



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.