

# *JDAM Reads!*

## Discussion Guide for *The Story of Beautiful Girl*

by Rachel Simon, Sandra Block & Shelly Christensen

Jewish  
Disability  
Awareness  
Month



February 2012

Jewish Disability Awareness Month ([JDAM](#)) is a unified effort among Jewish organizations worldwide to use common programs to raise awareness and foster inclusion of people with disabilities, their families, and those who love them. Established in 2009, JDAM is observed during February. In 2012, JDAM is launching a book club, with *The New York Times* bestselling novel, *The Story of Beautiful Girl* by Rachel Simon, as its first selection. Participants are encouraged to read and discuss the book throughout the year.

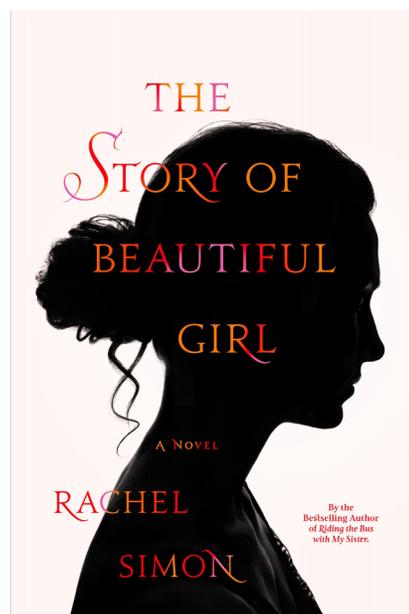


### **JDAM's mission is to:**

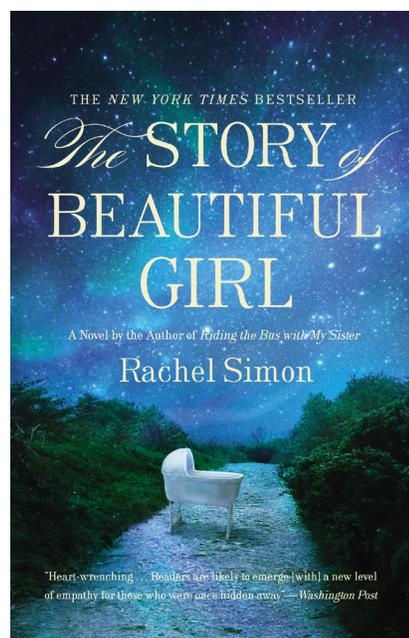
- ★ Elevate Jewish awareness of the way people with disabilities have been regarded by society.
- ★ Encourage Jews around the world to become more empathetic toward people with disabilities.
- ★ Urge Jews to welcome people with disabilities into their communities and personal lives.
- ★ Unite Jewish communities to raise awareness and champion inclusion of people with disabilities.

# To participate in *JDAM Reads*:

- ★ Read *The Story of Beautiful Girl*, by Rachel Simon. The book is available in hardcover and as an ebook or audiobook. The paperback will be released in mid-February 2012. To purchase a paperback copy, pre-order now at your favorite local or online bookseller.
- ★ Use the [JDAM Reads Facebook event](#) as a discussion board
- ★ Learn about *The Story of Beautiful Girl* by visiting [Rachel Simon's website](#).
- ★ Set up a book discussion by doing one or more of the following:
  1. Encourage a Jewish book club (e.g., Hadassah, Sisterhood, NCJW, etc.) or your personal or professional book club to select *The Story of Beautiful Girl* for their February read.
  2. Start a one-time or ongoing book club.
  3. Be ambitious! Some cities, counties and states have community-wide reads. Propose they read *The Story of Beautiful Girl* for their next community-wide selection.



Hardcover, ebook, audiobook



Paperback, available 2/13/12

If you're viewing this on the printed page, you can find Rachel's website at [rachelsimon.com](http://rachelsimon.com) and visit our Facebook page at <http://is.gd/Zj3LuC>

# Jewish Values in *The Story Of Beautiful Girl*

“So G-d created the human beings B'tzelem Elohim (in the Divine image), creating [them] in the image of G-d.

**Gen. 1:27**

“Ask of ourselves what G-d asks: ‘What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your G-d?’”

**Micah 6:8**

“All of Israel is responsible for one another.”

**Shevuot 39a**

“Do not separate yourself from the community.”

**Pirke Avot 2:5**

“You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind. You shall fear your G-d: I am the Lord.”

**Lev. 19:14**

“Do not look at the container, but what is in it.”

**Pirke Avot 4:27**

“Speak up for those who cannot speak...speak up, judge righteously, champion the poor and the needy.”

**Proverbs 31:8**

“Behold how good and pleasant it is when all people live together as one.”

**Psalms 133**

“The Holy One...strikes us all from the mold of the first human and each one of us is unique.”

**Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5**

“Blessed are You, Adonai our G-d, Sovereign of the Universe Who makes people different.”

**Mishneh Torah, Hilchot B'rachot 10:12**

“Good intentions alone not followed by action are without value as it is the actions which make the intentions so profound.”

**Yehudi Hakadosh**

# The Historical Truth Behind *The Story Of Beautiful Girl*

Today, many people in the United States who hear the word “institution” think only about psychiatric hospitals. Yet for the last two centuries, there has been a completely separate system of institutions which housed people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Some individuals with cerebral palsy, deafness, blindness, epilepsy, mood disorders and what we now call Autism Spectrum Disorder were put in these institutions as well. In addition, people like the character Homan, who used unfamiliar forms of communication, were sometimes relegated to institutional life. Although these institutions were not officially secret, few people in the US knew—and know—about them.

Historians of developmental disabilities trace the beginning of the institutional era to the mid-nineteenth century, when Samuel Gridley Howe founded The Massachusetts School for Idiotic Children as a safe haven where children could be educated. He felt that “all such institutions are unnatural, undesirable, and very liable to abuse. We should have as few of them as is possible, and those few should be kept as small as possible.” Public institutions, however, quickly began to proliferate—losing this original intent. There were 35 by 1900, 145 by 1920, and 283 at their peak in 1970. They existed in every state, and, at the time when *The Story of Beautiful Girl* opens, housed almost 200,000 individuals.

In the 1960s and 1970s, investigative reporters began to uncover the reality of the conditions in these institutions. One of the most famous exposés was of the Willowbrook State School in New York. The young journalist behind that story,

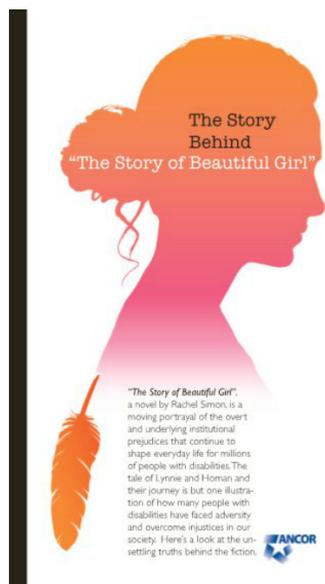
Geraldo Rivera, was the inspiration for the episode with the character John-Michael Malone in *The Story of Beautiful Girl*.

These investigations began to turn public opinion against institutions. Lawsuits followed, along with the rise of the concept that people with disabilities would lead better lives if given the opportunity to live in the community.

Although many institutions have closed since that time, they are not a thing of the past. When *The Story of Beautiful Girl* went to press in 2010, there were still approximately 160 public institutions in the United States, housing close to 35,000 people.

To learn more about institutions for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and what you can do to help people live in the community, [read “The Story Behind ‘The Story of Beautiful Girl’”](#) produced by the American Network of Community Options and Resources, or ANCOR.

**If you’re viewing this on the printed page, visit:**  
<http://is.gd/EWMwND> to read “The Story Behind...”.



# Discussion Questions for *The Story Of Beautiful Girl*

1. When Homan and Linnie go to Martha's house, Martha lets them in and treats them with respect, hospitality and compassion. She feeds them and gives them clothes that are of great significance to her. Discuss the Jewish value of *Hachnasat Orachim* (welcoming the stranger). What parallels can you draw from Abraham and Sarah welcoming the strangers?
2. Homan and Linnie last see the baby when she is in a basket and Luke Collins ("Uncle Luke") orders the fugitives apprehended and taken back over the river. Discuss parallels in the opening of the story and the story of the birth of Moses. Also, discuss similarities to the story of Pharaoh and his oppression of the Israelites. What do you think the author was trying to achieve by referring to the events in the Book of Exodus?
3. The book contains a number of allusions to the Exodus story and Passover. What do you think the author's intent was by weaving these elements through the story?
4. Linnie loves her daughter so much she would rather the child be raised by a stranger than be brought back to the institution and risk oppression, abuse, or even death. King Solomon had the wisdom to test a mother's identity by seeing if she was willing to give up her child in order to save its life. Do you view Linnie's decision as wise? If so, how does that affect your perception of people with intellectual disabilities?
5. Martha raises Julia with the full commitment of a parent or grandparent. She is helped along the way by a support system of her devoted students and Pete. Martha gives up everything so she can fulfill the promise she made to Linnie. What is *The Story of Beautiful Girl* saying about self-sacrifice and parenthood? What is it saying about the role of the community in providing support to help those in need?
6. Linnie's mother struggled for years over whether she should institutionalize Linnie. What do you think she was looking for when she consulted with the rabbi? Discuss the rabbi's remarks and the ultimate decision Linnie's parents made.
7. Homan is taken to a faith-healing ceremony, where he's distressed to realize that he's regarded as broken and in need of being "fixed." His new friend Sam feels the same way, and rather than go through with being "healed," they escape. In Judaism, we recite the *Misheberach* prayer for renewal of body and spirit. What are we really praying for?

Are we praying to “fix” others and make them more perfect in body and spirit? What are more encompassing ways we can view that prayer?

8. Homan comes to perceive of the universe as a Big Drawing, and that the great creator is a Big Artist. His final thought that addresses spirituality, which comes at the moment when he figures out how he’ll find Linnie, is, “Maybe that Big Artist need me as much as I need him.” How does this revelation reflect the Jewish understanding of our relationship with G-d?
9. Recognizing that great social injustices are being committed, Kate breaks the rules and risks her livelihood through advocacy and support of Linnie in every way, including advocacy and secretly developing Linnie’s artistic ability and, eventually, speech. Have you known someone who has taken a risk like that to defend and nurture another human being? How would you encourage others to do the same?
10. When Kate realizes she could have done even more by recognizing how much abuse was going on in the institution, she prays for forgiveness and then attempts to atone by confronting Smokes. Ultimately, she atones more by being a loving friend to Linnie. Discuss ways individuals can atone for actions that might have allowed hurt or harm to come to another person.
11. The book delves into the thoughts of each of the main characters. What surprised you

about the feelings, desires, and memories of the main characters? Did your reaction differ between the characters with disabilities and those without? Has this book altered your perception of people you see who happen to have a disability? Which character resonated with you most?

12. There are multiple Biblical references to disabilities, e.g., Moses being “slow of speech,” Jacob having a wrenched hip, Leah having weakness in her eyes, Isaac possibly having an intellectual disability, Saul having depression. What did you learn about disabilities in religious school? Has *The Story of Beautiful Girl* expanded on or changed that understanding? If so, in what way?
13. G-d created people in G-d’s own image. Therefore, might we conclude that people with disabilities are created in G-d’s image?
14. Kabbalah speaks of many aspects of the divine light that shattered and scattered. What does *The Story of Beautiful Girl* say about gathering pieces and wholeness? What are our individual and collective or communal roles in making the world whole?
15. What is the story saying about the possibility of *Shalom*, or wholeness? What is your own role in making the world whole?

**Thanks to our JDAM Reads! Discussion Guide co-authors:**

Rachel Simon, award-winning author, *The Story of Beautiful Girl*  
Sandra Block, advocate and vice-chair of Inclusion Committee, Congregation Emanu El in Houston, Texas

Shelly Christensen, Program Manager, Jewish Community Inclusion Program for People with Disabilities, a program of Jewish Family and Children’s Service of Minneapolis and co-founder of JDAM