Myths and realities

• Sensory awareness is amazingly helpful for teachers and students

• Giving kids fidgets doesn’t make inclusion easy.

• Using “sensory issues” as a euphemism can muddy the waters.

• We teach better when we acknowledge disability.
We are better teachers when we think about sensory experiences.

- What are our students experiencing?
- How do things feel to them?
- How could the learning environment be more physically comfortable?
- How could engaging the senses help students to learn?
- How might sensory strategies enable a wider range of learners to participate fully?
Everyone uses sensory strategies

- Human beings aren’t just made of words and ideas
- We also have bodies.
- Bodies are important, and all of our senses are important.
- We all use sensory strategies to do things and understand things.
- Disability can impact which sensory strategies are necessary, useful, and/or effective.
Jewish culture uses a lot of sensory strategies!

- Prayer
- Multi-sensory ritual
- Beit midrash learning
- Talking with our hands
In prayers

• Rocking back and forth.
• Music and repetition.
• Varying noise/volume levels.
• Wearing a tallit.
• Sitting and standing.
• Walking in and out.
Wearing a tallit

• Wearing a tallit affects the sensory experience of prayer.

• Wearing a tallit over your head shifts focus.
Holding tzitzit

- Holding tzitzit
- Playing with tzitzit
- Looking at tzitzit
- Focus in prayer; praying with our whole body.
Music

• The sensory experience of music carries meaning
• Musical transitions
• Varying volume levels
• Alternating between shared and individual sensory experiences
• Alternating between listening and singing together
Walking around and taking breaks

- In most communities, it’s acceptable to go in and out of services.
- This makes participation - and comfort - possible for a lot of people it otherwise wouldn’t be possible for.
Rocking back and forth

• Rocking back and forth is normal in Jewish prayer

• (including for the leader)

• Enabled focus

• Shared/individual movement

• Praying with our whole body.
In the beit midrash

- Rocking back and forth
- Sitting in the same place every day
- Texture of sefarim (beit midrash books)
- Singsong learning tone
Creating new sensory strategies

• Our tradition has given us a lot of really effective sensory strategies

• We don’t have good strategies for everyone or every situation

• How do we invent our own?

• Let’s look at how sensory strategies work….
Two kinds of sensory strategies

- Comfort strategies: Make an environment more comfortable, or more tolerable
- Expansion strategies: Harness sensory experiences to make things more effective or more possible
- Some strategies can do both
- Remember: Everyone uses sensory strategies!
Comfort strategies

• Comfort matters because pain is both unpleasant and distracting

• When people are in pain, it’s much harder to learn

• Being comfortable can make a lot of things possible.

• Sensory awareness can often allow us to make a situation more comfortable or less painful.

• Comfort strategies can sometimes also relieve emotional or cognitive pain
Some common comfort-related sensory strategies:

- Setting the heater or air conditioner to a weather-appropriate temperature
- Wearing layers when you expect the temperature to change
- Taking a deep breath to calm down
- Rocking back and forth when things are overwhelming
- Using noise-cancelling headphones in noisy environments
- Wearing shoes and socks that fit
Comfort strategies are different for different people

- Disability can mean that your body or brain hurts when other people are comfortable
- Differences in life experiences can also lead to different sources of emotional pain
- A strategy that most people find comforting may be painful to others
- Conversely, something that most people find unpleasant may be desired by someone whose sensory processing is different
• Expansion strategies harness sensory experiences to make things more effective or more possible

• Eg: Using a fidget to help yourself focus

• Eg: Singing a song to memorize something
Eg: Eye Contact

• For most people, making eye contact is an effective sensory strategy

• Most people find it easier to pay attention when they are looking at someone’s face.

• Most people find it easier to stay engaged in a conversation with someone when they are looking them in the eye.

• Most people find it easier to feel respected and heard when someone is looking at their face.

• This sensory strategy does not work for everyone.
Call and response - a sensory strategy for teaching

• Sometimes teachers have students repeat things in unison

• Or recite a response to a prompt.

• Or sing a song together

• This can be a very effective way of getting people to maintain focus and retain information

• Again, it doesn’t always work for everyone.
Eg: Standing to answer a question

- Standing can direct focus
- And show whose turn it is
- And maintain certain energy
- Also doesn’t work for everyone!
Eg: Quiet libraries

• Making libraries quiet is a sensory strategy for focus and seriousness

• It can also be a comfort strategy — most people find it more comfortable to read in quiet spaces than loud spaces.
And now, the elephant in the room
Giving people fidget toys doesn’t make inclusion easy.

- People still have disabilities when they also have fidget toys
- Fidgets introduce their own complications
- Classrooms full of fidgets are still classrooms full of inclusion challenges.
Sometimes “sensory” is a euphemism

- Sometimes we say “sensory issues” because it feels more acceptable than the real problem.
- Not everything that gets called a “sensory issue” has anything to do with anything sensory.
- Sometimes we say “sensory issues” as a way to avoid saying “bad behavior” or “disruptiveness”.
- Sometimes we say “sensory issues” as a way to avoid saying “disability”.
“Do fidgets work?” is the wrong question

• It’s not so black and white.

• Fidgets and other objects are really helpful for some people under some circumstances.

• Fidgets can be make-or-break important for some people.

• They’re not a universal solution to every problem.

• They’re rarely a *simple* solution to any problem.
Multi-sensory teaching is not the same thing as accessibility

- Engaging kids with all of their senses is a good teaching strategy
- It’s *not* inherently more accessible or inclusive than anything else.
- If we want to fully include kids with disabilities, we need to talk about accessibility and disability
- We also need to accept and acknowledge differences that stay significant.
There are no easy answers in inclusion

- Inclusion is often hard
- Inclusion takes a lot of trial and error
- Every potential solution to a problem can create new problems
- We need to keep trying
Not everything disruptive is an unmet sensory need

• When kids do things at school that teachers find disruptive, this could be a sign of sensory issues — or of other problems, eg:

• Developmentally inappropriate expectations

• Tourette syndrome, OCD, or a disorder that causes frequent coughing

• Frustration with confusing or impossible instructions

• Not wanting to be at Hebrew school
Sometimes the issue is identity

- Hebrew school is a difficult educational setting on a number of levels.

- Kids and families often have very complicated feelings about the burdens of being Jewish.

- Kids who go to Hebrew school know that their non-Jewish peers don’t have to go — and that most of them don’t have to think about the Holocaust or terrorism.

- When a kid is working through conflicting feelings about what it means to be Jewish and the price Jews pay for being Jewish, it is not helpful to treat this as a sensory issue.
Jewish kids with disabilities have *three* identity problems

- Forming a Jewish identity in an often-antisemitic world
- Forming a disability identity in an often ableist world
- (Ableism is discrimination and prejudice against people with disabilities)
- Coming to terms with being both at the same time.
- Accommodating sensory issues will not resolve the identity issues.
Sensory strategies are not the right solution to every problem

• Sometimes kids need clearer instructions

• Or accommodations for motor skills impairments

• Or work on a more appropriate level for them (possibly more introductory; possibly more advanced)

• Or large print. Or medication. Or a different teaching strategy.

• Or emotional scaffolding and long-term patience.

• (Sometimes, people need all of these things).
Giving people fidget toys doesn’t make inclusion easy.

- Giving a room full of distracted kids fidget spinners does not get you a room full of kids who are paying attention.
- Fidgets introduce their own complications
- Tools don’t create skills
- Disability — and accessibility — can be very complicated.
How does disability affect sensory strategies?

- People with disabilities have bodies and brains that work differently.
- Bodies stay important when they are different.
- Some strategies usually that work for nondisabled people may not work for someone with a disability.
- Someone with a disability may need sensory strategies that most people don’t need.
Sensory processing

• Sensory impairments are sometimes brain-based rather than body-based.

• Sensory organs may be typically-functioning, but sensory experiences are not.

• Eg: Some people who have technically normal hearing need captions in order to understand movies.

• Eg: Someone may have 20/20 vision but also get visually disoriented in a crowd.

• Some people have both types of impairment, and it’s not always possible (or important) to tell which is which.
Differences in sensory experience

- Sensory strategies depend on how things feel and are experienced.

- If things feel different, the strategy may not work.

- Eg: Music probably won’t help people focus if it feels painfully loud.

- Eg: Visual strategies probably won’t work for a blind person.
Sensory overload

- Many people with disabilities experience sensory overload
- Too much overwhelming sensory input
- Often in circumstances where other people aren’t bothered or aren’t very bothered by
- It’s not always just loud spaces — some people are more overloaded by quiet spaces.
Some common sensory overload strategies

• Wearing noise-cancelling headphones
• Wrapping yourself in a blanket or sheet
• Rocking back and forth
• Using a fidget or grounding object
• Sitting on the edge of the room rather than the middle
• Taking breaks
• Making sure that flickering lightbulbs are replaced promptly
A caution about breaks

• People who experience sensory overload often need to take breaks

• They also need to be welcome in spaces they find overloading.

• A person using a visible sensory strategy like covering their ears is not necessarily someone who needs to leave.

• Sometimes, it’s what they’re doing in order to stay.
Different experiences in general

- The same space or activity may be experienced very differently by students with and without disabilities.

- Even when this isn’t caused by sensory differences per se, sensory strategies can sometimes be helpful.

- Eg: If someone is often frustrated by inaccessible activities, a stress ball might help

- Eg: Someone with memory impairments might benefit from sensory mnemonic strategies
Fidgets and stim toys

- The education community tends to call handheld useful objects fidgets
- The autistic community tends to call handheld useful objects stim toys
- If you want to find first hand autistic perspective on sensory strategies involving objects, “stim toy” is a better search term.
Some uses of fidgets/stim toys

• Fidgeting with an object in order to maintain focus and reduce distractibility

• Constant movement to maintain body awareness or voluntary movement

• A pleasant sensory focus as a distraction from physical or emotional pain

• Grounding objects as a way to avoid disorientation or dissociation

• Something that stays the same across contexts, and remains familiar in unfamiliar environments.
Some sensory strategies involving being distracted

• Distraction can be a good and necessary thing!

• Eg: Distracting yourself from a PTSD trigger in order to avoid a panic attack

• Distracting yourself from pain.

• Taking a brief sensory break without having to actually leave the room.

• Filtering out background noise.

• Distracting yourself from an off-topic conversation with peers so that you can get back to focusing on your work.
Eg: Grounding objects

- People with PTSD or similar disabilities sometimes use objects to cope with triggers

- Distracting yourself can sometimes prevent a full-blown panic attack

- Grounding objects can also help you to understand that you’re in the present in a safe situation not in the dangerous situation you’re remembering

- This can look similar to the way some people use fidgets for focus or sensory input

- In Jewish terms, one might understand this as a form of “It is a tree of life to those who hold fast to it.”
Sensory objects aren’t interchangeable

• People who need sensory objects often need *specific* sensory objects.

• The need is often more complicated than “they need something to fidget with”.

• You can’t assume that people who use rocks could just as easily use silly putty or a piece of foam.

• It often takes a lot of trial and error.
Fidget spinners usually work better for distraction than focus

- For most (not all) people, fidget spinners are distracting.
- People usually (not always) focus on the spinner while they’re spinning it.
- For most people, fidget spinners are more useful for distraction strategies than focus strategies.
- Distractions can be good and necessary.
- It’s important to use the right tools for every job.
Disruptive and necessary aren’t opposites

• Kids can use *anything* to be disruptive. Sensory tools are no exception.

• Just like any other school supplies, kids will play with them and use them inappropriately sometimes.

• People who need sensory tools will not use them correctly 100% of the time.

• It’s not that the tools are bad. It’s that kids are kids.
The importance of trial and error

- Disability doesn’t come with a manual.
- It’s not always easy for teachers to find solutions to accessibility problems.
- It’s not always even possible in the short term.
- Even the best strategies don’t always work 100% of the time.
- It’s even harder for the students who are living without access.
- We need to keep trying.
Matan Jewish Disability Acceptance and Inclusion Pledge

• I acknowledge that ability, disability and humanity coexist, and I pledge to see my students as they are.

• I will not look past their disabilities; I will seek to understand. I will not overlook their abilities; I will seek to support them effectively.

• I will not ignore the humanity of my students; I will remember that they have individual interests and a perspective of their own and that they were each created in the image of God.