous path of

adolescence & peer pressure, even so much as lobbying for a playdate - These are just a few examples of ordinary life which appear to be so “normal & customary” for most families, but in fact can be & often are very exclusionary for the special needs community. I’m of course not even diving into the post-academic & vocational discussion that is always looming on the horizon. It is painful, it is challenging, it is exhausting, and it is frustrating beyond what anyone can imagine. Exclusion leads to sadness & loneliness amongst the excluded & their families as well as resentment & bitterness, which as we all know can destroy relationships & tear apart a community. In fact a poll conducted last year by RespectAbilityUSA which surveyed thousands of Jewish respondents, found that *“while fully one in four adults has a disability, only 12 percent of Jewish respondents report knowing any clergy member or staffer at a Jewish institution with a disability. Less than a fifth of respondents say that our institutions are doing “extremely well” or “very well” at including those with disabilities in communal activities.”*

We are reminded of one such example of exclusion in the story of the daughters of Tzelophchad in Parshas Pinchas. As we know at that time, land inheritance was passed down through the generations of males only. The daughters’ father had passed away and they had no brother for the inheritance to pass over to, and so they faced being excluded from any inheritance. They came before Moshe & complained that regardless of the tradition, they should not suffer & be excluded due to circumstances outside of their control. Though not an example involving developmental disabilities, it is a lesson in how divisive exclusion can be to a community. So divisive in fact that Hashem responded by giving them the honor of not just being given a portion of the land, but also having an entire chapter in the Torah written in their honor on the laws of inheritance.

We all know that the obvious antidote to the products of exclusion, is inclusion...but to dive into what that means & how we accomplish it, is not just an entirely separate discussion that could & probably would take hours, but there are way better qualified people than me to lead that charge. However as a parent of a developmentally disabled child I do want to offer a few key thoughts and/or suggestions:

First, to borrow a thought from Lisa Handleman who is the Federation's Community Disability Inclusion Specialist, we need to be “**intentional**” about not just our language when talking about inclusion, but also in our efforts. I like to call it “**intentional awareness**” and to me that means being proactive and not reactive. Why wait for the annual DAS to do something inclusive? Tomorrow, you could invite a special needs family to a Shabbat meal at your house; next week a parent volunteer could walk a couple of our special needs kids down to Shabbat groups and just hang there as a supervisor; if they’re present, let’s see to it that our special needs kids finish off davening with the

other kids; next year we could look into having a developmentally disabled group join us for Shir-on-Shabbat either to perform or just to be there included with the rest of us; perhaps on Purim this year or next, we can look into a sensory-friendly service that's more accommodative for those who need it. The list is endless, but it's about having that intentional awareness...the truth is that we don't need to set aside a special time to be inclusive; the opportunities are all around us all of the time. Second, as I spoke earlier about the natural social borders that exist around our community, take some time to think about those children who don't get play dates so easily...they can't just "link up with another kid at shul & tell Mom & Dad that they're going home with so-and-so for lunch and will see them later". Believe me, you have no idea how far a play date invitation will go both for the child and the parents of that child. And not to leave Mom & Dad out, what goes equally as far if not more so, is a play date invitation from the adults as well - trust me, they can use a break. Lastly, I would like to suggest to all of us not to think of inclusion as benefitting one group of people. I think a part of inclusion that gets lost is what it actually does for the people doing the including. We are often so focused on creating opportunities & equal treatment for our developmentally disabled, that we forget about how important the impact is on our abled population. We become better people; more sensitive people; we discover strengths we never knew we had, and I truly believe we elevate our neshama & come closer to G-d.

As it says in Tehillim 133, "*Hinei ma tov u'ma na'im shevet achim gam yachad.*" - "*Behold how good and pleasant it is when all people live together as one.*" Thank you all for coming and Shabbat Shalom.