



How Inclusive ARE You (of those with disabilities)?

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By Ed Frim

Of course we want to include everyone in synagogue life regardless of their abilities. But when we scratch the surface, it is not so simple. We do not all agree on what inclusion means; we have different reasons, even within Jewish tradition, for focusing on inclusion; and there are many barriers to doing it and doing it right.

One of the best definitions of inclusion I've read is from Miss Malory, an occupational therapist and dance instructor at Dance Ability in Milton, Ontario, in a 2013 post titled, *Inclusion, Integration, Segregation? What does it all mean?*

She asks, "What is best for individuals with special needs when looking at community programming? Is it a segregated specialized program just for them? A program where they are integrated into a "regular" class? Or complete inclusion ... and what is the difference?"

She shares her understanding of inclusion. "Sometimes segregation is best to provide opportunities that best fit an individual's needs and this may be most easily done through offering something new and different that is not being offered already. Integration does not emphasize providing unique

supports for each individual within the group, but rather treating the group as a whole. Inclusion means accommodating for all individual's needs without restrictions or limitations."

She concludes by saying, "Our goal with Dance Ability is to provide opportunity. We strive to provide as much support as possible to make these opportunities successful and available for those who wish to seize it!"

To put this in a Jewish context, inclusion is *Kvod HaBriyot*, the respect that we owe each and every person as a creation of God.

There are a number of frustrating statements commonly heard from congregational leaders about inclusion of those with disabilities:

- "We don't have anyone with *THOSE* kinds of disabilities"
- "We know our congregants, and we are providing for all their needs"
- "We already have a very welcoming culture; we take care of everyone's needs"
- "We try, but we don't have the resources to accommodate everyone's needs"

Even when there is a sincere desire to include those with disabilities, staff and lay leaders who believe they know the needs and situation of every congregant are simply wrong. People have invisible disabilities such as mental illness. People have emergent disabilities as they age, and they may drop out of synagogue life. People may be embarrassed to share that their child has a disability. People may choose not to join and participate because the synagogue or its programs are not accessible to them. Each situation is unique.

Further, all too often, synagogues who say they are doing inclusion are really segregating those with disabilities and their families. That may be appropriate, or it may be a problem. One crucial thing we learn from Miss Mallory is that people themselves need to have the opportunity to choose how they wish to participate and contribute. And that we must ask a person what they want, not just what supports they need.

To be truly inclusive, a synagogue needs to promote genuine relationships between congregants of all abilities, realizing the rabbinic insight that when someone is known, "familiar in his own city" (*Talmud Megillah*), the blessings that they offer are not diminished by having a disability.

Synagogues must seek people out in a systematic way, and send the message it is not about the resources that the synagogue needs, but how to include the person, right now. A congregation may not have the money to build a ramp today, but can bring the Torah down to the floor to read and raise funds for the ramp over time. A congregation may not have the funds for a new hearing loop today, but can rearrange the seating immediately while seeking a grant. Congregations must figure out a way to include people with disabilities in the here and now, even if it is not the ultimate solution.

I believe in a uniquely Jewish way to approach inclusion of those with disabilities in our synagogues and community – a ladder of *Hakhlala* (inclusion) similar to Maimonides' ladder of *Tsedakah*. First presented as an exercise to the USCJ Ruderman Inclusion Action Community, the rungs of this ladder reach closer and closer to the ideal of helping people with disabilities to contribute to the community, perhaps the most powerful way to realize a sense of purpose and self-worth.

Sulam HaKhla

A Ladder of Inclusion in Keeping with Jewish Values

7. *Sherut* – *Gmilut Hasadim* – Service and Acts of Loving Kindness

Providing service to others with disabilities outside our kehilla in their own spaces and lives.

6. *Hafrada* – Segregation

Meaningful self-contained programs for the disabled, separate from but connected to the community, where other community members are invited to be present in safe and comfortable spaces and times, providing supports and nurturing for those who choose to participate and hopefully leading to connection with larger community.

5. *Shiluv* – Integration

Allowing people to be present in ongoing activities without special supports/ accommodations, but comfortable and feeling that they are in a safe space.

4. *Hishtatfut* – Participation

Including all people in activities and providing the supports they require to participate fully, with community members practicing *Kvod Habriyot* (honoring God's creations) – valuing relationships with each other regardless of abilities.

3. *Hitnadvut* – Volunteering

All, with and without disabilities, are able to volunteer together to serve others, each bringing their unique abilities.

2. *Terumah* – Contribution

Deliberately and programmatically allowing everyone the opportunity to contribute to *Tsorchei Tsibur* – the ongoing activities and life of the community, enabling each individual to find a sense of purpose and meaning in the community. Allowing each person's voice to be heard.

1. *Hakhlala* – Inclusion

A culture that takes for granted and acts on the rights of each person to participate and contribute in meaningful ways, where individuals are not defined by a disability but by all of their qualities (*Midot*) and abilities (*Kishronot*). People advocate for each other because of the familiarity and relationships individuals have to each other.

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