

Just Say Yes: Inclusion is a No Brainer

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Brandon Kaplan at his Bar Mitzvah Service

Past President Michael Kaplan likes to tell the story about why he joined his current congregation and ultimately became its president. He talks about one High Holy Days when he entered the sanctuary with his wife, their profoundly challenged son Brandon, and Brandon's guide dog. Settling into the services, sitting in the front row, they prayed and sang and enjoyed Brandon's smiles and clapping. After services the rabbi approached to welcome them and, upon meeting then eight year old Brandon, asked, "So when's his Bar Mitzvah?"

Michael speaks about falling in love with the congregation at that moment. There were no discussions about the challenges that Brandon's challenges would bring to the learning process. No concerns about whether Brandon could make it on a classroom or whether he would need special attention or a Jewish IEP (Individualized Educational Plan). Just a firm expectation that Brandon would follow the ritual path that Judaism sets out for all young Jewish men and women. So the Kaplans joined **Congregation Or Ami** (Calabasas, CA), and years later, Brandon became Bar Mitzvah in a very moving ceremony which combined signing, singing and an ingenious computer that articulated Brandon's words. Just before that, Michael agreed

to become president of the congregation.

Nothing Special Going On

I would like to say that we at Congregation Or Ami are especially proud of what Brandon had accomplished. But that would be disingenuous. You see, we kvell when each of our congregant kids become B'nai Mitzvah. Many tears were shed that day as Brandon signed his parasha (Torah portion). But on the most fundamental level, there was nothing that remarkable that a profoundly challenged – disabled? handicapped? exceptional? – child followed the Jewish path. Because that is just what Judaism expects. So that's what we make happen.

In the 17 years I have been rabbi at Or Ami, we have educated every child who sought Jewish learning experiences, regardless of his unique learning challenges. We have celebrated as countless families watched their children with special needs ascend our bimah to fully participate in Jewish rituals. We have mainstreamed so many children, or when appropriate, created special learning paths for others.

How do we succeed where others struggle?

We always start with YES.

Yes, your child can learn here.

Yes, your child can become a Bar or Bat Mitzvah.

It all begins with the desire to learn and celebrate. It all begins with the will. And as we say, "If there is a will, we can always find a way."

The Ones I Remember

So many of our children with disabilities have been called to Torah, been integrated into our learning programs, and become leaders in our youth programs. I cannot remember them all.

We had a boy on the autism scale, high functioning, whose educational path had him learning to sound the shofar while his parents tried to figure out how to help him in all the other aspects of his life. The intimate crowd of 20 people who attended the service – he couldn't handle any more people there – were schlepping nachas, and could not stop kvelling at the party of 150 people the next night.

There was the beautiful girl, developmentally delayed, who read Torah from a transliteration, bringing such meaning to the moment, that we invited her to chant a different aliyah on the next Yom Kippur before a crowd of 1,200.

There was the young woman on the autism scale who [stood first before her Madrichim \(teaching assistant peers\) class, and later before the whole congregation, to explain autism](#), how it affects her, and how everyone can help her integrate. By the way, she rocks as a Madricha and her peers love and respect her.

One much loved young man cannot sit still in a class because of his challenges so he meets privately with one of our teachers to learn about Judaism. I look forward to the moment each week when he bounces into my office after his learning session to share what he learned.

There was that 22 year old who became Bar Mitzvah alongside his younger brother in a ceremony marked by mutual respect, a complete service, and boundless energy and joy.

Those parents who spoke from the bimah on Yom Kippur about [facing the blessing of Ethan](#), their child with special challenges.

And the then [20-year-old with Fragile X Syndrome who helped lead a Shabbat service](#) for exceptional kids.

Then we have the many members of [Chaverim, the local group for developmentally disabled adults ages 18 to 88, who consider Or Ami their home](#) and attend services unannounced. We extended to them full temple membership (for \$5-\$15/per year) and invite them to lead English prayers from time to time.

Oh, and that doesn't begin to capture the other 54 meaningful B'nai Mitzvah students each year who are called up to read from Torah. To be honest, I cannot remember which students are "typically abled" and which are "specially abled" because all are exceptional and unique. This one's life is complicated by ADHD and that one's by his divorced parents. She celebrates alongside her 88 year old grandfather who cannot stand up straight and he chants his prayers in spite of his dyslexia. All participate and all shine.

Just Say Yes: God Inspired Moses To Do So

Moses had a speech impediment but that did not stop God from calling him and insisting he accept his responsibility. Are we holier than the Holy One that we can choose to be more restrictive about who gets to be included? Genesis teaches that each was created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in God's image. What right do we have NOT to include and accommodate each one?

No one is more welcome here at Congregation Or Ami than you!

That's our motto at the synagogue. So here are our secrets to making inclusion work:

- **Set a clear policy**, as did we at my first board meeting as the temple's new rabbi, which states that "any child of a member is entitled to a Jewish educational experience at the temple, and that any child of a member who works to the best of his or her ability has the right and privilege to become a Bar or Bat Mitzvah."
- **Find a teacher** or two with creativity, grit, and patience. Invest in them and train them to work with people with special needs, either by sending him to a training program, or guiding her to learn on the web.
- **Ask each parent of a child with special needs to be your partner** in developing a Jewish learning path that works for their child. Promise the parent that the road ahead will be bumpy and that at least once a year that the temple will mess up. Doubly promise that you are committed to achieving successful inclusion and celebration, so ask them to give up on you even should the process is imperfect and frustrating.
- **Sit together – parent, rabbi, educator and teacher** (and perhaps the child's educational therapist or a congregant so trained) – and **map out a Jewish educational path** for the next 6 to 12 months. Since young people change month to month and year to year, commit to reevaluating every 4-6 months to redirect the path if necessary.
- **Publicize the temple's commitment to inclusion.** Tell the stories over and over again about the involvement of families with children with special needs. Weave their successes into sermons, introductions to the Mi Shebeirach healing prayer, presentations at board meetings and posting on blogs and social media. Invite parents of children with special needs to speak, carry Torah, or read a prayer at public events, including during High Holy Day services.

- **Use social media** to tease out educational paths for the more challenging situations. You will be amazed at how widespread inclusion is and how many great ideas are out there from which to learn.
- Have your rabbi and educator speak to their colleagues, or to me, to find support and resources. Rabbis and educators can quickly move from no way to absolutely yes.
- **Participate in the important discussions on inclusion:**
- New York Jewish Week's [The New Normal blog](#).
- [Jewish Special Needs Education: Removing the Stumbling Block](#) Facebook group.
- [Zeh Lezeh \(For One Another\) blog](#) of the Ruderman Family Foundation.
- The interdenominational [Hineinu](#), a comprehensive Jewish guide to creating inclusive communities hosted by the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism.
- [HaMercaz](#)—A Community of Support for Families Raising Children with Special Needs
- [Jewish Leadership Institute on Disabilities and Inclusion](#)
- [Or Am I?](#): My own blogging about Inclusion and Disability

Embrace the failures as learning experiences.

I will always remember the mistakes along the way: The time I did not encourage a certain child with special needs to join me at camp when instead I should have been pushing the camp to make it work for him. The time we allowed a family to mainstream their child when that path caused more pain than pleasure and, had we stuck to our original plan, it would have saved a lot of grief. The time when students struggled with the participation of another child because his issues made them too uncomfortable. Each of these learning experiences, though painful, led us to greater understanding, better expertise, and more joy.

The synagogue can and should be a safe place for people with special needs and their families. Make a point to invite them onto the bimah as much as possible during services. Allow parents to drop their child if he or she is so abled on a Friday night so the parents can have a few hours off. Create

special roles for extraordinary people so they feel wanted and included. When planned well, other congregants easily sit by and with the special needs kids to make them feel comfortable and at home.

Remember, we all were at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. Not just the able bodied people. All people. Every person – typically or specially abled – can be welcomed and embraced in their synagogue homes.

It ain't brain surgery. In fact, its a no brainer. It just begins with "YES".