

Torah at the Center

Turning Good Intentions into Meaningful Action

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The great Chassidic master Yehudi HaKadosh said, “Good intentions alone not accompanied by action are without value. The main thing is the action, as this is what makes the intention so profound.” When I read these words, they defined the journey from invisibility to “visibly in” that congregations and religious schools take to include people with disabilities.

Judaism provides a strong foundation for inclusion, so it is heartbreakingly sad is that having a disability has kept so many individuals and families away synagogues and religious schools. The sense of belonging to our communal spiritual homes has often been out of reach. The breadth and depth of inclusion issues could exhaust volumes: comforting parents when dreams for a child disappear with a diagnosis; ensuring meaningful participation in religious school and Jewish life cycle events; and extending a sincere welcome to people who do not have the “lay of the Jewish Land” are just a few.

This article focuses on creating practices that firmly support the intention of inclusion. Below are basic and important actions we can integrate into congregational practice.

Welcome the stranger. Abraham and Sarah did. So must we. Avoiding a person with a disability often comes from a fear of saying or doing the wrong thing. Being friendly and interested sends the right message. Take the risk to say “Shabbat shalom” or “Welcome to our class.” When professional and lay leaders exude welcome, congregants will follow.

Assess and act. Establish an inclusion committee. Just as your other committees fill important roles in the congregation, the inclusion committee will guide your good intentions into action. An inclusion committee is a collaborative mechanism between lay and professional leadership providing guidance and support in all congregational activities. The initial role of the inclusion committee is to assess the many aspects of congregational life to understand current practices of inclusion. Even if your congregation has begun to address inclusion issues, you will want to conduct an assessment to establish priorities based on need. The inclusion committee guides the assessment process. Through a series of assessments that address practices including

administration, preschool, religious and day school, *b’nei mitzvah*, youth group, social activities, adult education and worship, in-depth personal interviews are conducted with professional and lay leaders. The questions should evoke discussion, provide a snapshot of current practices and raise awareness. Following the assessments, the inclusion committee can develop an inclusion plan that defines the work of the committee based on the needs of the congregation. From this vantage point, your congregation can start to address unmet needs.

This is how you turn your good intentions into action. The best time to do it is now.

February is Jewish Disability Awareness Month

The Union for Reform Judaism will join the Conservative, Orthodox and Reconstructionist movements, the Jewish Special Education International Consortium and other national Jewish organizations to highlight Jewish Disability Awareness Month in February 2010. Congregations and Jewish communities are planning events to raise awareness about inclusion. Actions can range from ceremonially hanging mezuzot at wheelchair height to recognizing the accomplishments of people with disabilities at a service to screening films about a range of disability topics including *Autistic License*, *Praying with Lior*, and *Including Samuel*. For a listing of resources and activities, visit www.jfcsmpls.org and click on Jewish Disability Awareness Month or visit www.jsped.org.

The Inclusion Committee of Bet Shalom Congregation in Minnetonka decided to create a video to share with the congregation during Jewish Disability Awareness Month 2009 in which members who have disabilities talk about their experiences. It was shown at the Erev Shabbat service dedicated to inclusion. Visit www.youtube.com/watch?v=D72NKCZINNA to see what one congregation can do to raise awareness.

Join congregations across North America to turn your good intentions into action. This is a journey we take together one step at a time.

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