

Published in the Liheyot Newsletter of the  
Union of American Hebrew Congregations

**"Do not look at the container, but what is in it."**  
(Avot 4:27)

### **Welcoming A Child With Disabilities: A Parent Speaks To Us**

Can a family with a child who has a disability be fully participating members of a Reform Jewish congregation? Will accommodations be made for that child in preschool, day school or weekend school settings? One would think that by the very nature of our caring community that we could expect our congregations to warmly welcome the family with a special needs child. Sadly, that is not always the case.

Sensitivity and understanding the child's special needs and abilities are paramount to welcoming the family into the congregation. Our children deserve the chance to demonstrate their potential in the religious school setting. Because of a lack of information and training, educators and clergy lack the sensitivity toward and awareness about disabilities which are needed to provide the resources for successful inclusion. Yet, *all the children in the school will learn from the experience*. Typical children learn that not all people are created equal; special needs students learn how to advocate for themselves among their unimpaired peers.

Because my child is profoundly hearing impaired does not mean that she cannot succeed. From an early age, she was exposed to Shabbat services and religious school. At times, it was rocky because of the lack of sensitivity and the absence of teaching staff knowledgeable about hearing impairment. In the public school, there is the federal law guaranteeing "an appropriate education in the least restrictive environment." One would hope that in the practice of "*tikkun olam*," we would give our children with special needs the same opportunities in religious school.

Educating the educators was essential, as was helping the teachers and clergy to become comfortable in relating to our child. The same was necessary with our fellow congregants. At times during the services, a congregant would turn around and ask us to refrain from speaking. When we explained that we were "oral interpreting" the service for our profoundly hearing impaired daughter, they would often express their apologies for their comment. Was it all accomplished in the first year? No, it is an on-going process.

We need to learn from each other. We need to be congregations of *inclusion*, rather than exclusion. We should put into practice daily the directive to "not curse the deaf nor place a stumbling block before the blind." (Lev. 19:14) Our children with special needs deserve the chance to demonstrate their abilities and to offer their contributions to the Jewish community. We looked on with pride as our daughter chanted her Torah portion at her bat mitzvah, was confirmed and became an active member of the Keshet program at Goucher College. Given the opportunity, our children will make us proud.

Benjamin Dubin  
Baltimore, Maryland





