



Temple Rodef Shalom

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Disability: A House of Prayer for All People

Angry Birds; YouTube; DVD's; verbs like "PDFing" and "crowd sourcing;" an answer to nearly any question instantly on your screen; and, almost unimaginably for me, GPS in the car. This is a list of things that weren't part of our lives 25 years ago. Any one of us could add to it for hours.

But there are many people among us for whom a different list is more telling: people who think back to 1990 with a more acute sense of what has changed, affecting even more basic and essential aspects of their lives. They remember that 25 years ago, they had to wait for a stranger to help them enter almost any building; were left without an option if they could not climb stairs; were routinely barred from restaurants and other gathering places if they traveled with a service dog; struggled at parent-teacher conferences without a sign language interpreter on hand; or were denied jobs for which, with minimal accommodations, they would have been perfectly qualified.

In a generation, these aspects of life have changed a great deal. Today, every time my family enters the public library, the mall or a department store, the only question is which child will arrive first and have the privilege of hitting the button to open the automatic door. This year marks the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act. It is an opportunity to notice what has changed – to remember a time when so many of these accommodations did not exist.

Even more than that, in the 70s and 80s, children with disabilities were denied adequate education, and some children and adults were kept in schools or institutions under inhumane conditions. The desire to keep disability out of sight led to laws in some cities, like Chicago and Omaha, enforced as late as 1974, that were nicknamed "ugly laws" because they banned from public places people whose physical conditions made them unpleasant for others to see.

Thank goodness this is no longer true. Thanks to the hard work of dedicated activists, today people with disabilities have recognized rights, and mandated accommodations to allow them to participate in public life. In 2010, according to the census, 57 million people, or 19 percent of America's population, had a disability. More than half of them reported that their disability was severe. The World Health Organization calls those with disabilities the largest minority group in the world, and one that will continue to increase because of population growth, medical advances, and the aging process.

The anniversary of the ADA is an occasion for our nation to take stock of what has been accomplished, and what remains to be done, for those with disabilities. It's also a chance for us as a community to do something more difficult: to reflect on our own progress; how *we* treat people with disabilities; what our *moral* responsibilities are to those in our community who require some special accommodation or attention; what all of us, as individuals, are doing to make ours a community that reaches out to all its members and values each one. As we gather to celebrate the New Year, the creation of the world and every creature in it, we have an opportunity once again to recognize that every human being is created in the image of God.

Disability is a hard subject for all of us. Many who do not have disabilities ourselves, or care for someone who does, find it easier to ignore the subject. We may be uncomfortable with what we don't understand and feel unsure of what to do. As we begin the days of Awe, we know this is not enough. Jewish tradition tells us, *Kol Yisrael aravim zeh lazeh*. We are all responsible for one another. And, we know too, that all of us move along the spectrum of ability and disability throughout our lives. It's an unpredictable world, and in a moment, any one of us could find ourselves in need of help accomplishing basic tasks, like getting from place to place or communicating with another person. Can you think of someone in your life who has gone from fully able to disabled in moments or days? A stroke? An accident or an injury? Most of us have or will someday experience that. Disability is an issue that we must face as a community, and one that we must see as a shared challenge. It excludes no one and it demands the attention of everyone.

What does the Torah teach us about this responsibility? What can we learn from each other about how to handle the presence of disability in our lives and in our community? I have learned a lot from studying Jewish texts, talking to members of our congregation and listening to leaders on disability rights. Today I would like to share with you three essential things I learned – three things that many who live with disabilities wish were better understood by those of us who don't → and in each case, messages we often get wrong.

The first thing has to do with how we see those with disabilities on a basic level, and it may come as a surprise. People with disabilities aren't looking for special treatment, or for being labeled as special. They are not asking for sympathy or admiration.

Stella Young, an Australian comedian, journalist and advocate, was born with brittle bone disease and confined to a wheelchair. She described an experience when she was 15, and a well-meaning person wanted to nominate her for a community achievement award. Her parents responded that this was very nice, but she hadn't really achieved anything. She got good grades in school, worked part time in her mom's hair salon, and spent a lot of time watching *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Dawson's Creek*.

Let me paraphrase Stella's response to being called brave or inspirational. "Life as a disabled person is hard," she said. "But the difficulty is not the physical disability. It's more the society than the actual diagnosis. I am quite fond of my body. I have learned to use it well. People with disabilities are just using their bodies to the best of their capacity just as you do. Disability honestly doesn't make you exceptional."

Stella goes further to suggest that when we see a disabled person, our rush to either sympathy or inspiration can even be hurtful. In expressing our sympathy, we may negatively label something that for them is simply the reality of their lives. We imply, "Thank goodness I don't have that disability." Or, in taking inspiration from a disabled person, we might inadvertent slight them, implying that, "If they can do it, certainly we can."

Most importantly, our efforts to "cheer on" a person with a disability will end up putting the focus on their disability and detracting from the normal relationships they seek with the people around them. Stella, when she was 15, didn't need to be put on a stage for applause. She needed to be seen as a regular teenager capable of doing lots of things everyone else can do, and capable of having regular friendships with other teens. Rabbi Meir said, "Look not at the vessel, but at what it contains." When we see another person as exceptional, we focus on the vessel and cannot see its contents.

The second thing I learned is that disabilities don't have to be as much of a barrier to participation as we make them. We just need think outside the box. In the Book of Exodus, Moses is Judaism's great example of our initial urge to say it can't be done. He claims he can't speak out to Pharaoh or lead the Israelites, because he has a speech impairment. But God responds, "Who gives a man a mouth?" God knows about Moses' disability and still chooses him for this task. A small accommodation is made – Aaron is enlisted to help Moses if needed – and, amazingly, we hear nothing more of Moses' disability in the entirety of the Torah.

Of course, it may not be quite this easy. Unfortunately, although Americans with disabilities now have tools to compete in the workplace, this hasn't helped them as much as it should in actually getting hired. According to the Labor Department, only 22 percent of people with disabilities in this country were employed in 2010. Leaders in the field tell us the problem lies not in the accommodation needed but in the perceptions of the employer. Job applicants tell stories of being assured their resume fits the job, arriving for an interview and immediately seeing in the employers' face that they will not be seriously considered. We hope this will change over time, as a new generation becomes more comfortable with disability, and as employers learn the facts coming out of the research: that the costs of accommodations for disabled employees are usually minimal. And many Americans say they prefer to patronize businesses that hire people with disabilities.

Pamela Schuler, an inclusion specialist and regional youth director for the Reform Movement, suffered as a child and young adult with an acute case of Tourette's Syndrome. She was excluded and singled out so much in her life, including her Jewish activities, but she tells the story of what brought her back into Jewish life. She was hired as a camp counselor, in spite of the propensity she had back then – with her rare form of Tourette's – to yell out inappropriate expletives at random. This might seem like an insurmountable problem with a group of children, but they thought outside the box. They talked about it openly with these third and fourth graders, teaching them that each of us is unique, and Pam's Tourette's was one of the unique things about her. Pam says the kids accepted her as their counselor, and whenever she uncontrollably uttered a profanity, her fellow counselors in unison would say, "... is a bad word!"

Imagine the positive message this sent to every child in that camp, that disability is a fact of life, not to be tiptoed around or pushed away; that the values every Jewish camp and congregation seek to teach to their children, of being a *Kehilah Kedoshah* or a holy community, aren't just words but real values we live by. The Israeli military has a quickly growing [program](#) in which young adults with intellectual or developmental disabilities hold paying jobs as soldiers, preparing gas mask kits, working in military stores, print shops, kitchens and even intelligence units.

The scientist Stephen Hawking, who suffers from ALS, said, "My advice to other disabled people would be, concentrate on things your disability doesn't prevent you doing well, and don't regret the things it interferes with. Don't be disabled in spirit as well as physically." People with disabilities need us to be their partners in this, focusing on their abilities and allowing them to succeed.

As the Torah warns us, "You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind." Can you imagine if a record producer had assumed that Stevie Wonder's blindness would keep him from entertaining a crowd? Or if Jim Abbot's coaches had figured that someone who was born without a right hand could never pitch in the major leagues? For every person who has not let a disability hold them back, there are other people who have helped them by not standing in their way.

But it's not only coaches, producers and employers. Every one of us has to cut through our assumptions and look for ways to enable people to participate. I spoke with parents of an 11 year old with cognitive disabilities. Their son, whom I'll call Spencer, is practically never approached by another kid at school, never invited to a birthday party, spoken to or included in unstructured activities. One day, though, during recess, the other students were playing a game, and they decided to make a special set of rules just for him, Spencer's Rules. It was something they might not be able to do every time they play, but once in a while, it was a small adjustment. Spencer came home that day elated, excited, talking a mile a minute. "I played with the other kids! I played with the other kids!"

These classmates did something that we don't do enough, and they'll probably never know how important it was to Spencer: they stopped for a moment and considered – well, maybe we *can* just make a little adjustment and invite this person in. Can we imagine doing this in our lives? Making a play date for our child with a disabled kid, and just asking her parents what it would take to make it work? Or speaking to a person we don't know with a disability, staying open to the personal relationship that might develop and what it could demand from us?

This small but significant act of inclusion – the image of a diversity of abilities playing together during school recess – brings me to the third thing I have learned: the deep reality that disability affects all of us, and that if we don't see it in our lives, it is not that we are lucky. We are doing something wrong. If 19 percent of America has a disability, then disability should be more visible in this community. Last month at a Shabbat Service, a young man came up for an *Aliyah* in a wheelchair. It was a gratifying to that we were able to accommodate that, but what struck me most was that our ramp is so seldom used. I believe there should be a more robust presence of disability here at Temple Rodef Shalom. A wheelchair coming up to the *bema* should be a regular occurrence. Accommodating different levels of ability at our events should be a constant need, because people with disabilities should know they are invited.

God declares in the Book of Isaiah, “My house will be a house of prayer for all peoples.” It is up to every one of us to make that vision a reality. Our newly created Inclusion Committee is working to build upon the many accommodations we already have, from physical equipment, to service streaming, now with closed captioning, to our special educator for religious school and youth programming. They've also initiated a new tradition of quarterly special Shabbat Services and dinners designed to be meaningful for kids of all abilities – it's a service full of joy and spirit.

This is all a work in progress. If there is something more we should do, if there is a way we can make the Temple more accessible to you, or you see a need that has not yet been addressed, please talk to us and help us do more. But this work extends to all of us. Our house must be a house of prayer, celebration and learning for all people. And it must be a house of meeting, connecting, and building relationships for every person who would join in. No amount of physical and programming accommodations alone will create a place where people with disabilities are fully included. We must look beyond every disability, see the whole person and try to create a relationship. We all have to see ourselves as enablers of others and agents of change. And, we have to look within and outside our community, and be eager to invite people in.