Parashat Vaera January 25, 2025 Submitted by Beth Chernoff, Mid Atlantic Region

Midrash explains how Moses - a beautiful and precocious child - acquired a speech impediment. As a baby, he liked to grab and play with Pharoah's crown, which court advisors found insolent. They devised a test to see if Moses understood the value of gold, the knowledge of which would have meant death for the child. A platter with two items was placed before the youngster: a gleaming nugget of gold and a glowing piece of coal. As little Moses reached for the gold, an angel pushed his hand aside and he grasped the hot coal instead. Instinctively, he put his injured hand in his mouth, but that burned his lips and tongue as well.

In this week's *parasha*, Vaera, when God selects Moses to stand before Pharoah, Moses protests that he "has never been a man of words... for I am of slow speech and a slow tongue." It is generally thought that this refers to stuttering, which, according to the ADA, could be considered a disability if it substantially limits one or more major life activities (such as speaking and communication). How severe Moses's speech impediment was we cannot know, but God does not disagree and offers "accommodations." God gives assurance that He will grant Moses the ability to speak and the words to say. Furthermore, a "support specialist" will be provided: brother Aaron will act as spokesperson.

People with disabilities make up the world's largest minority group. Globally, about 16% of the world's population live with a disability of some kind. In the United States that figure is substantially lower; in Israel, slightly higher. This might be due to the number of war casualties relative to Israel's population, or perhaps Israel's very high life expectancy. Whatever the reason, few nations have tackled issues of equal access and facilitating participation in public life as has Israel. This is clearly evident within the Israeli army (*Tzahal*). For decades, Tzahal has assigned those with hearing challenges as clerk typists; soldiers with visual loss have trained as dispatchers where auditory skills are essential. But now, Tzahal has taken inclusion to a whole new level, and other nations have taken notice.

Begun in 2014 with one army unit, "Special in Uniform" has grown to hundreds of Israeli youngsters with intellectual and physical disabilities serving in dozens of units around the country. The newest unit, in the Galilee, includes a 24-year-old Druze man with Down syndrome. *Roim Rachok* ("Seeing Far") matches those on the autism spectrum with jobs requiring extreme focus, such as data analysis and mapping. Another 100 soldiers on the spectrum serve in the highly selective Unit 9900, deciphering satellite imagery down to the smallest details. These soldiers are demonstrating to Israeli society - and the world - what those with intellectual differences are capable of achieving. But, on an individual level, they are maturing, and receiving a paycheck and benefits, and preparing for post-military life - just like their siblings. We can almost feel the pride and *nachas* around many family dinner tables.

February is "Jewish Disability Awareness, Acceptance and Inclusion Month." This is a unified effort among Jewish organizations worldwide to foster inclusion of all Jews in all aspects of Jewish life. Another goal of JDAIM is to raise awareness about concerns we might not give much thought to that can be alienating to people with disabilities.

Historically, disability was often viewed as a punishment from God. Even everyday language sometimes uses disability as a metaphor for spiritual weakness or sin (such as "crippled with fear" or "blind to the truth"). In truth, Judaism also has a mixed history and evolving views on disability. But our Jewish tradition firmly emphasizes the value of communal life and our obligation to help facilitate the full participation of everyone - including individuals with disabilities. "Do not look at the flask, but at what it contains," says The Mishnah. Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson goes further to say that when we teach ourselves "to see the inner sparks that light a person's soul, rather than merely glancing at the casing," we are acting like God.

Right at the beginning, in the first chapter of Breisheet (Genesis 1:27), we read that each of us was created "b'tzelem Elohim," in the image of God. "Do not separate yourself from the community" says Pirke Avot (Ethics of Our Fathers 2:5), which modern thinkers interpret as not permitting others to feel disconnected from their surroundings, either. In Vayikra (Leviticus 19:14) we are commanded to "not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind." This negative commandment ("You shall not") pivots to positive action when we take it upon ourselves to remove stumbling blocks we see around us. And in our sisterhoods, those stumbling blocks come in many forms, from less-than-accessible buildings, to communication solely by email, to nighttime events. February is a good time to look around with fresh eyes. Does our dues renewal form have a space for members to write in their special needs? Do we turn on the captioning option on our zoom events? Does our telephone squad call those members who prefer not to use email? Accommodation requires our focus all year long, as circumstances have a way of changing on a dime.

The JDAIM website is loaded with programming ideas to make each sisterhood a leader in raising awareness. Start by using the JDAIM logo in all February communications. Host an art exhibit or musical performance by an artist who has a disability. Collaborate with a nearby sisterhood on a community-wide event, with workshops, or an author talk, or a film screening of *Autism the Musical* or *Praying with Lior*. Extend personal invitations to people who may be on the margins of the community. Do an environmental scan of the synagogue with an eye toward accessibility of the sanctuary and bima and restrooms. Above all, we should rejoice in promoting belonging and share stories of our success. Who knows what impact your inclusion initiatives will have on your sisterhood, and other sisterhoods, and on the disability community at large? (No doubt Special in Uniform did not imagine their program would be studied and replicated by the South Carolina National Guard!)

And, finally, on this Shabbat - or any time we are in a reflective mood – we should give ourselves a treat. You will find inspiration reading *Shirat Ha'azinu*, the poem Moses delivered on the last day of his earthly life. Marvel at its magnificence, delivered by a man who once told God that he is "not a man of words." It will feed your soul to realize how irrelevant disabilities can be, and how far those with challenges can soar. But it will also fill you with determination to remove those personal stumbling blocks that are impeding your own untapped potential and unrealized aspirations. It may even give you motivation to live, as Moses did, *ad maya v'esrim*. Until 120!

Shabbat Shalom.