

# What's so funny about disability? (A pre-Purim webinar)

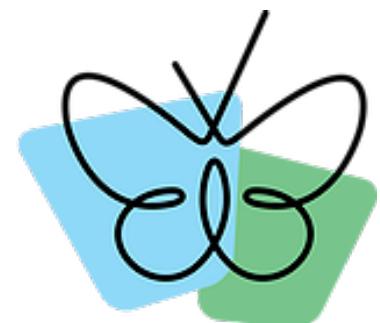
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matan



# Purim for Adults

- For children, Purim is silly humor and carnivals.
- For adults, Purim can do more.



# The most important jokes are about the least funny things

- Most Jewish humor is about things that really aren't funny.
- We joke about antisemitism, collective trauma, and the struggles of being Jewish.
- Joking about these things makes them possible to think about.



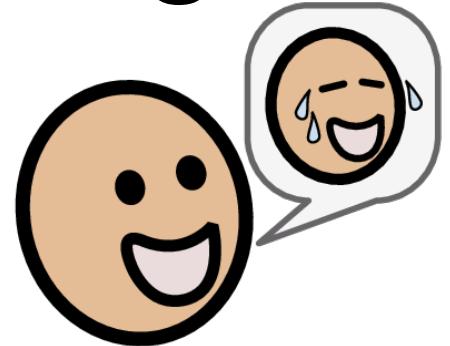
# Sometimes you have to laugh or cry

- Some things are unbearable to think about with direct language.
- Jewish culture offers ways to do both.
- On Tisha b'Av, we cry
- On Purim, we laugh





# Humor can make things bearable



- This can be good:
- Eg: morticians joke about death in order to make dealing with death all the time bearable.
- Eg: Early childhood educators make jokes about bodily fluids and dealing with toddler attention spans.
- This can also be bad: Eg: Men who make ‘jokes’ about treating women badly in order to feel ok about continuing to mistreat women.

# Humor can change the way we look at things.

- Humor can say, “that’s ridiculous!”
- Humor can say, “that’s ok, and you don’t need to be ashamed of it!”
- Humor can say, “That’s awful, and no one should feel good about it.”
- Humor can say taboo things.
- Humor can call the status quo into question.

# Powerful humor is inherently risky



- Change is not always good.
- There's a reason that not every day can be Purim.
- We don't want to take Purim-level risks every day.
- With great power comes great responsibility.

# The risks of humor



- Humor can make good things feel shameful.
- Humor can make shameful things feel good.
- Jokes have content, and we need to take the content seriously.
- What can we do to mitigate the risks?

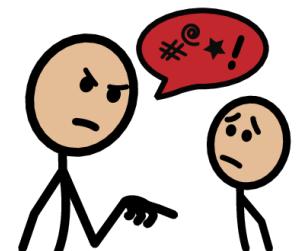
# Desecration vs humor



- Sacred things are still sacred on Purim
- We read from a megillah scroll that has to be written I'shem kedushat megillah (for the sanctity of megillah)
- There's still a line.
- We take different risks on Purim than at other times, but respect still matters.
- Our humor needs to respect everyone's basic human dignity.

# Intent is not magic

- Jokes have power. We need to use our powers for good.
- Jokes can hurt people.
- “I was just joking” or “I didn’t mean any harm” don’t erase harm.
- Something as powerful as humor requires caution and thoughtfulness.



# It is forbidden to rely on miracles. We remain responsible for our actions.

## Megillah 7b

**Rava said:** A person is obligated to become intoxicated with wine on Purim until one does not know how to distinguish between cursed is Haman and blessed is Mordecai.

The Gemara relates that **Rava and Rabbi Zeira prepared a Purim feast with each other, and they became intoxicated to the point that Rava arose and slaughtered Rabbi Zeira.**

**The next day**, when he became sober and realized what he had done, Rava asked God for mercy, and revived him.

**The next year**, Rava said to Rabbi Zeira: Let the Master come and let us prepare the Purim feast with each other.

[Rabbi Zeira] said to him: Miracles do not happen each and every hour, and I do not want to undergo that experience again.

## מגילה ז' ב

אמר רبا: מיחייב אנייש לבסומי בפוריא עד דלא ידע בין ארור המן לברוך מררכי.

רבה ורבו זира עבדו סעודת פורים בהדי הדדי. איבסום. קם רבה שחטיה לרב זира.

למחר בעי רחמי ואחיה.

לשנה אמר ליה: ניתי מר ונעביד סעודת פורים בהדי הדדי. אמר ליה: לא בכל שעתא ושעתא מתרחיש ניסא.

# Some Jewish humor examples

A joke about fearing  
antisemitism



A Jewish man passing through Texas for a short stay on business checked into a rooming house in what you would call a “frontier town.” Not to be conspicuous, he dressed in Western attire and went in to the only saloon in town. He was surrounded by men in cowboy clothes, wearing six-shooters and looking very gruff. He ordered a beer.

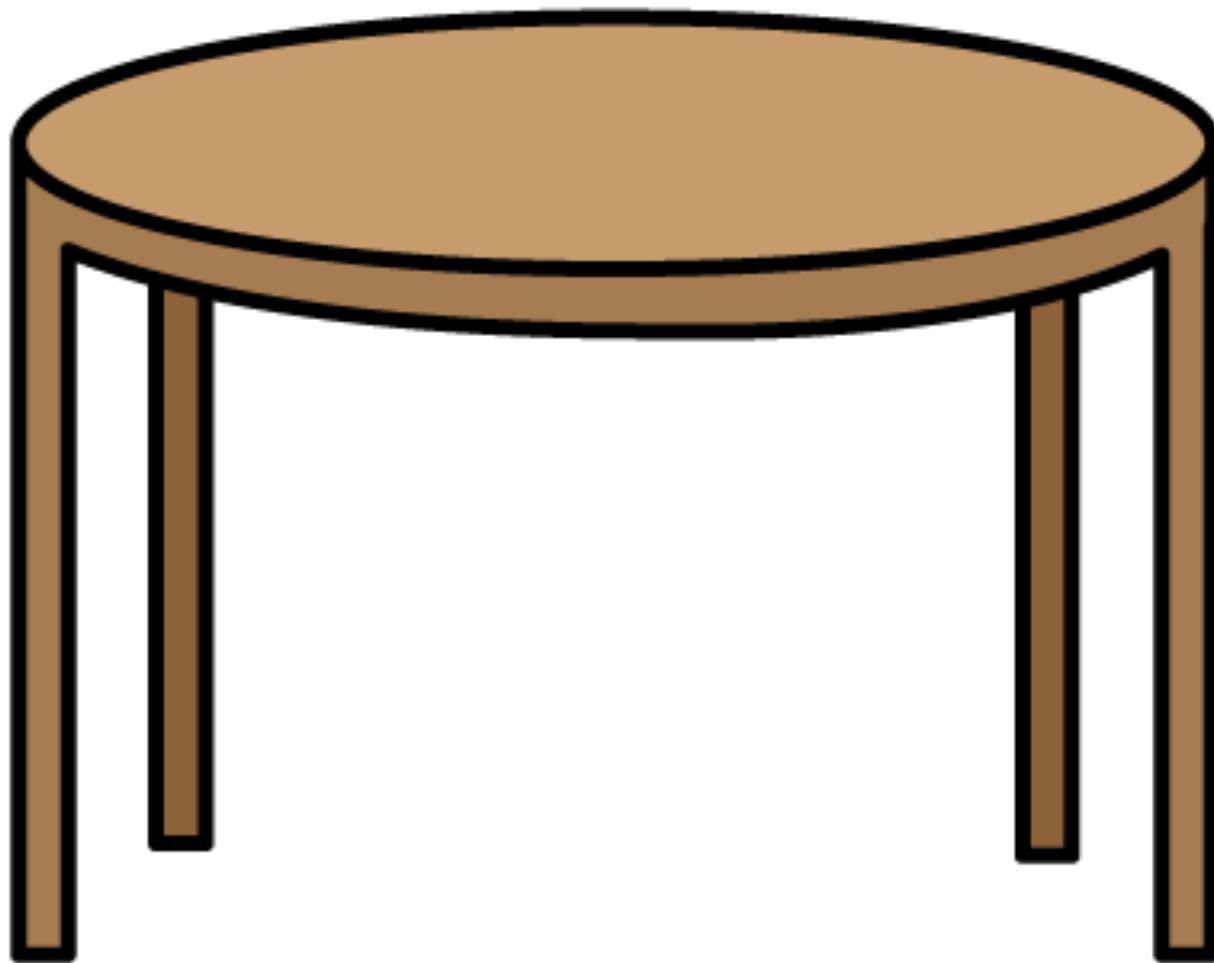
He is sipping his beer and trying to be as inconspicuous as possible when the biggest burliest, scroungiest-looking specimen walks in and proclaims, “Ah hears there is a Jew in here!” The Jewish man cringes and says nothing. “Ah know you’re in here and you better speak up,” says the stranger. The Jewish man can’t take it anymore. He stands up proudly and says, “I am a Jew!”

The cowboy stares at him angrily, “What the hell are you hiding for? Come with me, ah needs you for a minyan.”

How does this joke think the world works?



# A joke about bystanders



Loewenstein, who had escaped from Germany just moments before Hitler's SS troopers stormed his house, was in a restaurant in DC, sipping an espresso, people watching. Two Germans entered the place and sat down at a table adjacent to Loewenstein, where they discussed Adolf boisterously.

"Hitler is not as bad as his enemies say he is," said one.

"You're right," said the second. "The trouble with Hitler is that he is his own worst enemy." "Not while I am alive!" shouted Loewenstein.

# Another collective trauma joke



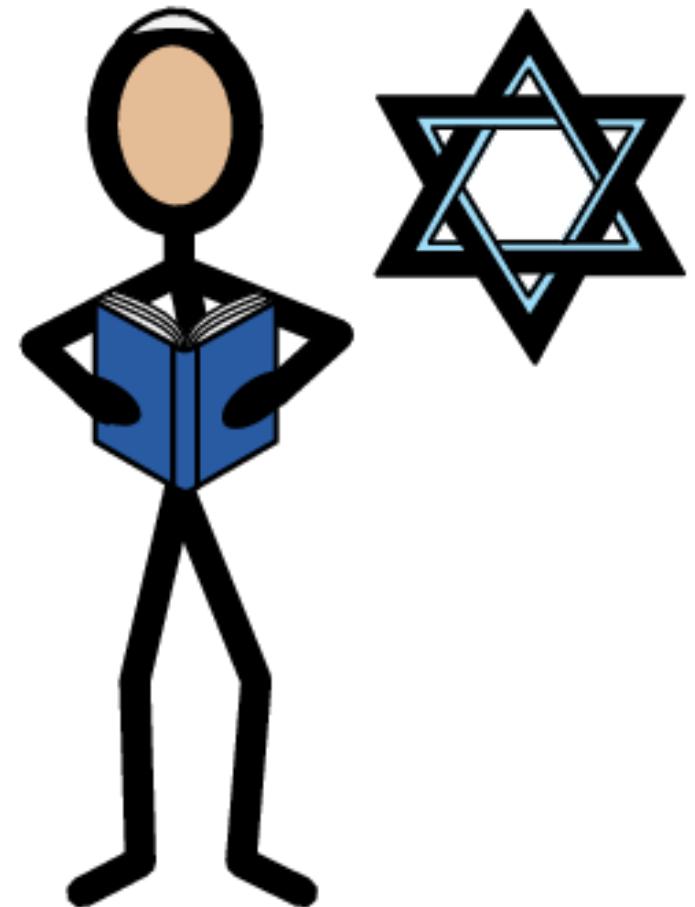
A Jewish man was riding the subway reading Breitbart News.

A friend of his, who happened to be riding in the same subway car, noticed this strange phenomenon. Very upset, he approached the newspaper reader.

"David, have you lost your mind? Why are you reading that antisemitic paper?"

David replied, "I used to read the Jewish newspaper, but what did I find? Jews being persecuted, Israel being attacked, Jews disappearing through assimilation and intermarriage, Jews living in poverty. So I switched to Breitbart News. Now what do I find? Jews own all the banks, Jews control the media, Jews are all rich and powerful, Jews rule the world. The news is so much better!"

# Jokes about prayer and doubt



Two Rabbis argued late into the night about the existence of God, and, using strong arguments from the scriptures, ended up indisputably disproving His existence. The next day, one Rabbi was surprised to see the other walking into the Shul for morning services. "I thought we had agreed there was no God," he said. "Yes, what does that have to do with it?" replied the other.

On a sunny Shabbos afternoon in Miami Beach, two old friends met for the first time in years.

After exchange of the usual amenities, as they sat on a beachfront bench, Jacob's expression grew somber, and he said, "Shmuel, people are telling me you don't go to shul any more. Can it be true that you no longer believe in G-d?" Shmuel looked uncomfortable, and hurriedly changed the subject. The next afternoon, the old friends met on the beach again. "You must tell me, Shmuel," Jacob said, "Don't you believe in our G-d anymore?" Shmuel replied, "Here is a straight answer to a straight question. No, I don't." Jacob asked, "Why didn't you tell me that yesterday?"

Shmuel, deeply shocked exclaimed, "G-d forbid - on Shabbos?"

# A joke about responsibility



It is teeming rain in the flood plain of the Mississippi Valley, and the rising river begins to threaten all manner of private homes, including that of the local Rabbi. With water coming into the ground floor, a rowboat with police comes by, and the officer shouts, "Rabbi, let us evacuate you! The water level is getting dangerous."

The Rabbi replies, "No thank you, I am a righteous man, who trusts in the Almighty, and I am confident he will deliver me." Three hours go by, and the rains intensify, at which point the Rabbi has been forced up to the second floor of his house. A second police rowboat comes by, and the officer shouts, "Rabbi, let us evacuate you! The water level is getting dangerous." The Rabbi replies, "No thank you, I am a righteous man, who trusts in the Almighty, and I am confident he will deliver me." The rain does not stop, and the Rabbi is forced up onto the roof of his house. A helicopter flies over, and the officer shouts down, "Rabbi, grab the rope and we'll pull you up! You're in terrible danger!" The Rabbi replies, "No thank you, I am a righteous man, who trusts in the Almighty, and I am confident he will deliver me." The deluge continues, and the Rabbi is swept off the roof, carried away in the current and drowns. He goes up to heaven, and at the Pearly Gates he is admitted, and comes before the Divine Presence. The Rabbi asks, "Dear God, I don't understand. I've been a righteous observant person my whole life, and depended on you to save me in my hour of need. Where were you?"

**And the God answered, "I sent two boats and a helicopter, what more do you want?"**

# What does this have to do with disability?

- The work of inclusion can be really hard.
- Being disabled can be really hard.
- Some of what we say in advocacy contexts is ridiculous.
- Some of what gets said to us is ridiculous.
- Humor can help us to get where we want to be.

# Remember the risks involved

- Joke mistakes can undermine inclusion.
- Or incite despair.
- Or humiliate people with disabilities.
- Consider: Who is the butt of the joke?
- What's being questioned? What's being validated?

# Sometimes we say and do ridiculous things

- Purim humor can make it ok to name the ridiculous.
- Naming the ridiculous can help us to get real.
- We have to be careful to identify it correctly.

# A bit of language silliness

- “If a noun and an adjective got into a fight, would any disabled people with disabilities win?”
- “Individuals who happen to experience living somewhere on the euphemism spectrum”.
- “Very special children with unique challenges who are just like everybody else”

# Two truths and a lie

- When we say “inclusion benefits everyone”, there are a lot of important ways that is true.
- There are also moments where it sure doesn’t \*feel\* true. Inclusion can be a struggle.
- “Inclusion benefits everyone” can also be a complicated talking point from the perspective of disabled people. Do we have to benefit others in order to be welcome?
- When something is both valuable and fraught, it can be especially important to find the humor in it.

This can also get ridiculous: “Inclusion doesn’t have to be difficult or expensive”

- What’s true: People often wrongly assume that all accommodations are expensive.
- Also true: Many problems can be solved without spending money.
- What’s ridiculous: Braille, captioning, ASL, and building modifications are inherently expensive. When we don’t acknowledge that, we don’t budget for it.
- Also: There are a lot of kids we don’t know how to teach, and including them can be difficult.

# Ridiculous: “I don’t see disability!”

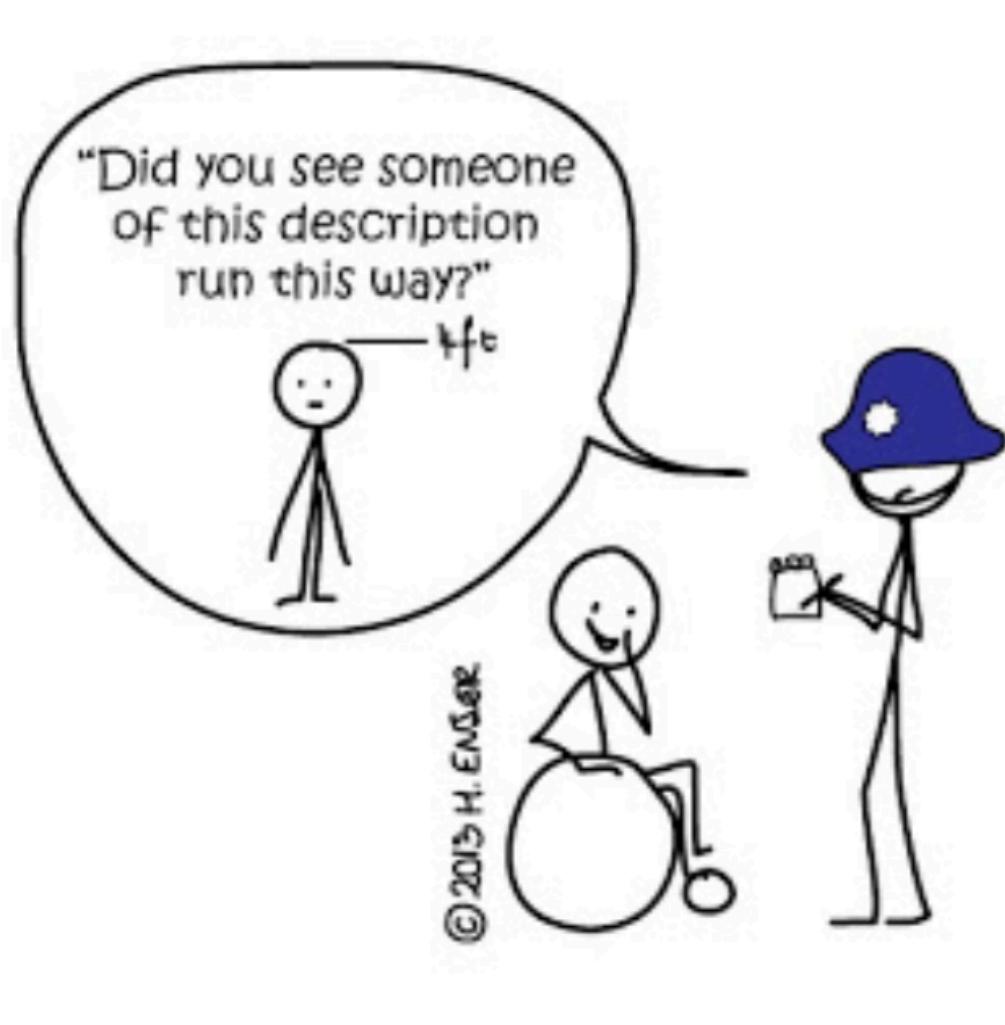
- What’s true: Seeing people as solely made of disability is dehumanizing.
- What’s ridiculous: Pretending that ignoring disability will make it stop mattering.

# "I don't see your disability"

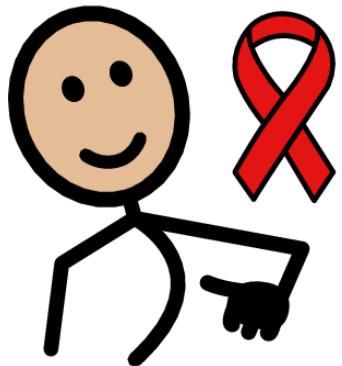
You don't?...this could be really awkward if we meet some stairs.



On the other hand, they'll never catch me based on your description!



# An even more ridiculous combination



- On the one hand: “I don’t see disability!”
- On the other hand: “We need to raise disability awareness!”
- Which is it? Awareness of what? Practical ignoring disability skills?



# Also ridiculous: “We all have disabilities!”

- Not everyone needs a lawsuit to get into a building.
- Not everyone needs an IEP in order to get access to education.
- Not everyone is treated as only conditionally welcome.
- Not everyone's body is the same.
- Disability means something.



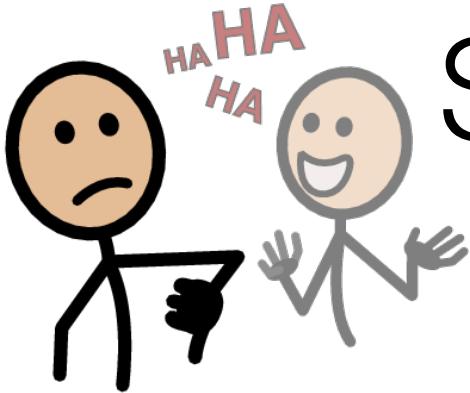
Finding the humor in all sides of a difficult conversation (From “The Middle”)



# Remember: Don't punch down

- There's a big difference between jokes along the lines of "teaching is hard", and jokes along the lines of "kids are awful monsters".
- (Or 'inclusion is hard' vs 'disabled people ruin schools')
- Jokes need to respect everyone as fully human.
- Jokes should not be hateful.





# Some things are not ridiculous



- Not ridiculous: The desire for equality.
- Not ridiculous: The desire for human dignity and age-appropriate autonomy.
- Not ridiculous: The expectation that we work at creating accessible environments.
- Not ridiculous: People with disabilities have feelings about discrimination.



# Questions to ask about our jokes

- What is the joke validating?
- What is the joke denigrating?
- What is the joke questioning?
- Who is the joke about?
- Do I agree with the messages the joke is sending?



Similarities between therapy  
and torture shouldn't feel ok.

Speech-Language Pathology



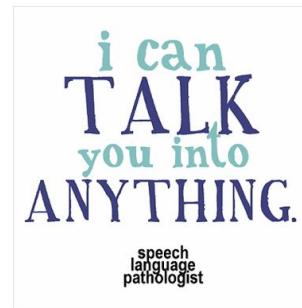
We Have Ways Of Making You Talk

i can  
TALK  
you into  
ANYTHING

speech  
language  
pathologist

# Destructive messages in this joke

- “We have ways of making you talk” is a torture joke.
- “I can talk you into anything” is a manipulation joke.
- Jokes like these send the message that the things therapy has in common with torture are ok.
- Jokes like these make abuses of power comfortable.
- These jokes aren’t funny to people who have had their boundaries violated in speech therapy.



A white plate filled with approximately ten golden-brown fried spring rolls. The rolls are cut into smaller pieces and arranged in a circular pattern on the plate. The background is a warm, out-of-focus yellowish-brown.

**THAT MOMENT WHEN YOU REALIZE YOUR  
PATIENT'S GOAL OF PREPARING A 4-STEP MEAL**

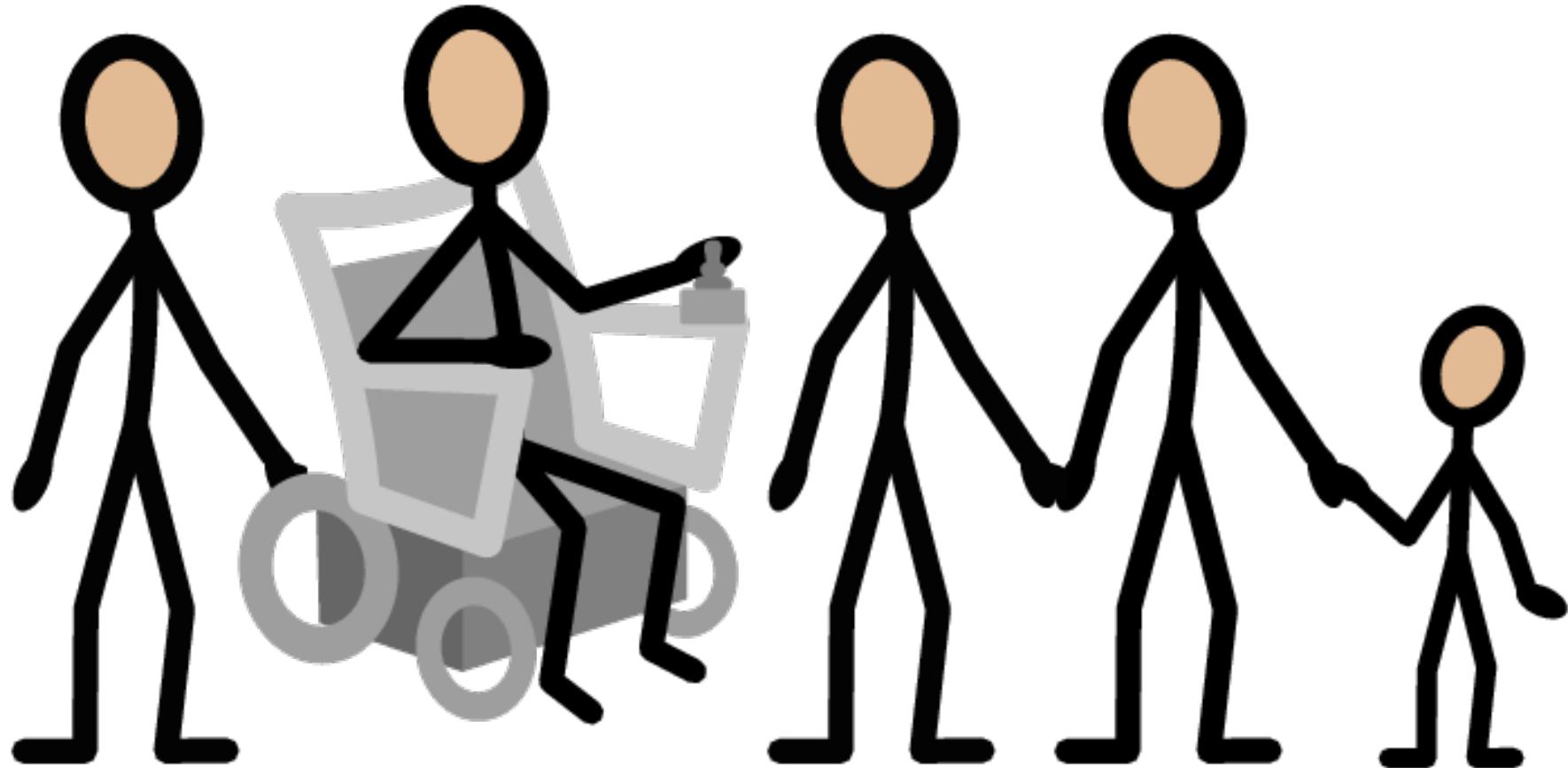
**IS MORE ADVANCED THAN ANY MEAL  
YOU'VE MADE IN THE LAST WEEK**

# This joke could be good or bad, depending on context/intent

- Disabled people get held to ridiculous double standards.
- This joke \*could\* be naming that as a problem.
- It could also be a way to feel comfortable holding disabled people to ridiculous double standards.



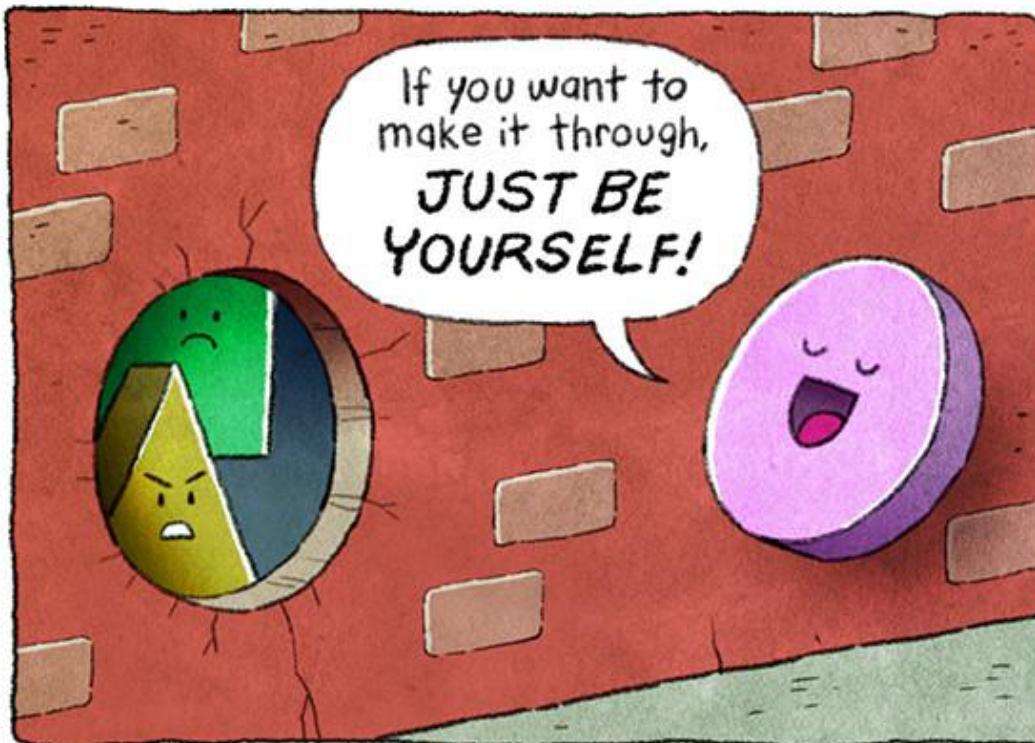
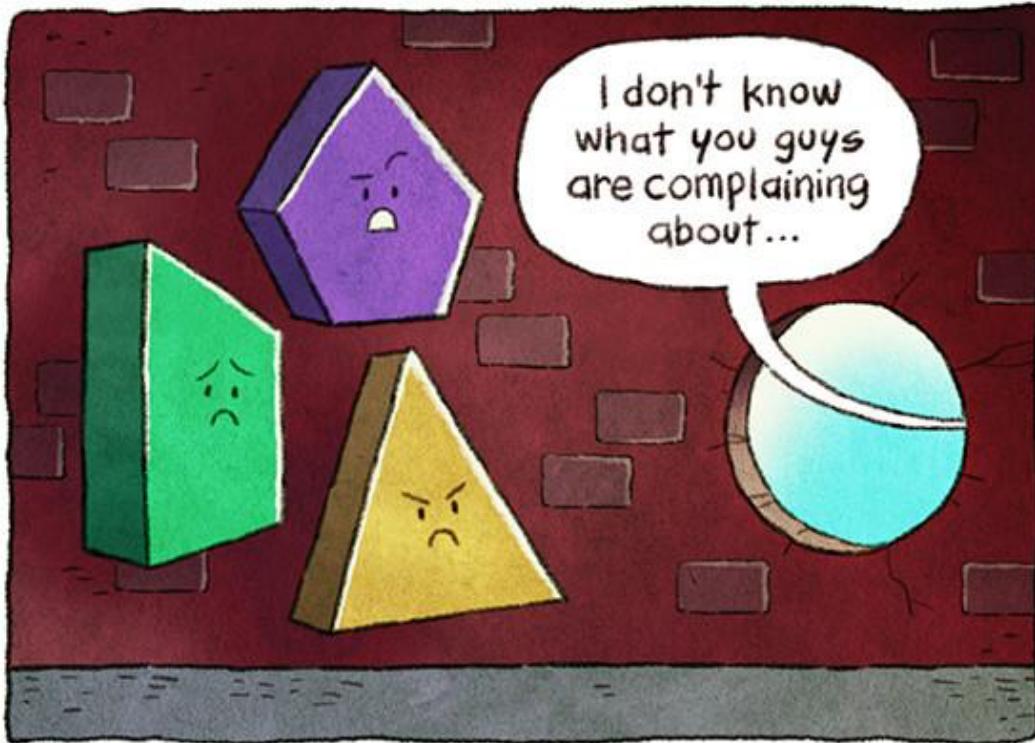
# Some disability-positive disability jokes:



# Not all jokes should be told by everyone.

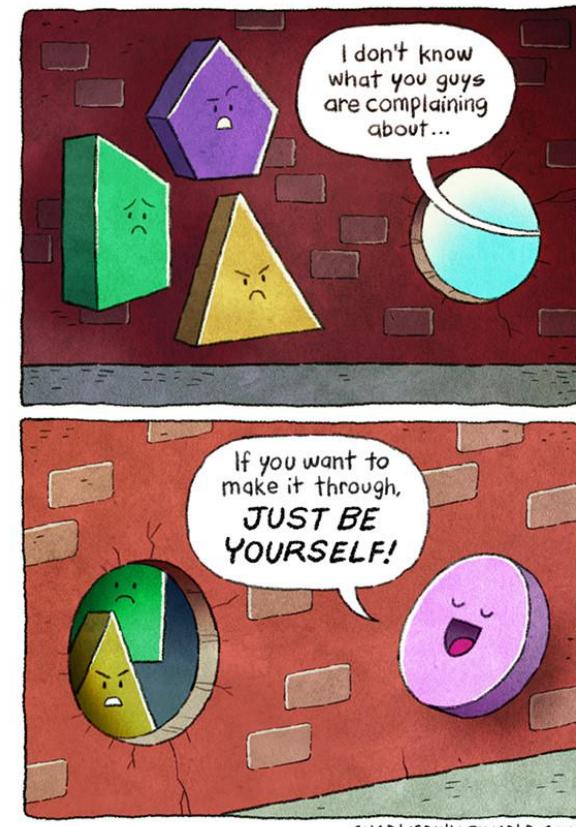


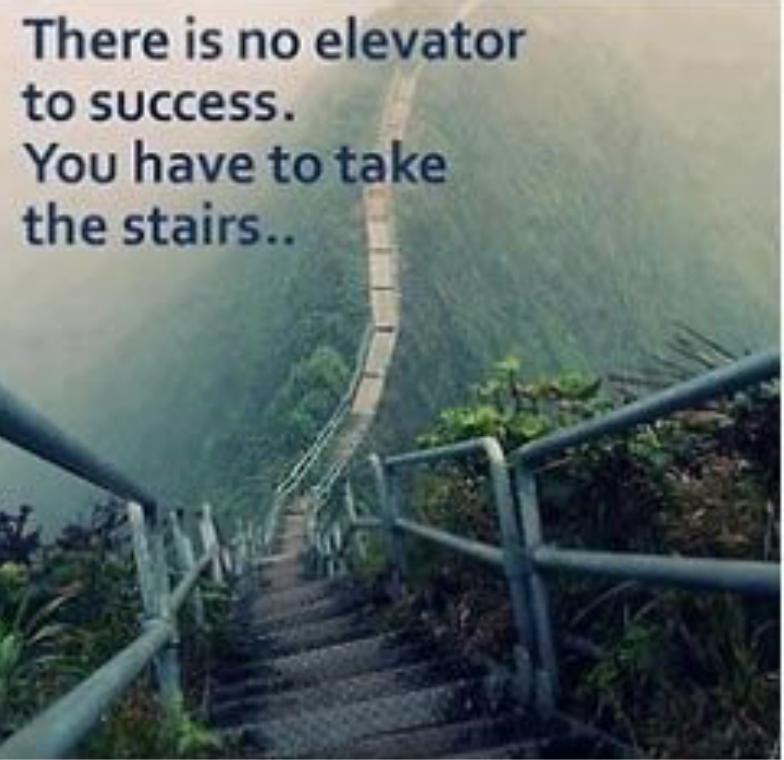
- Jokes about your own experiences are ok.
- Making fun of someone else's body, brain, or communication is not ok.
- It's generally better to avoid telling jokes about a disability you don't have.
- Don't joke about things you can't relate to.



# The world according to this joke: “Just be yourself” can be cruel bad advice

- This joke validates: Being angry/upset about being told ‘just be yourself’ when your access needs aren’t met or you face discrimination.
- This joke mocks: Telling people ‘just be yourself’ instead of acknowledging/fixing access barriers.





# The world according to this joke: It's wrong to shame people for using the elevator

- This joke validates: Being a wheelchair user and using elevators.
- This joke mocks: People who make fun of other people's access needs.
- This joke also points out that people feel shame over this, and says that hurting people in this way is bad.

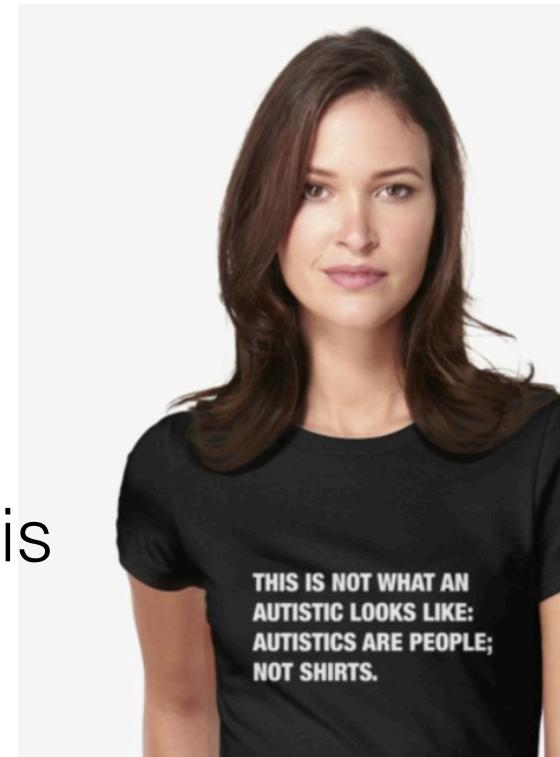


A close-up photograph of a woman from the chest up. She has long, dark brown hair and is wearing a black short-sleeved t-shirt. The text on the shirt is printed in a bold, white, sans-serif font.

**THIS IS NOT WHAT AN  
AUTISTIC LOOKS LIKE:  
AUTISTICS ARE PEOPLE;  
NOT SHIRTS.**

# Autistic literalism humor

- Almost every autistic person I know makes sarcastic jokes about their ostensible inability to understand sarcasm.
- In this joke, literalist humor is ok, and autistic speech patterns are ok.
- It's also claiming pride and a political identity, with references to the popular “this is what a feminist looks like” shirt.





Tammy Duckworth ✅

@SenDuckworth

Following



Just broke my leg rowing — I blame my hardcore pace. Luckily, it no longer hurts to break a leg!



3:18 PM - 7 Sep 2017

17,437 Retweets 111,818 Likes



2.3K



17K



112K

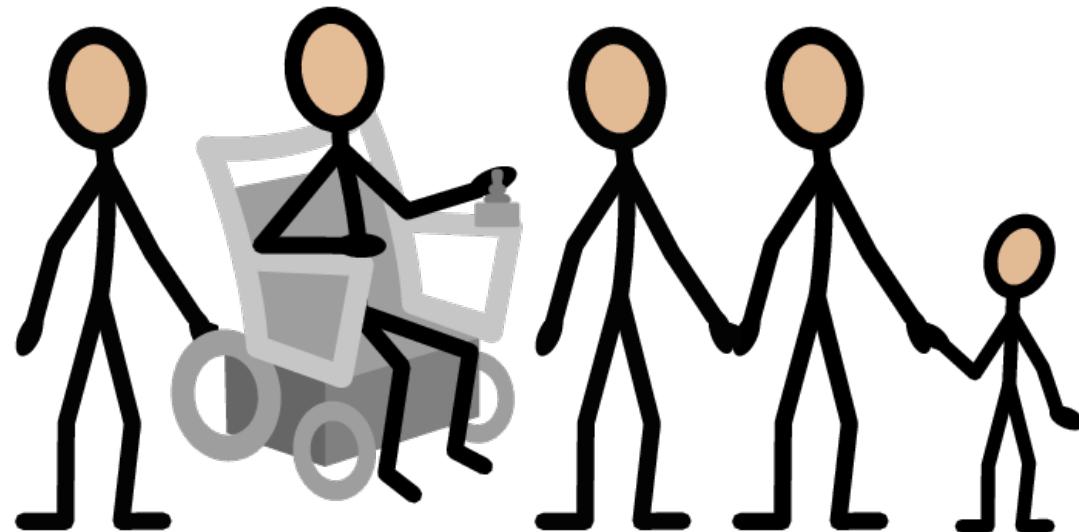


# The world according to this joke: Disability is not scary

- Senator Duckworth is mocking the idea that disability means your life is tragic.
- In this joke, her disability has a major advantage — when she breaks her leg, it doesn't hurt.



# Happy Purim!



# 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.





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