

I am Dyslexic: Moses and Me, Dyslexia and My Bar Mitzvah

 February 26, 2015  by Ruderman Family Foundation  [bar mitzvah](#), [dyslexia](#), [Learning Ally](#)

 1 Comment

Brennan Ratican is a 13 year old boy, who became a Bar Mitzvah at [Congregation Or Ami](#) (Calabasas, California). Brennan spoke about being dyslexic, inspiring the entire congregation. He gave us permission to excerpt portions of his d'var Torah (speech):

I am dyslexic. Dyslexia is just a fancy word to describe a uniqueness in the way my brain is wired that makes me learn differently from most people.

I have embraced that being dyslexic is just one part of who I am and I have grown to be very proud of that. Part of accepting my reality was appreciating that my differences could help others feel a part of something much bigger than the isolation they may feel by being singled out as being different or learning disabled. I now appreciate that part of my purpose in life is helping other dyslexic kids feel the way I do now... proud of who I am and confident that I can accomplish whatever I set my mind to.

My Torah portion (Shemot, Exodus 5) talks about another person with a uniqueness that made him seem different at first, but then helped him become an important leader of the Jewish people. Our ancestor Moses was very self-conscious about what he felt was a disability. Jewish teachings tell us that Moses stuttered intensely when he spoke. Moses was so concerned about how others would perceive him as God's messenger that at the burning bush, when God told him to go to Egypt to get Pharaoh to let God's people go, Moses begged God to choose someone else. Moses did not think that he was good enough to do God's work.

But God does everything for a purpose, and He wanted Moses to be His leader. To meet God's expectations of him, Moses and God created a plan. God sent Moses' brother Aaron to be Moses' spokesperson. Just like Moses, sometimes to get over hurdles in our lives, we just need to make a plan and look outside ourselves to find the tools we need to accomplish our goals.

My Second Grade Teacher Told Me I was Lazy

I wanted to become a Bar Mitzvah ever since I was in second grade. That was the year my teacher told me that I would never accomplish anything because I was lazy and could not read. Over and over again that year, my teacher reminded me that my work was not good enough and compared me unfavorably to my classmates. I felt horrible about myself and I was just 8 years old. I had my whole life ahead of me, and I was being told that I wasn't good enough. At that time, I did not know I could speak up to a teacher, that I could advocate for what I needed to be able to learn and keep up in class.

Imagine if God had responded like my teacher, telling Moses that he was not good enough or that he was too lazy to meet God's expectations of him. With this self-doubt, Moses likely would not have gone to Pharaoh because God would have crushed his self-esteem and willingness to keep trying. Instead, I imagine that Moses had the resilience to persevere, working as hard as necessary to do his assigned work.

The Torah talks about working hard without the support of others. Earlier in Exodus, Pharaoh gave the Israelites straw and mud to make their daily quota of bricks. Later, Pharaoh forced them to find their own straw and mud and still make the same number of bricks each day. This reminded me of recent research that shows that providing dyslexic students with accommodations like extended time for tests and teacher lecture notes only levels the playing field for those students. It does not provide them with any advantage over non-dyslexic students. Without accommodations, people with dyslexia must work on average ten times harder to keep up with and complete the same amount of work as their classmates or work partners – just like the Israelites who had to find their own mud and straw.



(credit: Jay Lawrence Goldman Photography)

Embracing Dyslexia and Becoming a Bar Mitzvah

I thought becoming a Bar Mitzvah would be ten times harder for me, and sometimes it was. Once we joined [Congregation Or Ami](#), which is very welcoming to all children, and I began working with my Bar Mitzvah tutor Diane Townsend, I knew I was in the right place. I knew in my heart that I could make this happen. Diane was there with me every Monday reminding me how to practice so to I could make myself proud. Thankfully, she believed in me too.

My rabbi, Paul Kipnes, teaches that when we are involved in *Tikkun Olam* (repairing the world), we are actually partnering with that Force in the world that created and sustains existence. To me, that partnership is what God is...the feeling we get when we are working together to make the world a better place.

Learning Ally: My Bar Mitzvah Project

Over the years, I wanted more of that feeling in my life. For my mitzvah project, we reached out to [Learning Ally](#), a non-profit focused on making books accessible to people with visual impairments and dyslexia. Learning Ally's audiobooks help me so much. When I hear the words and follow along in my book, the material sinks into my brain much better. I use the app a lot to read textbooks to help me keep up with the pace of school. Since audiobooks, especially textbooks, aren't always easy to find, I wanted to make the Learning Ally tool available to other dyslexic kids whose schools or families cannot afford to join Learning Ally.

To help others learn about dyslexia and the Learning Ally tool, I [partnered with Learning Ally](#) to build a presentation, community engagement plan and webpage. I am encouraging others to learn about dyslexia, volunteer to record audiobooks, send a letter to legislators to support a dyslexia bill pending in the U.S. House of Representatives, and/or donate money to help kids like me gain access to Learning Ally.

I also started raising awareness about dyslexia at local schools and the importance of self-advocacy to other dyslexic kids. I am meeting with school principals and have hosted a self-advocacy workshop for dyslexic kids and their families with Learning Ally and the local chapter of the International Dyslexia Association.

Dyslexia is my life

Dyslexia is my life and I embrace this reality. Judaism teaches that Jews are *Am HaSefer*, the people of the book. This means that we place a very high value on learning throughout our lives. With Learning Ally, my Congregation Or Ami, and my work raising awareness about dyslexia, I am making sure that all people, even those with reading challenges, can embrace learning.

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One Comment



Vita Nemirovksy *March 2, 2015 at 9:12 pm* [Reply](#)

Thank you for sharing your story, I am a special education teacher working in the Pittsburgh Jewish community on a multi-sensory Hebrew reading curriculum to help students with Dyslexia: DVASH. I would very much like to talk with you and learn more about your experience. My e-mail is listed above.

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