

Beyond Accommodation: The Need for the Truly Inclusive Community

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On Disability Awareness Shabbat, we celebrate our congregation's commitment to inclusion and we recommit ourselves to the ongoing process of building community.

In front of our building, there is a display board with service time, etc. and the message "Enjoy our extensive programming." The sign is great. We are welcoming, and we are willing to make accommodations to allow people with special needs to participate in our services and programs. But still, I think the sign should be changed. More than accommodating to invite people to *enjoy* the programs that we define, the sign should say, "We invite you to be a part of our dynamic community." Or better, "We invite you to join us in *creating* community."

To be truly welcoming, we must value the input of every person who joins us; we must be patient in working with all people; we must be compassionate - understanding that there are people around us with disabilities, some of which are easily seen and some of which, like mental illness or infertility, can be hidden deep below a person's surface. To be truly inclusive, we must be willing to change and to be changed by others.

A few weeks ago, the turmoil at Gallaudet University, ostensibly over the objection by students to the appointment of the university's next president, exposed a larger debate within the deaf community over the nature of responding to disabilities. The argument centered on whether disabilities should be understood in a *medical* - or accommodationist - paradigm or a *community* - or inclusion - paradigm.

In the medical paradigm, disabilities are viewed as obstacles which must be overcome and the community is called upon to accommodate. The goal is to help *them* to overcome *their* disabilities so that *they* can be a part of what *we* do. The medical model looks to build ramps and provide accommodations to allow *them* to feel welcome in *our* community. Accommodation is important, but it fails to truly expand community. Joshua Walker, a Gallaudet sophomore signed his disdain for this approach to a reporter for the New York Times: "In some way, you're saying deaf people are not good enough; they need to be fixed. But I don't need to be fixed. My brain works fine."

The time has come to stretch beyond accommodation and to strive for the truly inclusive community, where the goal is to remove the boundaries between *them* and *us*. We can do more than accommodate. We can strive to be truly open, to be willing to be *changed*, to truly include others with everything that inclusion entails. Unlike accommodation, which becomes unnecessary once certain changes are made, the process of building inclusive community never ends. There is always more we can do.

Parashat Vayera describes Abraham as the paradigm for hospitality and inclusiveness. The *parasha* begins with Abraham sitting at the entrance to his tent, waiting for guests to arrive so he might be able to welcome them. A *midrash* wonders why Abraham had to wait by the entrance to the tent. Why couldn't he simply go about his business and wait for a needy person to knock?

For the poor who had become accustomed to receiving bread and charity and who were not embarrassed by it, there was no need to wait; they would find the way themselves. However, often there was among them a "wayfarer," a person who would approach the door and then back away and then approach again. Each time he would change his mind and back away, going the way he came. He did not have the courage to enter and stretch out his hand. Abraham waited at the entrance precisely for these kinds of people.

In the accommodation paradigm for disability awareness, our responsibility is only to meet the needs of those who knock and say they want to enter. The inclusion model - the community paradigm - implores us to go further: to be compassionate even when the need is not explicitly defined, to seek to include people who may not already be knocking on the door, and to be willing to expand the definition of community, to be changed by people with special needs or new perspectives or diverse skill levels. The Talmud goes further:

Rabbi Hama bar Hanina said: That same day, the third day after Abraham's circumcision, God took the sun from its case and made it shine with intense heat so that no guests should bother the righteous man while he was recovering. Abraham sent his servant Eliezer outside to look for guests and Eliezer went out and (of course) didn't find anyone. Abraham said, "I don't believe you," and so he went to see for himself.¹

The creation of a truly open and inclusive community is never complete. Like Abraham, if we think we've welcomed everyone, we must go out and look for more people who can sustain the dynamism of the community.

¹ Bava Metzia 86b, Quoted by *Dov Peretz Elkins*, from weekly e-Newsletter, *DOV-ray TORAH*. Used by permission of Growth Associates Publishers, www.JewishGrowth.org - Email: Office@JewishGrowth.org

At B'nai Israel, the mission of our Special Needs Committee is not limited to creating physical accommodations in the synagogue. It is concerned with strengthening community on all its diverse levels. The Special Needs Committee provides a forum to **reflect** on our inclusiveness, to **build awareness** about the various needs that exist so that we can all become more sensitive, and to **initiate programs** that include more people in the process of building community.

This year the committee is working on a special “buddy system” project called the *Chaverim* Connection. More than ramps or hearing aids or large print prayer books, this program builds *relationships* among members of our community with specific disabilities and others in the community. The program does more than accommodate. It aims to destroy the barrier between *us* and *them*, so that our united community will be stronger.

The psalmist advised, “*shiviti Adonai lenegdi tamid*, I will place the Lord before me always.” *Shiviti*, translated as “I will place”, shares a root with the word *shaveh*, which means “equal.” The Baal Shem Tov understands the verse not as I will place the Lord before me, but as “All are equal to me because the Lord is before me always.” When we are truly aware that everyone, regardless of their needs or disabilities, is both connected and unified in purpose and essence, only then can we become content with ourselves and only then can we become a *kehilah kedoshah*, a holy community.

In honor of Disability Awareness Shabbat, I conclude with a prayer, written by Isaac Mozeson, which highlights the blessings of a truly inclusive community where all people are recognized and valued:

Living God,
Help me always to feel
Like the blind, to see
Like the deaf, to hear
Like the mute, and to love
Like the dying.

Following the model of Abraham, may we always be inclusive of, willing to learn from, and strengthened by one another.