

RABBI'S MESSAGE

What is "Inclusion?"

"Inclusion" is a popular term in today's social service circles. February has been designated as "Jewish Awareness of Disabilities and Inclusion Month." At face value, inclusion is simply the act of *including* anyone who might be thought of as "different" in one way or another. But it is important to ask the question, "Different from whom?" If we look at a supposed "norm," we realize we all have differences. Some differences make life more difficult than others.

When I was in college, there was an attempt in some circles to replace the term "disabled" with "differently able." It was nice to remember that those with limitations also have special talents to offer. However, when I used the term once with a woman who carried a cane, she said, "I *am* disabled! I can't walk as quickly as you can, and I can't get around as well, and I need to recognize that and adjust my life accordingly." She acknowledged the difference between things she is able to do well and things she is unable to do well. It wasn't that she wanted special privileges, just an understanding that some things that required walking would take her longer than someone who could walk.

The same is true with any disability, whether it is a physical difficulty (like not being able to see, hear or walk) or a mental or emotional disability. Like anything else, when we look at a person as a category, we fail to see the unique human qualities he or she might have. Differences put people in a category, in many people's minds, as "stranger." Torah teaches us to "treat the stranger as one of your own, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Leviticus 19:34) and "...love your neighbor as yourself." (Leviticus 19:18)

However, there are many misconceptions about what it means to be inclusive of those with differences. In an article in "Inclusion Press," entitled, "The Ethics of Inclusion," authors John O'Brien, Marsha Forest, Jack Pearpoint, Shafik Asante and Judith Snow assert that being inclusive does *not* mean that everyone is the same.

"The delusion of sameness leads away from the values of Inclusion. It blurs differences and covers over discomfort and the sense of strangeness or even threat that goes with confronting actual human differences. Strangely, it is only when the assumption of friendship fades away that the space opens up for friendship to flower... The way to Inclusion calls for more modest, and probably more difficult, virtues. We must simply be willing to learn to get along while recognizing our differences, our faults and foibles, and our gifts..."

This begins with a commitment to decency: a commitment not to behave in ways that demean others and an openness to notice and change when our behavior is demeaning, even when this is unintentional."

The authors of this article also remind us that not all differences are disabilities. Some differences that may make others feel excluded include economic situations. Each of us is different in one way or another. Some of our differences are challenging obstacles we strive to overcome; other differences are gifts we embrace. At the heart, inclusion means seeing people as people, rather than only focusing on external characteristics. Or, as Rabbi Hillel was known to say in his summary of Torah: "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah; all the rest is the commentary; now, go and learn." (Talmud: Shabbat 31a)

Temple Beth Torah attempts to be as inclusive as possible. It wasn't long ago that, in most synagogues in America, an interfaith family would have a hard time fitting in with the community. At TBT, we have always embraced the gifts of our non-Jewish members, striving to understand how the diversity of our community helps strengthen personal identity for all. Our 2013 renovations made our physical structure handicapped accessible. We certainly have political, theological and philosophical differences, and we also make efforts to listen respectfully with one another to learn from each other with open hearts. We still have a way to go to learn about full understanding of differences.

Please join us for a special Shabbat service on Friday, February 9, as Cantor Anita and other guests will help us celebrate the spirit of embracing difference and learning from each other.

L'shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon