

Dvar Torah for Parshat Yitro, February 14, 2009, part of Jewish Disability Awareness Month **Bob Kusnetz**, Congregation Darchei Noam, St. Louis Park, MN

As you know, February has been designated as **Jewish Disability Awareness Month**. The goal is to raise awareness, within the Jewish community, of people with disabilities and the issues of disability and inclusion in general. Shuls and other Jewish institutions across the US and Canada will be hosting events on these themes. One of the key planners of the month is the **Minneapolis Jewish Community Inclusion Program for People with Disabilities**; I'm Darchei Noam's representative on the Program's liaison committee. We're very pleased to welcome Shelly Christensen, Program Manager of the Inclusion Program, who will be saying a few words about the Program before kiddush.

The mission of the Inclusion Program is to lead the Jewish community to become inclusive and welcoming, where all people with disabilities have an opportunity to participate fully in educational, spiritual, social, and recreational activities. The vision of the Program is to develop a caring and responsible community that respects every individual's right to participate in all aspects of Jewish life.

The first question you might ask is, why have a Jewish Disability Awareness Month? There are really two answers. The simple answer is that inclusion and disability awareness are not always highly visible issues in most communities, Jewish or otherwise. The more specific answer is that awareness of these issues is almost mandatory in Jewish communities because of what the Torah and other writings say about disability and inclusion. As just one example, in Isaiah 56:7 Hashem says, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people." Our responsibility, as residents and caretakers of one of those houses, is to make sure that all people of all abilities feel welcome in this house and, just as importantly, have the ability to be full participants – to the full extent of their abilities – in Darchei Noam.

As this is a "dvar torah", I actually want to talk a bit about the "dvar" (words), before getting back to the Torah. To understand this issue, it is very important to understand three key terms, especially because two of them are often confused and used incorrectly. We often use "disability" and "handicap" synonymously, when, actually, they have a very important difference.

A **disability** is a condition caused by genetics, accident, or disease, which limits a person's ability to perform some function. There are many types of disabilities which are grouped into families – motor disabilities (problems with walking, physical control, etc.), sensory disabilities (hearing or vision impairment, for example), or cognitive and psychological disabilities, among others. People with disabilities may use "assistive devices" to help them overcome their disabilities. Assistive devices include things such as wheelchairs, crutches, braces, eyeglasses, cameras, TTDs, and even service animals.

A **handicap** is a physical or attitudinal constraint that is imposed upon a person, regardless of whether that person has a disability. A handicap puts a person at a disadvantage. Let's look at an example of the difference between disabilities and handicaps. Some people who cannot walk use wheelchairs. When using a wheelchair, they may have difficulties with stairs, narrow doorways, curbs, and high tables. The inability to walk is often due to a motor disability. Stairs, narrow doorways, curbs, and high tables are handicaps imposed upon people with disabilities who use wheelchairs.

The key difference between disabilities and handicaps is where they come from. Disabilities are part of a person; they come from within. Handicaps come from outside – from the community – and are imposed on a person. This distinction becomes very important when dealing with our third term, "inclusion".

Inclusion is creation of the opportunity for people of any and all abilities to participate in meaningful ways within their community. The emphasis here is on "meaningful". An inclusive community is one where all people have the opportunity to participate to the full extent of their desires and of their abilities. This is why the distinction between disabilities and handicaps is so important. As a community, we cannot remove people's disabilities; they are internal. The way to achieve inclusion is to remove handicaps; the barriers we place upon people.

I want to touch on one other important point before returning to the "Torah" part of the dvar Torah. While most of us easily recognize disabilities in people who are visually or hearing impaired or who are in a wheelchair, disability extends far beyond that. It is important for us to recognize **all** forms of disability. A lot of the work I've done in the disability community, including some of the work I did with Medtronic's ABLED employee resource group, has dealt with "invisible disabilities". These are often cognitive or psychological disabilities, but not always. Physical disabilities can also be invisible. I'll use myself as an example. In the spring of 1999, when I was working for IBM, I had spinal surgery. After a recovery period, I was allowed to return to travel and teaching, but I was not allowed to walk or carry things very far. IBM gave me a handicapped-parking flag for use in IBM lots. People who saw me get out of my car asked why I parked in a handicapped space. (It would be better called a "disability" space, but that's a separate issue!) They couldn't tell that I had a disability (fortunately, a temporary one). Remember – just because you can't see one doesn't mean a person does not have a disability.

OK – back to the Torah. I mentioned that the Torah (actually the whole Tanach, and Talmud, and other writings) discusses disability and inclusion, and gave you an example from Isaiah. There are many more examples.

On the issue of removing handicaps, Parshat Kedoshim (Vayikra 19:14) says “You shall not curse the deaf, and shall not place a stumbling block before the blind.”

Inclusion is mentioned in Beha'alotcha (Bamidbar 12:15+). When Miriam was banished from the camp because of her tzara'at, “...the people did not journey until Miriam was brought in.” The Jewish people waited until Miriam was once again included in the community.

One phrase often used by people in the disability community is, “consider the person, not the disability.” Important concept, but it's older than you think. Rabbi Meir said it in Pirkei Avot (4:27) – “Do not look at the vessel, but what is in it.”

Even the Talmud discusses these issues. In tractate Brachot (58b) the Rabbis discuss two different brachot you are to say when seeing people with very unusual physical characteristics or disabilities. If you believe the disfigurement or disability is not congenital, that it's the result of an accident, trauma, or disease later in life, you are to say “Baruch Dayan Haemet” (blessed is the true Judge). This actually reflected the Rabbis' belief that the condition might have been some form of Divine punishment or judgment.

If you believe the unusual physical characteristics or disabilities are congenital (from birth), you say, “Baruch Ata Hashem, Elokeinu, Melech haolam, mishaneh habriot.” (Blessed are You, Lord, our G-d, King of the universe, who diversifies His creatures.) This is an acknowledgement that Hashem created people differently and expects each to contribute to the world in his or her own, unique way.

Of the four parshiyot in Jewish Disability Awareness Month this year, I chose to speak on Parshat Yitro because it incorporates both inclusion and disabilities. The beginning of the parsha is all about inclusion. It talks about the reunion of Moshe's family, and how Moshe had been “a sojourner in a strange land.” Moshe was part of multiple societies. In which was he most “included”? In Mitzrayim, where he grew up? Midian, where he married? The Jewish people, who he led? There is also a good deal of discussion on whether Yitro actually joined (was included in) the Jewish people or not. These stories are not about physical disabilities, but are still about inclusion of people “who are different”.

The “highlight” of this week's parsha is what we stood up for a short while ago: the reading of the Aseret Hadibrot (Ten Commandments) – our receiving the Torah on Har Sinai. This parsha is really the culmination of the story of the exodus, the reason we were redeemed from Egypt. The story of the exodus (not of the slavery) started with a discussion of disability. When Hashem told Moshe to go to Paro, Moshe said he couldn't, because he had a disability – (Parshat Shemot 4:10) “I am slow of speech and heavy of tongue.” Hashem got a bit peeved and told Moshe (4:11), “Who makes a mouth for man, or who makes one mute or deaf or sighted or blind?” “You aren't even trying to be included, Moishie baby” (this is in the Midrash), “so I'll give you help.” Today, Hashem might have sent Moshe to a Speech Language Prophetologist, but back then, he gave Moshe the only assistive device he had, the “Aharon Achicha” (“Aaron, your brother”, who spoke for Moshe). As we know, Moshe overcame his disability and did rather well. As Rob (Portnoe) said earlier this week, the Torah doesn't pity Moshe, nor does it focus on his disability. It shows what a person with a disability can do when he focuses on, and develops his abilities.

So why didn't I give this dvar Torah on Shabbat Parshat Shemot, where all this happened? Two reasons. First, it wasn't February yet. More importantly, however, Moshe's disability itself isn't really the issue. Between then and now, two very important things happened. As I just mentioned, Moshe made an effort to overcome his disability (and was quite successful). We also have to remember something else Moshe said in parshat Shemot. He said the Jewish people wouldn't listen to him. As we see in the story, he was absolutely right – at first. Eventually, though, the Jewish people not only listened to what Moshe had to say, they allowed him, despite his disability, to lead them. In other words, they became a more inclusive community. This shows the power of these two things coming together. What can be achieved when individuals with disabilities make the effort to overcome their disabilities and participate in the community, while, at the same time the community becomes more inclusive of those individuals? They can merit to receive the Torah from Hashem. Pretty good reward!

I want to end with one more quote from Pirkei Avot (2:5). Hillel said, “Do not separate yourself from the community.” On the surface, as in the example of Moshe, it seems to be addressed to the individual with a disability, to stress involvement with the community. If that's true, however, then implicit in the statement is a message to the community: If there are those in your community who want to participate, do not cause them to have to be separated. Certainly, a person with a disability needs to have the strength and will to be included and involved with the community. But, it is critical for **all of us** to make the community inclusive. We can't remove disabilities, but it is our job – our obligation – to remove handicaps so that no people are left out (“separated”), in spite of their efforts to be included. The first step is being aware of what the situation is and what needs to be done; that's where groups like the Inclusion Program, and events like Jewish Disability Awareness Month come in. With our focus on social justice, our work at STEP (local food shelf), pledges for Mazon (Jewish anti-hunger organization), the Chanuka program where our kids sang to the elderly, Darchei Noam is well placed to be a center of inclusion in the Jewish community in general, and the Orthodox community in particular. We need to know how to be – and ensure that we always are – an inclusive congregation and community so that all members, of all abilities, are welcomed and can realize their full potential. Shabbat shalom!