Beyond Fidget Spinners: Making Sense of Sensory Strategies in Jewish Education

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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

• 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.
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.