

Ask Not What the Temple Can Do for People with Disabilities. Ask What people with Disabilities Can Do For the Temple.

Often when we discuss inclusion of people with disabilities, the conversation quickly turns into discussing what we should do for them. Do we need to make the Temple more accessible? Do we need to build a ramp, or put in an A.D.A. bathroom? Do we need to buy prayer books or hire interpreters for people who are deaf or hard of hearing? Do we need tables and chairs at the Onegs so people can sit and mingle? Although these are all very important things to consider, I suggest that perhaps the most important way of include us in Temple Life is to need us. I suggest that perhaps the best way of including anyone into a community is to need them, to want their assistance and to enable them to do their part in Tikkun Olum.

As background, I'm a man entering my golden age. I have Cerebral Palsy. I use a motorized wheelchair. I need assistance with almost all my activities of daily living including feeding, dressing, grooming, etc. I also have a progressing speech impairment and have just begun using this speech synthesizer.

After 29+ years, I retired from Wells Fargo as a Senior Vice President in their IT area to start a business called Abilicorp. Abilicorp is a company that consults on issues and policies related to employment of people with disabilities. I am on the Board of Trustees at Temple Sinai. I also co-chair the Center for Economic Growth (CEG) at the World Institute on Disability. Most importantly I am the husband of Denise for almost 32 years and the father of David who we adopted when he was 3 months old and who is now 28 years old.

To understand how I got to where I am now, probably the most significant thing you should know is that my parents are Holocaust survivors who taught me to be a survivor too. They both survived the Lodz Ghetto and my Mom survived Auschwitz. Having a child born with Cerebral Palsy was devastating to them. Disability equated to death. They instilled in me a survival instinct and a belief that there is always a way to do what needs to be done. They were determined to make sure that I was as independent as I could be and that I contribute back to the world.

I truly believe that the most important lessons I learned from my parents and my Jewish upbringing was that there were things I HAD to do and that there was always a way to get those things done. My Mom woke me up at 5:30 every morning so I had time to dress myself before the school bus came. Twice a week the bus would drop me off at the synagogue where my Mom helped me walk up to my 2nd floor religious school class. By the way, before high school, these classes were the only classes I had with non-disabled children. My Mom would return 2 hours later to help me climb down the stairs and walk 3 blocks home. I wasn't allowed to have a wheelchair until I went to high school. At home, I had 2 dinners every evening. The 1st dinner I ate independently, causing me to exert so much energy as to make me hungrier after I ate than before. My mother fed me the 2nd dinner! Whenever I complained to my father, he would say, "life is hard, so?"

I am not advocating that our religious school should be moved to the 2nd floor of an inaccessible location or that we deny children with disabilities wheelchairs. I am advocating that we teach all children, including children with disabilities, how important they are, how needed they are, and how they can do Tikkun Olam.

The time I felt the most accepted was when our son, David, was a baby. Since Denise took care of him all day while I worked, I had night duty. When David woke up hungry at 2am, he didn't ask if I was able to get up and warm a bottle for him. He didn't ask if I was too tired. He didn't ask how I was going to do it. He made no assumptions as to what I could or could not do. He cried and demanded his bottle. I was thrilled. I was needed!

Although big banks and big corporations have received bad press lately, working for Wells Fargo was wonderful for me. Working there, you really understood that if you did well and contributed to the bottom line, it didn't matter what sex you were, what religion you practiced, what color you were or even what you sounded like. There were many nights when there were system problems. They would call me and inevitably find a way to understand what I was saying because they needed to! One of my favorite stories happened near the beginning of my career, before there was online computing, The system crashed at 1AM. My van was in the shop, Trains in the Bay Area don't run all night. Wells Fargo sent an armored van to transport me and my 300 pound powered wheelchair to the data center.

The last story I'd like to share with you is about one of my favorite rabbis. Rabbi Berlin. She often relates the story of how her family found a welcoming synagogue when she was a child. Her family, which included a brother with a developmental disability, did not feel welcomed at their old synagogue. The rabbi at the new synagogue immediately asked her brother to please turn the lights off before Havdalah and turn the lights back on at the end of the service. Her brother was thrilled! From then on he had his job. He knew he was needed. He and his family knew they were wanted. The rabbi had created an environment where everyone felt valued.

Imagine if every congregant knew what their 'job' was, knew the community was relying on them, and knew they were needed. This is what inclusion looks like. This is Tikkun Olam. This is Judaism!

Thank you for listening.

Go! Go! Go!