Jews and Disabilities

Judaism and Inclusion: The Missing Link

by Michael Gordon, Ph.D.

My brother, David, may have intellectual limitations, but he finds unlimited joy and comfort in religious observance. He has belonged to as many as four different congregations at once, participates in multiple daily minyans (nowadays mainly online) and is a fixture at services on Friday evenings and Saturdays as well as every conceivable holiday. He loves that being involved in Jewish life keeps him in the company of others, provides him with scheduled activities during the day and connects him to a tradition he finds soothing.

If you were to join my brother in person at any of the two schuls he now attends where he lives in Florida, you would find that he enjoys a celebrity status. As he hands out the prayerbooks (he's an usher at both), everyone approaches him with a broad smile and a heartfelt greeting. Some will inevitably take me aside to tell me how much they adore David and how they find his intrepid nature and fundamental goodness an inspiration. Many will also let me know that I had better be taking good care of him because he means so much to them and their congregation.

While I know that individual congregants routinely embrace David in ways that often bring tears to my eyes, I'm less sure about the extent to which our Jewish institutions have formally encouraged or adopted that attitude of caring and inclusion. I cannot remember a single sermon over the course of my life that expressly addressed the importance of reaching out to congregants with disabilities, especially mental ones. Sure, we have a long tradition of treating individuals with learning and psychiatric problems. The history of psychiatry is replete with thought leaders who were Jewish, including Sigmund Freud, Erik Erikson, Abraham Maslow, Kurt Lewin, David Wechsler, Bruno Bettelheim and many others.

But treating those with limitations is not the same as actively finding ways to fold them into the life of a community and address their spiritual needs. It's one thing to provide treatment to someone with a disability, but quite another to ensure that they are embraced and respected for the positive impact they can have on the spirit of the congregation, even if they're substantially different in how they think, feel, look and behave. Healing is not tantamount to acceptance.

And so I've gone on a bit of a mission to find out how Judaism regards individuals with disabilities.

I first asked five pulpit rabbis how many times over the years they had addressed the congregation on issues related to disability. The only rabbi who had delivered a sermon on that topic has two children with special needs, and even he only did so once or twice over the course of decades. While the rabbis all acknowledged the importance of serving the religious needs of everyone in their congregation, they ruefully admitted that disability was never a focus of concern within the congregation. None of their synagogues had an inclusion committee. At a national level, the most formal initiative I could identify was the *Heneinu* Project.

I next read through the entire list of the 613 *mitzvot* we Jews hear about from early on in our education. It's a compendium of commandments, derived from biblical passages, a blueprint for a leading a holy life. They cover a wide range of topics, from dietary laws, judicial proceedings, warfare, property rights, idolatry, taxes, sacrifices, ritual purity and business practices to animal husbandry, proper dress and the best approach to dealing with lepers.

Some of the *mitzvot* speak directly to the overall importance of caring for others. You're supposed to love all human beings, relieve a neighbor (even an enemy) of his burdens and make sure not to insult the deaf or "place a stumbling block before the blind." It's also considered virtuous to give charity according to your means, not to stand by idly when a human life is in danger or speak in such a way as to bring shame to another Jew.

What you won't find is anything in the entire list that speaks directly to the importance of engaging those amongst us who have special needs, not only because they have those needs, but because they can enhance the community's spiritual life. Put another way, our forefathers were not into inclusion. They seemed more about self-protection, the maintenance of order and the prohibition of sexual kinkiness.

As for the Torah, well, it generally considers a disability as something that happens if you displease the Almighty. If anything, the ancient scribes were more worried about keeping someone out of the inner sanctum if they were at all imperfect (like having so much as a blemish). For the most part, the bible considers disability as the consequence of divine retribution. If you fail to heed the Lord's commandments, watch out for paralysis, blindness, leprosy and all manner of other afflictions.

Hubert Humphrey famously said that the moral test of a government is how it treats the weakest members of society. Can the same be said of a religion? Should we be concerned that our faith, with all its emphasis on virtue, seems to have fallen short on how it approaches disability?

It does disappoint me that our Jewish tradition has so little good or specific to say about embracing the Davids of the world (we might give a pass to the father of the seder's Simple Son because he at least tried to make the Passover story meaningful for him). Given our history, you would think we would be especially sensitive to what happens to people who are cast to the periphery because they are somehow atypical.

I believe that our rabbis may have also lost a prime opportunity to explore how being a Jew is more than just an intellectual exercise in the pursuit of an idealized existence. They could make the point that a good life can come to a person who orbits outside the Good Life; that maximizing personal joy and well-being stands as a loftier goal than eking out every last drop of academic or occupational attainment; that we should admire people for their goodness, not their greatness; that our tradition's clarion call to first respect life applies to all lives; that what matters for a person is their experience in the moment, not what may have been or might be; that religious practice helps us fashion an infrastructure for our lives, whether or not we follow or understand the theology; that limitations should never predestine a person to a life of limited dignity and meaning; that accepting limitations in others can help us accept them in ourselves; that holiness can flow from all who care.

Here's to a time when our rabbis and our synagogues might more fully embrace the importance of inclusion in community life.

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