ROSH HASHANAH 5776 - Hearing All the Voices in our Community

Rabbi Marc Israel

Marc: Before I begin, I would like to introduce you to some friends from the Disney/Pixar movie *Inside Out* with whom I will be sharing the bimah today. Joy-

[VOICE ACTOR MICHAEL BIHOVSKY JOINS ME ON THE BIMA AND PLAYS EACH OF THE EMOTIONS}

Joy: Hey guys! How’s it goin’??

Marc: Sadness-

Sadness: Ohhhh, half the people walked out before we even started. We’re depressing.

Marc: Fear-

Fear: What are all these people gonna think? The Rosh Hashanah sermon’s got a multiple personality disorder!

Marc: Anger-

Anger: Look at all those poor schlubs in the back – they’re 20 miles away! What is that, the PEANUT gallery?

Marc: And, disgust-

Disgust: Yeah, um, you people? The peanut gallery? Next year, try getting here, like, a little sooner.

Anger: Yeah! We throw all this money into a parking lot, and you people STILL can’t get a spot!

Marc: These five basic human emotions come to us directly from their critically acclaimed run in movie theaters across the nation. In the movie *Inside Out,* these emotions, represented by five voices and five different colors, tell the story of a teenage girl whose family moves from Minneapolis to San Francisco. Today, they will be represented by Michael Bihovsky-

Michael: Hi!

Marc: -and will help us gain a better understand of this morning's Torah reading.

Fear: Rabbi, I don’t know if people are gonna like this shtick. It’s very unorthodox.

Marc: We *are* Conservative!

(Joy: That was funny!)

Disgust: P-*lease!* Way to like, totally cling on to the latest fad. Po-ser…

Anger: It’s a SERMON, people! Would you rather he just TALK for an hour?

Sadness: I like sermons. I like it when they make me feel really bad about myself.

Marc: No, no, this is not about feeling bad.

Joy: Yeah, it’s a feel-good sermon! I feel great already.

Marc: I’m glad.

Anger: *FEEL-good?* What about Iran? What about the Syrian refugees? What about the traffic from the Pope?!

Sadness: The world is such a mess. What can *we* say that’ll make a difference? (Sigh) This is gonna be boring.

Marc: No, no - this is a positive sermon.

Sadness: Okay – I’m *positive* this is gonna be boring.

Marc: Let’s talk about Abraham.

Sadness: Told you.

Anger: Will you let the man TALK, for God’s sake? It’s Rosh Hashanah, so literally, for GOD’S SAKE.

[DAY NUMBER ONE]

Marc: Right. So: back to the Torah. Abraham has lived 86 years. Like Riley, the teen-aged girl from *Inside Out,* he has had to move several times, sometimes at his father’s behest, sometimes in response to a call from God. He leaves behind most of his family, all that is familiar and heads out to unfamiliar territory, taking just his wife and nephew with him. He is repeatedly promised to be made into a great nation. However, years go by and still no kids. Finally, now at 86, Abraham’s wondering if this “great nation” is ever going to come to be, when Ishmael is born.

Joy: Ooh, I love babies, I knew God would come through..

Fear: I don't know about this...

Marc: Of course, Ishmael is not Sarah's child, but Hagar's.

Disgust: Wow. Really? Wow.

Marc: And even though it was Sarah's idea, seeing the reality of her handmaiden pregnant was just too much for her emotions to handle.

Anger: (rub hands together) I see a Jerry Springer show on the horizon!

Marc: And once Abraham and Sarah have their own son – Yitzchak – the one who brings laughter-

Joy: Laughter! Yay! (Thumbs up)

Marc: Sarah expels Hagar and Ishmael.

Anger: (Thumbs down) EXPEL? What do you mean, “expel?” This isn’t high school - that’s his SON!

Fear: What’s gonna happen to him? He’s gonna end up trapped in the desert and then AAAAH! NO WATER!

Marc: Actually, according to the Torah, that’s exactly what happens.

Fear: (Gasp!)

Anger: Boy this God’s a piece of work. Your wife can’t have kids, Abe. Here, have a kid with *this* one, Abe. What’s that? Your wife *can* have kids? Kick out number one, Abe. What’s He gonna do next? Make him sacrifice-

Marc: Well, actually, we’ll be talking about that tomorrow.

Anger: (beat) Are you KIDDING me???

The selection of the Torah reading for Rosh Hashanah morning relates one of its more challenging and difficult episodes, leaving little to the imagination for what each of the characters must have been going through at the time and challenging us to consider the possibilities. We see Sarah’s fear and anger, as she instructs Abraham to “Cast out that slave woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.” We feel Abraham’s sadness, at the thought of losing a son, when the Torah tells us “The matter distressed Abraham greatly.” Even as God instructs Abraham “Do not be distressed over the boy or your slave,” the pain and anguish of the moment come crying out to us.

And we are left to wonder - is this the way that things had to work out? If this was a choose-your-own adventure book, how far back would we have to go to get ourselves to a different, more harmonious ending?

But the Torah is not a Disney movie - at least, not a Disney movie in the classical sense, in which everything works out happily ever after. Torah portrays its characters in all of their humanity. In doing so, it presents us the opportunities to learn from real models - not people who are perfect, who can achieve levels we could never reach, but real human beings who have to work to overcome adversity in their lives.

One could argue that the story of Hagar and Ishmael might not be necessary to the book of Genesis, whose primary purpose is to tell how the Jewish people became a nation. So why is it here? Its inclusion, despite its difficulty - or perhaps *because of* its difficulty - must somehow enrich our understanding of our *avot v’imahot*. By giving us the challenging episodes of our ancestors history along with the positive ones, we come to a deeper, more full understanding of who they are and what we can learn about ourselves from their example.

One of the central themes of this part of the story is the impact of being banished from the community. Hagar and Ishmael are forced out and sent to the desert on their own. They quickly run out of water and food and Hagar calls out to God in despair and God responds with the famous words “ba-asher hu sham” - where He is there. As I taught two years ago, the rabbis envision the ministering angels asking God why he saves this boy whose descendants will one day torture the Jewish people, and God responds “ba-asher hu sham” - where the boy is at that moment, he has not yet done anything that would condemn him to death.

And so we are left to question - to what extent are the Jewish people’s later trouble with the Ishmaelites a fate that could have been avoided? What if Sarah had not asked and what if Abraham had not agreed to Sarah’s request to banish them to the desert?

 Of course, the Torah doesn’t have the characters from *Inside Out* providing us with all of these answers - all we know is that somehow, having these difficult stories, along with positive stories, helps to paint a more complete picture.

On the surface, it might be easy to see *Inside Out* as light, mass market entertainment. But what made itso powerful is that at its very essence, it eschews the fairy-tale notion of “happily ever after”. And it illustrates some very deep and important understandings about how our brains actually work. As the British Philosopher Julian Baggani wrote “When you go to see a [Pixar](http://www.theguardian.com/film/pixar) film you know you’re going to see something clever, funny and inventive. What you don’t expect, however, is to see a remarkably intelligent treatment of one of the most complicated and confusing philosophical issues of them all: the self.”

The movie paints a three dimensional picture - literally - of how our emotions impact our lives, as another review noted, pointing out how it showed the way that “emotions organize — rather than disrupt — rational thinking...emotions guide our perceptions of the world, our memories of the past and even our moral judgments of right and wrong, most typically in ways that enable effective responses to the current situation.”

But perhaps its most important lesson is that the combination of emotions, and the way the various emotions impact one another, make them stronger through their interaction. For example, In order to feel happiness, we have to also experience sadness. As Jason Marsh and Vicki Zakrhewski of the Greater Good Science Center at U-C Berkeley note:

... a [recent study](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/variety_is_the_spice_of_emotional_life) found that people who experience “emodiversity,” or a rich array of both positive *and* negative emotions, have better mental health. The authors of this study suggest that feeling a variety of specific emotions may give a person more detailed information about a particular situation, thus resulting in better behavioral choices—and potentially greater happiness.

[http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/four\_lessons\_from\_inside\_out\_to\_discuss\_with\_kids#](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/four_lessons_from_inside_out_to_discuss_with_kids)

Both joy and sadness are needed; both play an important role in our lives. Yet, too often, we only want to focus on the joy and happiness. Our society denigrates expressions of sadness and rarely provides people with the space they need to be sad. Even at a shivah house, it is not unusual to hear mourners apologizing for crying or for those who come to visit the mourner equate comforting with cheering up. Many people don’t realize that simply being present for someone during their sadness is comforting. Perhaps we fear that their sadness is contagious.

Just as we need to understand the benefits of our full range of emotions, just as the Torah teaches us stories about our ancestors as real people with real issues - both their positive attributes and their blemishes - so too, must we understand our own community and the people therein.

It may seem like the easy road for a synagogue to only focus on the people who have full use of their physical, mental and emotional faculties - the so-called “normal” people. After all, we have limited resources, and the needs within the community are boundless. Our teachers in our schools, our staff and our clergy would all be plenty busy even if we only focused on the people who don’t need any special accommodations.

By now, you may be aware that we have formed a new Inclusion Committee this past year, chaired by Sara Crimm. Nearly two dozen members of the congregation - including parents, whose children and young adult children have a variety of disabilities, as well as professionals from the field and other interested parties, have been meeting regularly and working to understand our community’s needs. Why are we making this effort to make our schools and our community more accessible to people with a broad range of physical, mental and emotional challenges?

The answer, I believe, is not because we are kind and good people who want to help others, even though I believe that is true. Rather, the real answer is that our community and everyone in it is made stronger and more whole by ensuring that all people- regardless of their abilities - are able to fully participate in our community. Tali Cohen, a staff member for the National Ramah Commission’s Tikvah Program for children with special needs, said it beautifully at a staff training this summer - “Our inclusion programs are not an act of Chesed (lovingkindness) but a mitzvah (a sacred responsibility).” We don’t have inclusion programs because we are good-hearted, we have them because there are people in our community who need them and we have an obligation to serve them. Furthermore, when we do create a community in which everyone - including those who have disabilities - are able to fully participate, it is a benefit to every one of us.

The Inclusion Committee is working on solutions to make the phrase “Our House, Your Home” one that everyone can state. The goal is to allow each person to reach his or her full potential. Just like we need all of our emotions - including those that present a greater challenge; just like we need all of the stories from the Torah, including those we may find difficult to read so too, we need all the members of our community - including those who have not been included previously, for us to be whole.

One of the best examples I have seen of this type of shleimut - wholness - was at Randy Shapiro’s Bar Mitzvah last spring. It was a wonderful celebration for Randy, his brother Will, and his parents Lester and Lyn. But it was also a wonderful celebration of our entire community. We were all so impressed with the appreciation that Randy’s religious school classmates shared about the benefits of having Randy in their class. Their statements made clear that having Randy in their class is not an “accommodation,” but an opportunity. These so called ‘normal’ students become better people and better Jews because of their experience of having Randy in their class.

As you may know, my family has had a long affiliation with Camp Ramah in New England, which has had an inclusion program for for over 45 years - it now serves children and adults who have a wide range of physical, emotional and mental disabilities. When we first started going there, we thought it was so nice for the people participate in it. What we discovered, however, is that we benefited just as much, if not more, from our involvement with this program. Each member of my family has had opportunities to grow and to learn to and to develop deep friendships with campers and staff in the Tikvah program. It has impacted each of our lives - Elianna and Micah both have been involved in working with the disability community for their respective bnei mitzvah projects. Abbey and I both had opportunities to work with young adults in their vocational education program, and Oren wrote us a letter this summer telling us he was sad one of his friends from the program had to leave early to go back to school. These relationships have helped us become more sensitive and we have developed ongoing friendships, including with Sam Busis, who works in the Gan. We are excited that this year, Camp Ramah in the Poconos will be expanding its 1 week Tikvah family camp program into a full summer program. Members of our Men’s Club have worked hard to raise money for this program through the Tour De Shuls, and if you haven’t signed up yet to support one of them, I encourage you to do so after the holiday.

These were the motivating experiences for me in wanting to work with Sara on our Inclusion Committee. In just a few short months, we have already made significant changes, including our expanded parking lot, which doubled the number of accessible spots for people with physical limitations. We also have new large-print machzorim, have expanded the availability of our hearing devices in the Sanctuary and are working to bring new technology to make other public spaces at the synagogue accessible to those with hearing difficulties.

We are building on the long-running success of our Bright Horizons program for our ECC and are now creating a more complete Inclusion program within our religious school. We now have Audrey Perlman, a recent graduate with a degree in special needs education, working with me and our faculty to better understand and meet the needs of our current students. And in the coming weeks, we look forward to launching a self-contained classroom for children with more stringent needs.

And there is much, much more that the committee is working on - some of which we will be working to implement in the short-term, other aspects will take additional time and funds. Of course, cost of such change is a very big issue and can be a very difficult challenge.

But against that, we must also consider the costs of not taking the steps to make our building and our programs more inclusive. Who do we banish from our community - whether through acts of commission or acts of omission - when we do not take the steps to be more inclusive? What are the contributions that we have missed from families who felt banished from the Jewish community because we have not found ways to accommodate their needs, and to allow their lives to touch upon and influence our lives?

I also think it is important that we acknowledge that there are reasons beyond cost that may have prevented us from being more inclusive. The fact is that confronting disability openly and honestly is a very challenging and highly emotional issue. We relate and react to disabilities in many different ways. All of these ways are a natural part of the human condition, yet if we are completely honest, not all of these reactions are productive, and not all of them are reflections of the people we want to be - the people we are commanded to be. And yet, when we face disability, as individuals and as a community, those reactions are there. Fear:

Michael: There but for the grace of God go I.

Marc: Sadness:

Michael: I feel so bad for them. I wish I could help.

Marc: Anger:

Michael: Why does that kid keep talking? Can’t his parents take him out?

Marc: And yes – joy.

Michael: I’m glad that we can do this for them...

Even in the joy, there can be a condescending tone that we must recognize and confront if we are going to move to a place where we are treating each person as full equals.

And, for those counting, there is one more of the emotions, one that we really don’t like to admit, but one that most of us, if we dig deep, can acknowledge we have felt, especially when seeing someone with severe physical disfiguration - disgust:

Michael: What is *wrong* with him? That’s disgusting. I’m not gonna make eye contact.

Marc: For those who may have ever felt victimized or known someone who was victimized by this last one, I apologize if acknowledging it brings up painful memories, but I think as our Torah portion teaches us, we must face even the most difficult truths. *Inside Out* teaches us that disgust, like every other emotion, has its intended purpose: namely, disgust “keeps Riley from being poisoned, physically and socially.” But while the intention of our emotion may be to self-protection, even if it misguided self-protection from someone who is not a threat, the consequences of acting upon that emotion can be severe. In reference to our conversation, we often see disgust played out as a fear of social poisoning played out not only with physical disabilities, but also in terms of associating with anyone who is different.

On this particular matter, Jewish tradition may offer some important insights.. The Talmud states that “*One who sees… an albino, or a giant, or a dwarf, or a person with dropsy, says ‘Blessed is He who made his creations different from one another.’ One who sees a person with missing limbs, or a blind person, or one with a flattened head, or a lame person, or one who suffers from boils or a person with a whitening skin complaint says, ‘Blessed is the true Judge.’ (Berachot 59b)*

There are several lessons I think we can learn from this statement:

* We don’t avert our eyes - we acknowledge the person in front of us.
* For physical ailments that one was born with - we state that this person is created in God’s image. As Jessica Sacks, a blogger on Jewish tradition and disabilities, writes, “An inborn physical difference, however, should not primarily evoke compassion. It is not a pathology: it is part of the glorious technicolour of God’s creation.”
* While the blessing for ailments that happen during one’s life is not as forgiving - it is the same blessing one traditionally recites upon hearing the news of a death - its meaning here seems to at least acknowledge that the ailment is not in the individual’s hands but the hand of God.

While I might take issue with some of the particulars of this teaching, I think that as a 5th Century text, it shows some remarkable insights about human nature and our need to move beyond those initial reactions and to engage with the person in front of us.

The reality is that Jewish tradition on these matters are a mixed bag. There were many people who were excluded from participation in the community because of their disabilities and how those disabilities were understood in different eras. But there is reason and ample precedent to see an overall arch of progress.

RABBI Binyamin Lau - nephew of Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, a former ashkenazic chief rabbi of Israel and 1st cousin to Rabbi David Lau, the current ashkenazic chief rabbi, taught the following:

The Mishna in Tractate Megilla lays down that “a cohen who has blemishes may not [administer] the priestly blessing.[[7]](https://jewishdisabilityunite.wordpress.com/Documents%20and%20Settings/User1/My%20Documents/Downloads/rav%20beny%20-%20society%20and%20halacha%20%281%29.doc#_ftn7) The Talmud understands the *mishna* in its broad sense, describing all the kinds of blemish that could invalidate a *cohen* from [administering the priestly blessing].

The section continues to tell… [a] story, [of] an event that took place in the *beit midrash* [study hall] of [Rabbi Yochanan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yochanan_bar_Nafcha) in the city of Tiberius:

*Rabbi Yochanan said: A [priest] who is blind in one of his eyes may not raise his palms. Yet there was a certain man [like that] in Rabbi Yochanan’s neighbourhood who did raise his palms! That man was familiar in his own city...*

In principle, such a man is disqualified from giving the priestly blessing – but the community ha[s] the power to rule otherwise by their actions. If the man is [a known person] in his own city, then [he may administer the priestly blessing.]

This distinction is delineated in the *halacha*.[[8]](https://jewishdisabilityunite.wordpress.com/Documents%20and%20Settings/User1/My%20Documents/Downloads/rav%20beny%20-%20society%20and%20halacha%20%281%29.doc#_ftn8) **It is clear that if the community had not reacted to those ‘blemished’ people with acceptance, the attitude of the *halacha* would not have changed**...

If this is the case, the public has enormous power to define the place and standing of people with disabilities in society. **Our attitude towards the disabled is not decreed from heaven.** It rests upon the attention and responsibility of the entire community.

This passage from Rabbi Lau is a clear statement for us as we move forward and it is echoed by Rabbi Brad Artson who notes that “the Torah was not given to angels. We are all of us blemished; human wholeness does not come from some elusive perfection, but rather from the radical act of taking hold of our imperfections and offering even them. "*Be-chol derakhekha da'ehu*--in all your ways, know God (Proverbs 3:6)."

And at this time of year, when we are even more keenly aware of our blemishes, even our incredibly talented shlichei tzibbur, before leading the musaf prayer, must must first recite the words of the Hineni that acknowledge “bati la’amod u’l’hitchanen l’fanecha al amcha yisrael asher sh’lachuni,’ af al pi she-eini kadai v’hagun k’chach -- I have come before you to offer prayers on behalf of the Jewish people, despite the fact that I'm not worthy of the task.”

What a powerful statement! None of us are without blemish - we all have our skills and we all have our challenges and the way that we move forward together as a whole community is first to acknowledge that there is a real tension even in speaking about people with disabilities, and then to realize that there are no clear-cut divisions between who is disabled and who is abled. For some people, their abilities can mask their disabilities, while for others, their disabilities mask their abilities. Our job is to try and see the whole picture - blemishes and all - both within ourselves and in others. And to consider that which we perceive to be a “blemish” not as a blemish at all - because sometimes, differences are merely that: differences. And the ways in which we work to overcome the challenges that are in our lives very often turn out to be the most defining part of who we are.

In 10 days we will gather together again. This time in the evening, at dusk, as we gather to say Kol Nidre. Just before we sing that haunting melody, we will recite the words “Anu matirin l’hitpaleil im ha-avaryanim - we grant permission to pray with those who have transgressed.” As our machzor notes, “This affirmation can welcome all of us who feel burdened by guilt and the sense of being unworthy to join with our community. The Talmud says that, on a fast day, no prayer will be accepted unless sinners join in.” The congregation is not complete - and the community is not whole, unless the entire community is included. We need the sinners and the non-sinners, just as we need both the positive and the challenging stories about our matriarchs and patriarchs; just as we need all of our emotions to truly feel any of our emotions; so too, we need abled and differently abled people to all join together to make our community whole.

Jay Ruderman, a leading philanthropist in the Jewish community working to expand access for people with disabilities, calls on congregations to “demonstrate leadership and work to create a powerful culture of inclusion among congregants so that inclusion pervades all aspects of congregational life, and thereby change basic attitudes toward people with disabilities.”

I hope that in the coming year, you will join us in this quest and that we will find more and more opportunities, to all stand together, and truly be, as our machzor states “agudah echat la’asot r’tzoncha b’lev shalem” - one united community, doing God’s will with a full heart.

[DAY TWO]

Marc: Before I begin, I would like to introduce you to some friends from the Disney/Pixar movie *Inside Out* with whom I am sharing the bimah today. Joy-

Joy: Hey guys! How’s it goin’??

Marc: Sadness-

Sadness: Ohhhh, half the people walked out before we even started. We’re depressing.

Marc: Fear-

Fear: What are all these people gonna think? The Rosh Hashanah sermon’s got a multiple personality disorder!

Marc: Anger-

Anger: Look at all those poor schlubs in the back – they’re 20 miles away! What is that, the PEANUT gallery?

Marc: And, disgust-

Disgust: Yeah, um, you people? The peanut gallery? Next year, try getting here, like, a little earlier.

Anger: Yeah! We throw all this money into a parking lot, and you people STILL can’t get a spot!

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Sadness: I like sermons. I like it when they make me feel really bad about myself.

Marc: No, no, this is not about feeling bad.

Joy: Yeah, it’s a feel-good sermon! I feel great already.

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Marc: No, no - this is a positive sermon.

Sadness: Okay – I’m *positive* this is gonna be boring.

Marc: Let’s talk about Abraham.

Sadness: Told you.

Anger: Will you let the man TALK, for God’s sake? It’s Rosh Hashanah, so literally, for GOD’S SAKE.

Marc: Right. So: back to the Torah. Abraham left his home for an unknown destination, waited year-after-year to have a child, then finally had a son, but it was with Sarah's handmaiden, Hagar, which only caused more trouble for him. Finally, he and Sarah have a child, Yitzchak, and after acceding to Sarah's demand that he expel Hagar and Ishmael, Abraham is now ready to live a normal life, together with Sarah and Yitzchak.

Joy: Ooh, I knew it! I knew God would come through!

Marc: Yes, God does return and calls out to Abraham once again.

Fear: I don't know about this...

Marc: This time, God instructs Abraham to rise up and take his son-

Joy: Ooh, road trip! Wait - which son?

Marc: His only son.

Disgust: Umm, he’s got *two* sons. Remember? “Rabbi?” Two women, two sons?

Marc: The one he loves.

Sadness: He only loves one of his sons? Oh, that's sad.

Marc: He is to take Yitzchak, and bring him to be sacrificed upon a mountain.

Anger: (beat) Are you KIDDING me??? FIRST God makes him give Ishmael the ol’ “heave ho,” and now THIS!

Marc: As hard as this was for Abraham, one can only imagine - quite literally - what *Isaac* was thinking.

Fear: Oh my God! Dad’s coming to kill me!

Disgust: Is that knife sanitized? Can someone get some purell?

Sadness: There goes the multitude of nations.

Joy: (excited gasp, comes up blank) Iiii’m having a really hard time with this one.

Marc: The reality is this event would come to define Yitzchak's life, along with Sarah and Abraham. According to our tradition, when Sarah hears what Abraham set off to do, she died on the spot. Abraham, despite the fact that he seemingly passes the test, will never have a direct conversation with God again. And the only time that our text records Abraham and Yitzchak in direct contact again is after Abraham’s death, when Yitzchak and Yishmael come together to bury him.

And, Yitzchak? Yitzchak bears the scars of this event both physically and emotionally. Midrash teaches that as Abraham bound Yitzchak upon the rock and prepared to sacrifice him, a tear fell from above and into his eye. The result was Yitzchak had diminished eyesight, something that would come to play a major role in the trickery that Rebecca manipulates in order to give the blessing to her favorite child, Jacob. He never appears to speak to his father again, and he seems to have little emotional connection to his own sons either, being more concerned about his physical needs.

So we are left to wonder - is this the way that things had to work out? If this was a choose-your-own adventure book, how far back would we have to go to get ourselves to a different, more harmonious ending?

But the Torah is not a Disney movie - at least, not a Disney movie in the classical sense, in which everything works out happily ever after. Torah portrays its characters in all of their humanity. In doing so, it presents us the opportunities to learn from real models - not people who are perfect, who can achieve levels we could never reach, but real human beings who have to work to overcome adversity in their lives.

The binding of Isaac has been among the most challenging passages for the Jewish people to understand over the centuries. Why would God even make this request, and why would Abraham, who stood up to God when God threatened to destroy Sodom and Amora, agree so quickly to this request. Its inclusion, despite its difficulty - or perhaps *because of* its difficulty - must somehow enrich our understanding of our *avot v’imahot*. By giving us the challenging episodes of our ancestors history along with the positive ones, we come to a deeper, more full understanding of who they are and what we can learn about ourselves from their example.

The rabbis see this as a defining moment in each of the character’s lives. In this case, the issues that bother our modern sensibilities have troubled our sages for many centuries. And, of course, it is not only in our tradition that this story plays a central role - Christians and Muslims also see this as a key moment, albeit with important differences in who the central character of the story is and what it means. While there is much that we don’t know, the one thing that is clear in the Torah is that this incident causes a permanent fissure in the family relationships.

We wish we could get inside their heads to know what Yitzchak was thinking as he walked silently up the mountain with his father. We would love to hear the conversation that took place between Sarah and Abraham the night that Abraham gets the call from God. We want to know what would have happened if Abraham had refused God’s request. We wish we could understand what lesson we are supposed to learn from this story.

 Of course, the Torah doesn’t have the characters from *Inside Out* providing us with all of these answers - all we know is that somehow, having these difficult stories, along with positive stories, helps to paint a more complete picture.

On the surface, it might be easy to see *Inside Out* as light, mass market entertainment. But what made itso powerful is that at its very essence, it eschews the fairy-tale notion of “happily ever after”. And it illustrates some very deep and important understandings about how our brains actually work. As the British Philosopher Julian Baggani wrote “When you go to see a [Pixar](http://www.theguardian.com/film/pixar) film you know you’re going to see something clever, funny and inventive. What you don’t expect, however, is to see a remarkably intelligent treatment of one of the most complicated and confusing philosophical issues of them all: the self.”

The movie paints a three dimensional picture - literally - of how our emotions impact our lives, as another review noted, pointing out how it showed the way that “emotions organize — rather than disrupt — rational thinking...emotions guide our perceptions of the world, our memories of the past and even our moral judgments of right and wrong, most typically in ways that enable effective responses to the current situation.”

But perhaps its most important lesson is that the combination of emotions, and the way the various emotions impact one another, make them stronger through their interaction. For example, In order to feel happiness, we have to also experience sadness. As Jason Marsh and Vicki Zakrhewski of the Greater Good Science Center at U-C Berkeley note:

... a [recent study](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/variety_is_the_spice_of_emotional_life) found that people who experience “emodiversity,” or a rich array of both positive *and* negative emotions, have better mental health. The authors of this study suggest that feeling a variety of specific emotions may give a person more detailed information about a particular situation, thus resulting in better behavioral choices—and potentially greater happiness.

[http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/four\_lessons\_from\_inside\_out\_to\_discuss\_with\_kids#](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/four_lessons_from_inside_out_to_discuss_with_kids)

Both joy and sadness are needed; both play an important role in our lives. Yet, too often, we only want to focus on the joy and happiness. Our society denigrates expressions of sadness and rarely provides people with the space they need to be sad. Even at a shivah house, it is not unusual to hear mourners apologizing for crying or for those who come to visit the mourner equate comforting with cheering up. Many people don’t realize that simply being present for someone during their sadness is comforting. Perhaps we fear that their sadness is contagious.

Just as we need to understand the benefits of our full range of emotions, just as the Torah teaches us stories about our ancestors as real people with real issues - both their positive attributes and their blemishes - so too, must we understand our own community and the people therein.

It may seem like the easy road for a synagogue to only focus on the people who have full use of their physical, mental and emotional faculties - the so-called “normal” people. After all, we have limited resources, and the needs within the community are boundless. Our teachers in our schools, our staff and our clergy would all be plenty busy even if we only focused on the people who don’t need any special accommodations.

By now, you may be aware that we have formed a new Inclusion Committee this past year, chaired by Sara Crimm. Nearly two dozen members of the congregation - including parents, whose children and young adult children have a variety of disabilities, as well as professionals from the field and other interested parties, have been meeting regularly and working to understand our community’s needs. Why are we making this effort to make our schools and our community more accessible to people with a broad range of physical, mental and emotional challenges?

The answer, I believe, is not because we are kind and good people who want to help others, even though I believe that is true. Rather, the real answer is that our community and everyone in it is made stronger and more whole by ensuring that all people- regardless of their abilities - are able to fully participate in our community. Tali Cohen, a staff member for the National Ramah Commission’s Tikvah Program for children with special needs, said it beautifully at a staff training this summer - “Our inclusion programs are not an act of Chesed (lovingkindness) but a mitzvah (a sacred responsibility).” We don’t have inclusion programs because we are good-hearted, we have them because there are people in our community who need them and we have an obligation to serve them. Furthermore, when we do create a community in which everyone - including those who have disabilities - are able to fully participate, it is a benefit to every one of us.

The Inclusion Committee is working on solutions to make the phrase “Our House, Your Home” one that everyone can state. The goal is to allow each person to reach his or her full potential. Just like we need all of our emotions - including those that present a greater challenge; just like we need all of the stories from the Torah, including those we may find difficult to read so too, we need all the members of our community - including those who have not been included previously, for us to be whole.

One of the best examples I have seen of this type of shleimut - wholness - was at Randy Shapiro’s Bar Mitzvah last spring. It was a wonderful celebration for Randy, his brother Will, and his parents Lester and Lyn. But it was also a wonderful celebration of our entire community. We were all so impressed with the appreciation that Randy’s religious school classmates shared about the benefits of having Randy in their class. Their statements made clear that having Randy in their class is not an “accommodation,” but an opportunity. These so called ‘normal’ students become better people and better Jews because of their experience of having Randy in their class.

As you may know, my family has had a long affiliation with Camp Ramah in New England, which has had an inclusion program for for over 45 years - it now serves children and adults who have a wide range of physical, emotional and mental disabilities. When we first started going there, we thought it was so nice for the people participate in it. What we discovered, however, is that we benefited just as much, if not more, from our involvement with this program. Each member of my family has had opportunities to grow and to learn to and to develop deep friendships with campers and staff in the Tikvah program. It has impacted each of our lives - Elianna and Micah both have been involved in working with the disability community for their respective bnei mitzvah projects. Abbey and I both had opportunities to work with young adults in their vocational education program, and Oren wrote us a letter this summer telling us he was sad one of his friends from the program had to leave early to go back to school. These relationships have helped us become more sensitive and we have developed ongoing friendships, including with Sam Busis, who works in the Gan. We are excited that this year, Camp Ramah in the Poconos will be expanding its 1 week Tikvah family camp program into a full summer program. Members of our Men’s Club have worked hard to raise money for this program through the Tour De Shuls, and if you haven’t signed up yet to support one of them, I encourage you to do so after the holiday.

These were the motivating experiences for me in wanting to work with Sara on our Inclusion Committee. In just a few short months, we have already made significant changes, including our expanded parking lot, which doubled the number of accessible spots for people with physical limitations. We also have new large-print machzorim, have expanded the availability of our hearing devices in the Sanctuary and are working to bring new technology to make other public spaces at the synagogue accessible to those with hearing difficulties.

We are building on the long-running success of our Bright Horizons program for our ECC and are now creating a more complete Inclusion program within our religious school. We now have Audrey Perlman, a recent graduate with a degree in special needs education, working with me and our faculty to better understand and meet the needs of our current students. And in the coming weeks, we look forward to launching a self-contained classroom for children with more stringent needs.

And there is much, much more that the committee is working on - some of which we will be working to implement in the short-term, other aspects will take additional time and funds. Of course, cost of such change is a very big issue and can be a very difficult challenge.

But against that, we must also consider the costs of not taking the steps to make our building and our programs more inclusive. Who do we banish from our community - whether through acts of commission or acts of omission - when we do not take the steps to be more inclusive? What are the contributions that we have missed from families who felt banished from the Jewish community because we have not found ways to accommodate their needs, and to allow their lives to touch upon and influence our lives?

I also think it is important that we acknowledge that there are reasons beyond cost that may have prevented us from being more inclusive. The fact is that confronting disability openly and honestly is a very challenging and highly emotional issue. We relate and react to disabilities in many different ways. All of these ways are a natural part of the human condition, yet if we are completely honest, not all of these reactions are productive, and not all of them are reflections of the people we want to be - the people we are commanded to be. And yet, when we face disability, as individuals and as a community, those reactions are there. Fear:

Michael: There but for the grace of God go I.

Marc: Sadness:

Michael: I feel so bad for them. I wish I could help.

Marc: Anger:

Michael: Why does that kid keep talking? Can’t his parents take him out?

Marc: And yes – joy.

Michael: I’m glad that we can do this for them...

Even in the joy, there can be a condescending tone that we must recognize and confront if we are going to move to a place where we are treating each person as full equals.

And, for those counting, there is one more of the emotions, one that we really don’t like to admit, but one that most of us, if we dig deep, can acknowledge we have felt, especially when seeing someone with severe physical disfiguration - disgust:

Michael: What is *wrong* with him? That’s disgusting. I’m not gonna make eye contact.

Marc: For those who may have ever felt victimized or known someone who was victimized by this last one, I apologize if acknowledging it brings up painful memories, but I think as our Torah portion teaches us, we must face even the most difficult truths. *Inside Out* teaches us that disgust, like every other emotion, has its intended purpose: namely, disgust “keeps Riley from being poisoned, physically and socially.” But while the intention of our emotion may be to self-protection, even if it misguided self-protection from someone who is not a threat, the consequences of acting upon that emotion can be severe. In reference to our conversation, we often see disgust played out as a fear of social poisoning played out not only with physical disabilities, but also in terms of associating with anyone who is different.

On this particular matter, Jewish tradition may offer some important insights.. The Talmud states that “*One who sees… an albino, or a giant, or a dwarf, or a person with dropsy, says ‘Blessed is He who made his creations different from one another.’ One who sees a person with missing limbs, or a blind person, or one with a flattened head, or a lame person, or one who suffers from boils or a person with a whitening skin complaint says, ‘Blessed is the true Judge.’ (Berachot 59b)*

There are several lessons I think we can learn from this statement:

* We don’t avert our eyes - we acknowledge the person in front of us.
* For physical ailments that one was born with - we state that this person is created in God’s image. As Jessica Sacks, a blogger on Jewish tradition and disabilities, writes, “An inborn physical difference, however, should not primarily evoke compassion. It is not a pathology: it is part of the glorious technicolour of God’s creation.”
* While the blessing for ailments that happen during one’s life is not as forgiving - it is the same blessing one traditionally recites upon hearing the news of a death - its meaning here seems to at least acknowledge that the ailment is not in the individual’s hands but the hand of God.

While I might take issue with some of the particulars of this teaching, I think that as a 5th Century text, it shows some remarkable insights about human nature and our need to move beyond those initial reactions and to engage with the person in front of us.

The reality is that Jewish tradition on these matters are a mixed bag. There were many people who were excluded from participation in the community because of their disabilities and how those disabilities were understood in different eras. But there is reason and ample precedent to see an overall arch of progress.

RABBI Binyamin Lau - nephew of Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, a former ashkenazic chief rabbi of Israel and 1st cousin to Rabbi David Lau, the current ashkenazic chief rabbi, taught the following:

The Mishna in Tractate Megilla lays down that “a cohen who has blemishes may not [administer] the priestly blessing.[[7]](https://jewishdisabilityunite.wordpress.com/Documents%20and%20Settings/User1/My%20Documents/Downloads/rav%20beny%20-%20society%20and%20halacha%20%281%29.doc#_ftn7) The Talmud understands the *mishna* in its broad sense, describing all the kinds of blemish that could invalidate a *cohen* from [administering the priestly blessing].

The section continues to tell… [a] story, [of] an event that took place in the *beit midrash* [study hall] of [Rabbi Yochanan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yochanan_bar_Nafcha) in the city of Tiberius:

*Rabbi Yochanan said: A [priest] who is blind in one of his eyes may not raise his palms. Yet there was a certain man [like that] in Rabbi Yochanan’s neighbourhood who did raise his palms! That man was familiar in his own city...*

In principle, such a man is disqualified from giving the priestly blessing – but the community ha[s] the power to rule otherwise by their actions. If the man is [a known person] in his own city, then [he may administer the priestly blessing.]

This distinction is delineated in the *halacha*.[[8]](https://jewishdisabilityunite.wordpress.com/Documents%20and%20Settings/User1/My%20Documents/Downloads/rav%20beny%20-%20society%20and%20halacha%20%281%29.doc#_ftn8) **It is clear that if the community had not reacted to those ‘blemished’ people with acceptance, the attitude of the *halacha* would not have changed**...

If this is the case, the public has enormous power to define the place and standing of people with disabilities in society. **Our attitude towards the disabled is not decreed from heaven.** It rests upon the attention and responsibility of the entire community.

This passage from Rabbi Lau is a clear statement for us as we move forward and it is echoed by Rabbi Brad Artson who notes that “the Torah was not given to angels. We are all of us blemished; human wholeness does not come from some elusive perfection, but rather from the radical act of taking hold of our imperfections and offering even them. "*Be-chol derakhekha da'ehu*--in all your ways, know God (Proverbs 3:6)."

And at this time of year, when we are even more keenly aware of our blemishes, even our incredibly talented shlichei tzibbur, before leading the musaf prayer, must must first recite the words of the Hineni that acknowledge “bati la’amod u’l’hitchanen l’fanecha al amcha yisrael asher sh’lachuni,’ af al pi she-eini kadai v’hagun k’chach -- I have come before you to offer prayers on behalf of the Jewish people, despite the fact that I'm not worthy of the task.”

What a powerful statement! None of us are without blemish - we all have our skills and we all have our challenges and the way that we move forward together as a whole community is first to acknowledge that there is a real tension even in speaking about people with disabilities, and then to realize that there are no clear-cut divisions between who is disabled and who is abled. For some people, their abilities can mask their disabilities, while for others, their disabilities mask their abilities. Our job is to try and see the whole picture - blemishes and all - both within ourselves and in others. And to consider that which we perceive to be a “blemish” not as a blemish at all - because sometimes, differences are merely that: differences. And the ways in which we work to overcome the challenges that are in our lives very often turn out to be the most defining part of who we are.

In 9 days we will gather together again. This time in the evening, at dusk, as we gather to say Kol Nidre. Just before we sing that haunting melody, we will recite the words “Anu matirin l’hitpaleil im ha-avaryanim - we grant permission to pray with those who have transgressed.” As our machzor notes, “This affirmation can welcome all of us who feel burdened by guilt and the sense of being unworthy to join with our community. The Talmud says that, on a fast day, no prayer will be accepted unless sinners join in.” The congregation is not complete - and the community is not whole, unless the entire community is included. We need the sinners and the non-sinners, just as we need both the positive and the challenging stories about our matriarchs and patriarchs; just as we need all of our emotions to truly feel any of our emotions; so too, we need abled and differently abled people to all join together to make our community whole.

Jay Ruderman, a leading philanthropist in the Jewish community working to expand access for people with disabilities, calls on congregations to “demonstrate leadership and work to create a powerful culture of inclusion among congregants so that inclusion pervades all aspects of congregational life, and thereby change basic attitudes toward people with disabilities.”

I hope that in the coming year, you will join us in this quest and that we will find more and more opportunities, to all stand together, and truly be, as our machzor states “agudah echat la’asot r’tzoncha b’lev shalem” - one united community, doing God’s will with a full heart.

EXTRA MATERIAL

OPENING 1 – Safe Opening

A tremendous amount has happened since we were together last year

* Example 1
* Example 2
* Example 3

On a personal level, this has also been a year of tremendous personal transformation

* Weigh loss – 50lbs
* Exercise – half-marathon/triathlon
* Attitude

People often ask me how I did it -

* Cognitive behavior therapy / impact on brain

We have learned a great deal about the inner-workings of the brain this year – You may not be aware that 2015 – Year of the brain – checkout

yearofthebrain2015.com; fesn.eu

However, for those of us who are not not neuro-scientists, whose work fascinates me well beyond my ability to comprehend what they are saying – this year will stand out most because finally brain science was explained in a way that all of us can understand – by which I mean Disney and Pixar Studio’s film Inside-Out

For those of you who haven’t seen it. [brief summaryP

Now imagine that instead of picking a teenage girl, the creators of Pixar had chosen Yitzchak/Yishmael or Avrahahm??? to make their movie.

OPENING 2 – Dramatic

ME: - shuffling papers, straightening tallit, etc – clear my throat a few times in between voices

Simultaneously – Michael does voices:
FEAR – Oh no, hear we go again. Wait, is my tie straight? I think I forgot my notes! Is my joke going to work? What if they hate me?

ANGER – Look at all these people? Where were they when I was speaking about Iran this summer? Oh yeah, down the shore? And now they expect me to inspire them?

JOY – Look at all these people – they are here and just waiting for me to inspire them! Its so great to see ??? and ??

SAD – The world is such a mess, nothing I will say can make a difference

JOY – Oh look, he’s finally ready – here we gooooooo!

ME: It is remarkable to me that each year, how much insight we can get from the Torah portions that were selected for reading on Rosh Hashanah

I, like many of you, thoroughly enjoyed the movie Inside-Out this summer.

For those of you who haven’t seen it. [brief summary

Unlike most of you, I’m guessing, it got me thinking about what if the creative minds at Pixar had chosen Yitzc Avraham??? Instead of a teenage girl to make the focus of their movie.

BATTLE OF EMOTIONS

One of my greatest concerns about Jewish education, is that we tend to only teach the fairy-tale version of the Torah. While one can argue that this is appropriate for young children, I have found that too often rabbinic tradition has tried to shift our ancestors from the way the TOrah itself presents them - as human beings struggling to do God’s will in difficult circumstances - and transforms them into superheroes who have no flaws. And in doing so,we miss out on the richness of the Torah. Instead of grappling with a challenging text and trying to understand its difficulties, our rabbinic tradition has too often presented us with a one-sided view of history that portrays the Jewish progenitors as always good and positive and the other characters as evil and negative.

Lets agree to accept that the banishment of Hagar and Ishamel was necessary - we still are left to wonder about its impact on Sarah and Abraham’s relationship or even Abraham and Isaac’s relationship. Perhaps the entire Akeidat Yitzchak can be seen as some type of “tikkun” for Sarah’s jealous over Hagar and Ishamael - a nearly cosmic “tit for tat” for Sarah’s banishment.

But what we do know through the inclusion of this text and the Akeidah we read tomorrow, we are presented with opportunities to raise questions and consider these deep and important issues. Had these texts been excised from our tradition, had we only told the nice and happy stories, our relationship with our ancestors and our level of understanding of Torah would be diminished.

We are so afraid of making room for difference that we sometimes create a world in which makes our very existence more fragile

For each of us individually, we must ask ourselves the same questions

--are there aspects of ourselves that we have sought to suppress because we were afraid they would take over our lives

--what has been the impact of those conscience, or more likely, not-so-conscious decisions?

The coming days provide us with a time-period in which our tradition teaches us to look deeply inside of ourselves

--as individuals,

--as community

and to think about the ways that we have not achieved all that we could and ways that we could do better in the year to come.

Recognizing and admitting that our fears of difference and discomfort with people who have disabilities

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People with disabilities - live with duality of the struggles and pain caused by the disability, but their concerns are often the same concerns as everyone else - relationships, jobs, etc.

Everything is impacted by the disability-

--People who don't have disabilities and don't live with someone who does, often focus on how to "fix" the disability

--For people with disabilities, life is not always about fixing the disability but learning to live a full life with the disability

--back to Yitzchak - fulfilling the prophecy of Jacob was easier because of his blindness

We need to learn to recognize our emotions, accept their validity, and utilize them to help us create a more inclusive community?

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What is our emotional response we might have when we see someone with a disability....

(Michael's piece)

We can learn that it is ok not to deny or repress those responses, but to allow them to teach us about ourselves.

--Ropes Course - Fear of heights serves us well in many circumstances

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 Every emotion has its purpose. Happiness allows us to relish life. Sadness helps us process when life doesn’t go the way we planned, and rallies our friends and family to our aid. Even anger, fear, and disgust have their place in keeping us physically and psychologically safe. Together, the combination of our emotions is a very large part in the puzzle of who we are.

We are healthy when our emotions serve us, and help us to serve others. We are less healthy when we and those around us are at the mercy of those very same emotions. In the words of the writer Robin Sharma, “The mind is a wonderful servant, but a terrible servant.” When we encounter someone in our congregation with a disability, we may react to them in many ways.