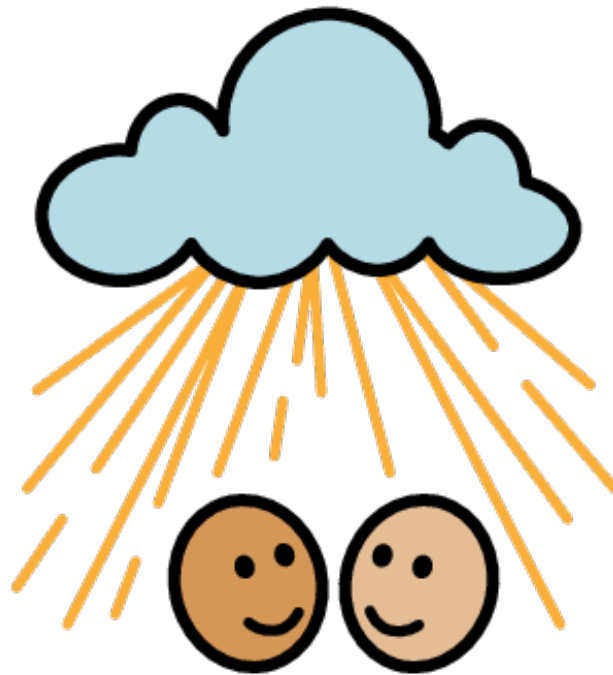


# Created disabled in God's image

Rabbi Ruti Regan

*Rabbinic Disability Scholar in Residence*



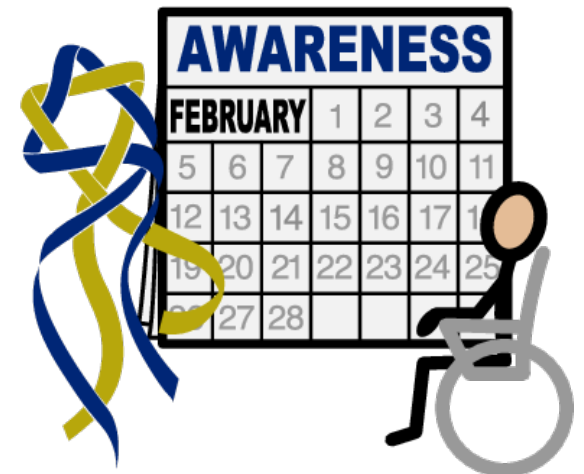
[www.matankids.org](http://www.matankids.org)  
@mataninc

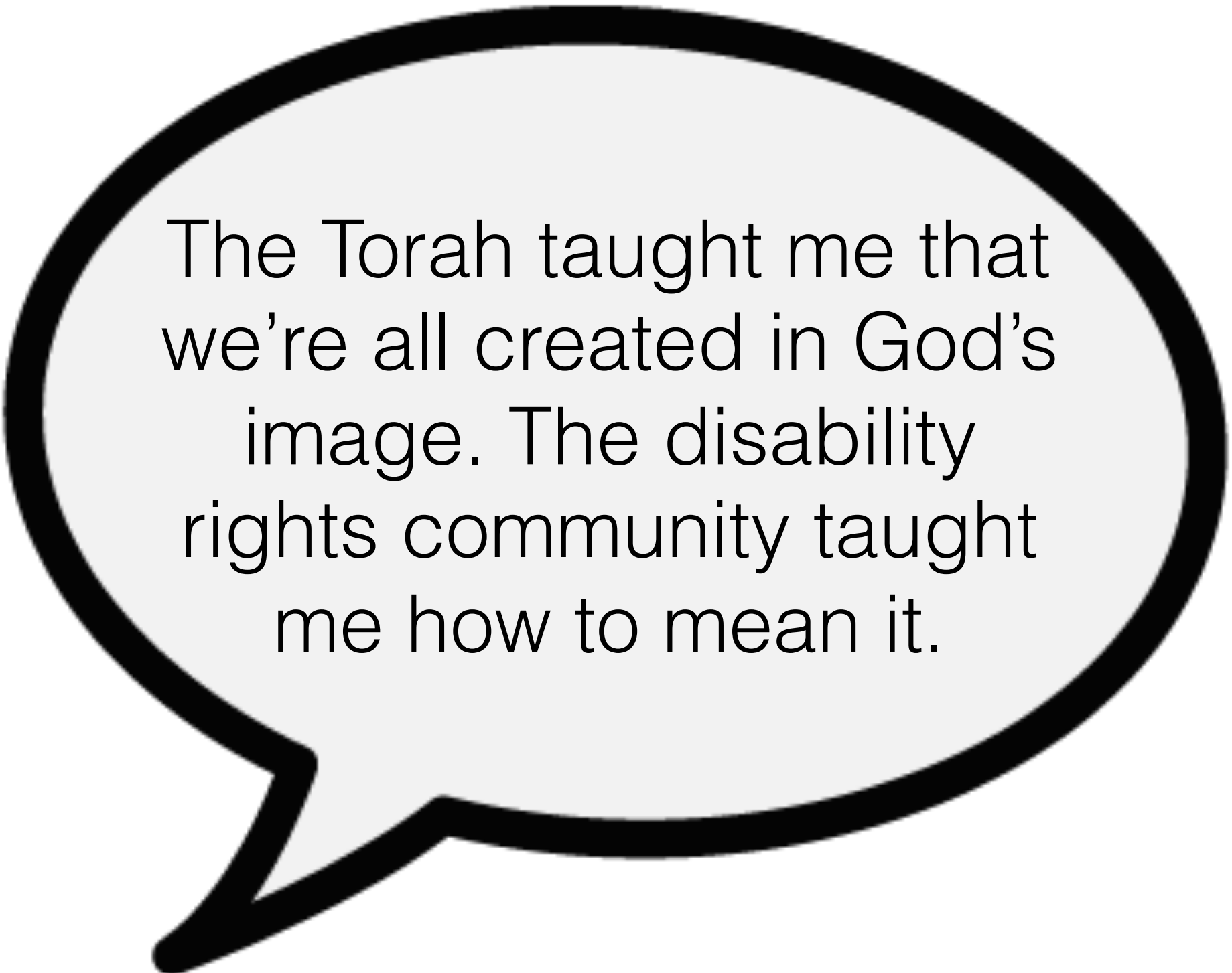
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# Jewish Disability Awareness/ Acceptance and Inclusion Month

- Awareness of Jewish disability
- Disabled Jews - accessibility, experiences, and perspectives.
- Disabled Jewish voices in the Jewish conversation.
- Disability in Jewish context.



A large, light gray speech bubble with a thick black outline. The bubble has a tail pointing towards the bottom left. Inside the bubble, the following text is written in a black, sans-serif font:

The Torah taught me that we're all created in God's image. The disability rights community taught me how to mean it.

# Disability is part of what defines us.

- Bodies matter.
- Brains matter.
- Life experiences matter.
- Community matters.
- Disability is not a dirty word.
- We don't need to edit it out to be fully human.

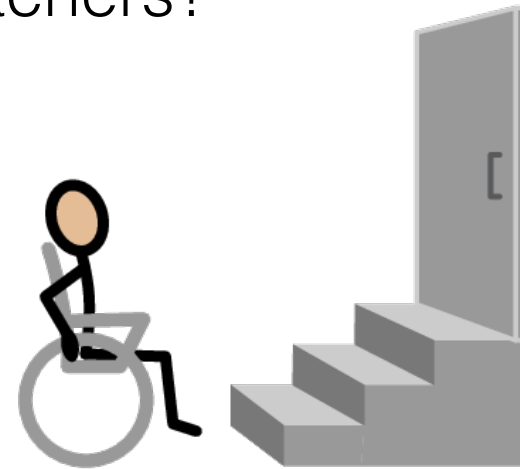


Kit Albrecht on being told that disability doesn't matter on the inside:

“It turns out that brains care more about oxygen than they do about academics.”

# Discrimination awareness

- How many of our communities are prepared to see Jews with communication disorders as leaders and teachers?
- As adults? As parents? As spouses? As rabbis?
- Discrimination has spiritual significance for both perpetrators and victims.
- A call to teshuva is a necessary part of our inclusion efforts.
- Framing our discrimination experiences within Jewish tradition is part of spirituality for disabled Jews.



“Growing up disabled, growing up queer, the stakes were stark. It was either kindle tenacious love for myself or swallow the world’s projections whole.

...

As a feminist, as a queer woman, and as a disabled bisexual Jew, I insist on honoring the integrity of a self that has often been disdained.”

Rabbi Julia Watts Belser, “God on Wheels: Disability and Jewish Feminist Theology”

# Disability awareness beyond discrimination awareness

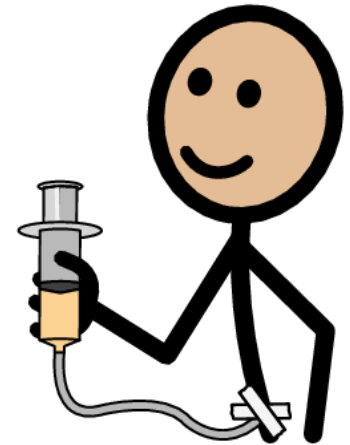
“I fear that by conceptualizing disability primarily as an access problem to be solved, we fail to invite in the vibrant, transgressive potential of disability culture: of a “crip” sensibility that celebrates disability as a way of life, a radically different way of moving through the world.”

Rabbi Julia Watts Belser, “God on Wheels: Disability and Jewish Feminist Theology”



# Mel Baggs on life with stigmatized assistive technology.

“My friends see it a different way. They see me as some cool kind of cyborg, with the oxygen, the feeding tube, and the Interstim implant that prevents spasticity in my urethra, allowing me to urinate. They say the sounds my oxygen concentrator makes sound almost “steampunk. But then all my friends are disabled, they see adaptive equipment as cool, and as a means to living, not a sign you're dying.”



Mel Baggs, “Feeding Tubes and Weird Ideas” [https://](https://ballastexistenz.wordpress.com/2013/05/02/feeding-tubes-and-weird-ideas/)

[ballastexistenz.wordpress.com/2013/05/02/feeding-tubes-and-weird-ideas/](https://ballastexistenz.wordpress.com/2013/05/02/feeding-tubes-and-weird-ideas/)

# Julia Bascom on autistic experience with obsessions

It's not anything recognized on the continuum of "normal".

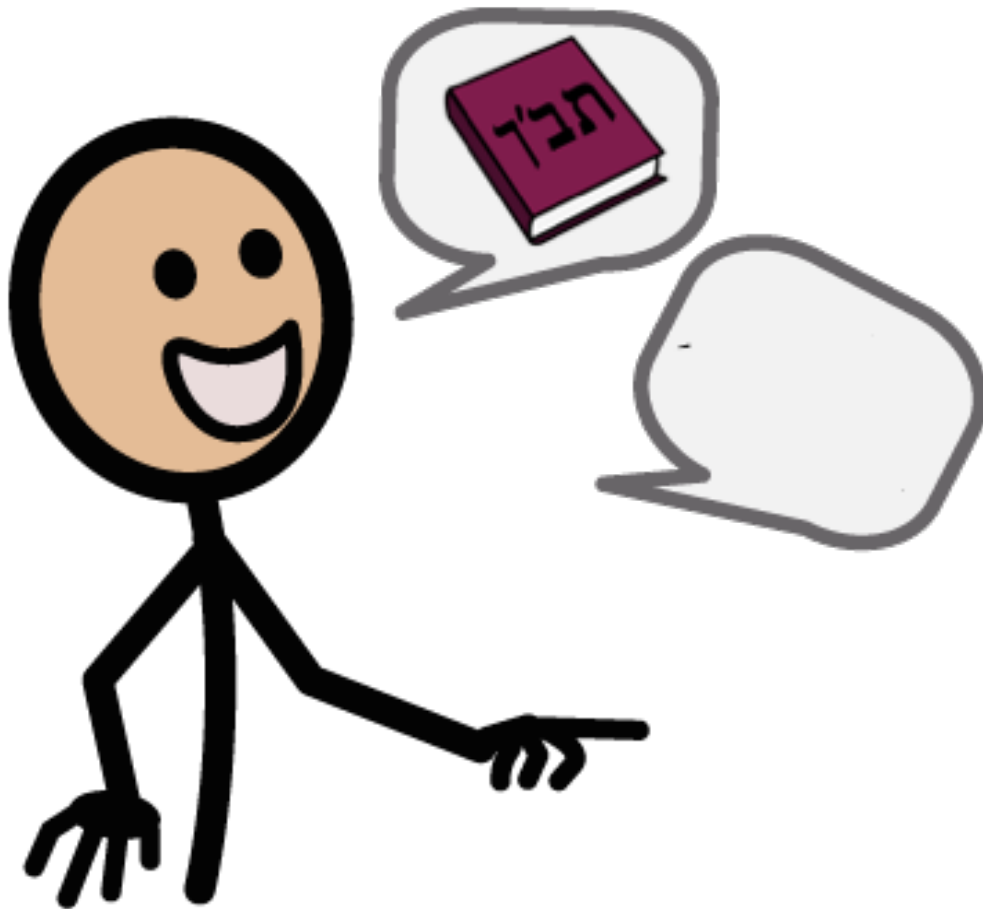
It's that the experience is so rich. It's textured, vibrant, and layered. It exudes joy. It is a hug machine for my brain. It makes my heart pump faster and my mouth twitch back into a smile every few minutes. I feel like I'm sparkling. Every inch of me is totally engaged in and powered up by the obsession. Things are clear.

It is beautiful. It is perfect.

“Are we “worse off”? I don’t think so. Not in any meaningful sense. There are too many variables. For those of us with congenital conditions, disability shapes all we are. Those disabled later in life adapt. We take constraints that no one would choose and build rich and satisfying lives within them. We enjoy pleasures other people enjoy, and pleasures peculiarly our own. We have something the world needs.”

Laura Hershey, *Too Late to Die Young*,  
*Nearly True Tales From a Life.*

We have something that the  
Torah needs.



Moses was not included at the burning bush. He was called to leadership.

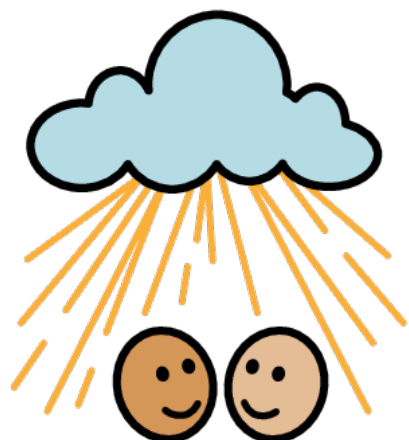


Ex. 4:10 But Moses said to YHVH, “Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.”

Ex. 4:11 And YHVH said to him, “Who gives man speech? Who makes him mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, YHVH?

Ex 4:10 וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה  
אֶל־יְהוָה בִּי אֲדֹנָי לֹא אִישׁ  
דְּבָרִים אָנֹכִי גַם מִתְמוּל גַּם  
מִשְׁלֵשָׁם גַּם מֵאִזְ דְּבַרְךָ  
אֶל־עַבְדְּךָ כִּי כְבֹד־פֶּה וְכַבֵּד  
לְשׁוֹן אָנֹכִי:

Ex. 4:11 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה  
אֵלָיו מִי שֵׁם פֶּה לְאָדָם אֹ  
מִי־יִשּׁוּם אֵלֶם אֹ חוֹשׁ אֹ  
פֶקַח אֹ עוֹר הֲלֹא אָנֹכִי  
יְהוָה:



# Reassurance doesn't erase reality



Ex. 4:12 Now go, and I will be with you as you speak and will instruct you what to say.”

Ex. 4:13 But he said, “Please, O Lord, make someone else Your agent.”

Ex. 4:12 וְעַתָּה לֵךְ  
וְאֲנֹכִי אֶהְיֶה עִם־פִּיךָ  
וְהוֹרִיתִיךָ אֲשֶׁר תִּדְבֹר׃  
Ex. 4:13 וַיֹּאמֶר בְּנִי  
אֲדֹנָי שְׁלַח־נָא  
בְיַד־תַּשְׁלַח׃



# Support doesn't erase leadership



Ex. 4:14 YHVH became angry with Moses, and He said, “There is your brother Aaron the Levite. He, I know, speaks readily. Even now he is setting out to meet you, and he will be happy to see you.

Ex. 4:15 You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth—I will be with you and with him as you speak, and tell both of you what to do—

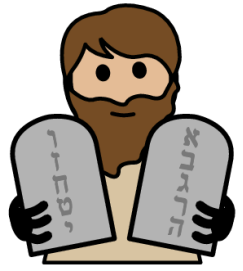
Ex. 4:16 and he shall speak for you to the people. Thus he

Ex. 4:14 וַיִּחַר־אַף יְהוָה בַּמֹּשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר הֲלֹא אֶהְרֶן אֶחִיךָ הַלֵּוִי יִדְעָתִי כִּי־דָבָר יִדְבֹר הוּא וְגַם הֵנִהּ הוּא יֵצֵא לְקִרְאתְךָ וּרְאֶךָ וְשָׁמַח בְּלִבּוֹ:

Ex. 4:15 וְדַבַּרְתָּ אֵלָיו וְשָׁמַתְּ אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים בְּפִיו וְאֲנֹכִי אֶהְיֶה עִם־פִּיךָ וְעִם־פִּיהוּ וְהוֹרִיתִי אֶתְכֶם אֵת אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשׂוּן:

Ex. 4:16 וְדַבַּר־הוּא לָךְ אֶל־הָעָם וְהָיָה הוּא יְהִי־לָךְ לִפֵּה וְאֵתָהּ תְהִי־לוֹ לְאֱלֹהִים:

Ex. 4:17 וְאֶת־הַמַּטֶּה הַזֶּה תִקַּח בְּיָדְךָ אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשֶׂה־בּוֹ אֶת־הָאֹתוֹת:



# Needing support — and being the right person for the job.

Ex. 17:11 Then, whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; but whenever he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed.

Ex. 17:12 But Moses' hands grew heavy; so they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur, one on each side, supported his hands; thus his hands remained steady until the sun set.

Ex. 17:11 וְהָיָה כַּאֲשֶׁר יָרִים מֹשֶׁה יָדוֹ וְגָבַר יִשְׂרָאֵל וּכְאֲשֶׁר יִנְיַח יָדוֹ וְגָבַר עַמְלֵק:

Ex. 17:12 כִּבְדִּים וַיִּקְחוּ אֲבֹן וַיִּשְׁימוּ תַּחְתָּיו וַיֹּשֶׁב עָלֶיהָ וְאַהֲרֹן וְחֹר וַתִּמְכּוּ בְיָדָיו מִזָּה אֶחָד וּמִזָּה אֶחָד וַיְהִי יָדָיו אֲמוֹנָה עַד-בֹּא הַשָּׁמֶשׁ:



# Bad things happen when support is confused with voice



Ex. 32:1 When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron and said to him, “Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him.”

Ex. 32:2 Aaron said to them, “Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.”

Ex. 32:3 And all the people took off the gold rings that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron.

Ex. 32:4 This he took from them and cast in a mold, and made it into a molten calf. And they exclaimed, “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!”

Ex. 32:5 When Aaron saw this, he built an

Ex. 32:1 וַיֵּרָא הָעָם כִּי־בִשָּׁשׁ מִשָּׁה לָּרֹדֶת מִן־הַהָר וַיִּקְהֵל הָעָם עַל־אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו קוּם וַעֲשֵׂה־לָּנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יֵלְכוּ לְפָנֵינוּ כִּי־זָה מֹשֶׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הָעַלָּנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֹא יָדַעְנוּ מָה־הָיָה לוֹ׃

Ex. 32:2 וַיֹּאמֶר אֶלֵהֶם אַהֲרֹן פְּרֹקוּ נְזָמֵי הַזֶּהָב אֲשֶׁר בְּאָזְנֵי נְשֵׁיכֶם בְּנֵיכֶם וּבְנֹתֵיכֶם וְהָבִיאוּ אֵלַי׃

Ex. 32:3 וַיִּתְּפְּרוּ כָּל־הָעָם אֶת־נְזָמֵי הַזֶּהָב אֲשֶׁר בְּאָזְנֵיהֶם וַיָּבִיאוּ אֶל־אַהֲרֹן׃

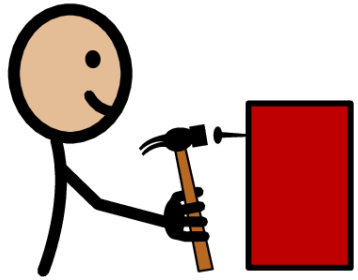
Ex. 32:4 וַיִּקַּח מִיָּדָם וַיִּצַר אֹתוֹ בַּחֹרֶט וַיַּעֲשֵׂהוּ עֵגֶל מַסְכָּה וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הָעַלּוֹךְ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם׃



# It's not just Moses...

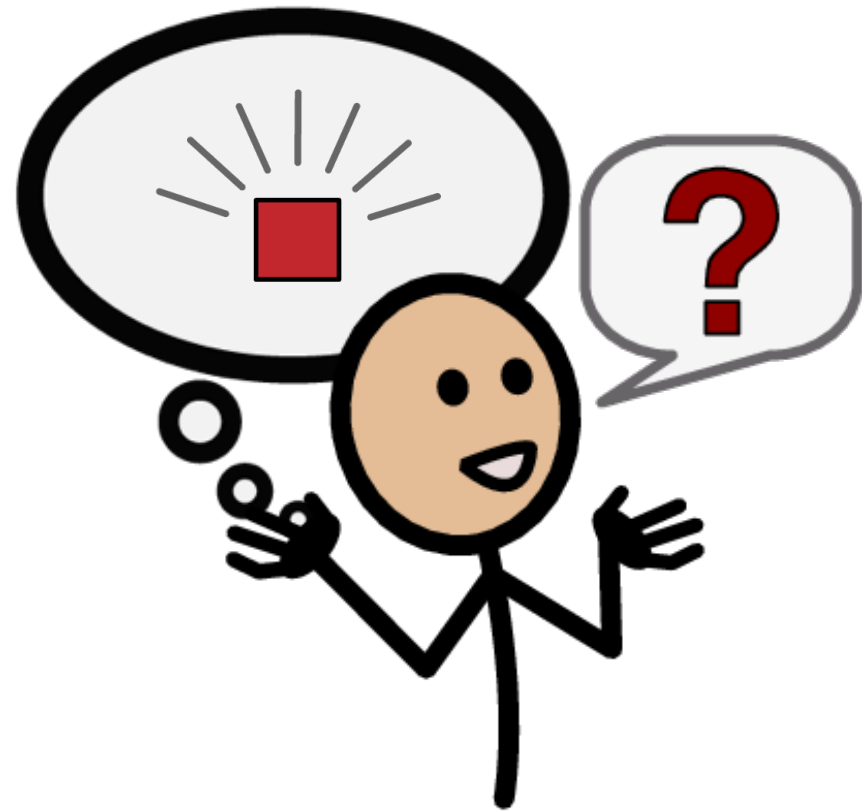
- We were all created in God's image.
- Jewish inclusion means more than meeting our needs.
- We have something to offer.
- We are leaders.
- Our voices are Jewish voices.
- We have something that the Torah needs.





# We create too.

- Our capacity to create came from God.
- What we create comes from us.
- We are more than our 'gifts'.
- We all have more to offer than God created us with.



Disability is part of every Jewish context and conversation



“One recent Shavuot, Ezekiel’s vision split open my own imagination. Hearing those words chanted, I felt a jolt of recognition, an intimate familiarity. I thought: God has wheels!”

When I think of God on wheels, I think of the delight I take in my own chair. I sense the holy possibility that my own body knows, the way wheels set me free and open up my spirit.

Rabbi Julia Watts Belser, “God on Wheels: Disability and Jewish Feminist Theology”

Were our mouths filled with song as  
the sea, our tongues to sing  
endlessly like countless waves, our  
lips to offer limitless praise like the  
sky, our eyes to shine like the sun  
and the moon,  
our arms to spread heavenward  
like eagles' wings, and our feet  
swift as deer, we would still be  
unable to fully praise You YHVH our  
God and God of our ancestors,  
or to praise Your name for even one  
of the myriad moments of kindness  
with which You have blessed our  
ancestors and us.

אֱלוֹ פִּינוּ מְלֵא שִׁירָה  
כְּיָם. וְלִשׁוֹנֵנוּ רִנָּה כַּהַמּוֹן  
גְּלוֹ. וְשִׁפְתוֹתֵינוּ שֶׁבַח  
כְּמִרְחֲבֵי רִקִיעַ. וְעֵינֵינוּ  
מְאִירוֹת בְּשֶׁמֶשׁ וּבְכִירָח.  
וְיָדֵינוּ פְּרוּשׁוֹת כְּנִשְׂרֵי  
שָׁמַיִם. וְרַגְלֵינוּ קָלוֹת  
כְּאַיִלוֹת. אֵין אֲנַחְנוּ  
מִסְפִּיקִים לְהוֹדוֹת לְךָ ה'  
אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ.  
וּלְבָרַךְ אֶת שְׁמֶךָ עַל אַחַת  
מֵאַלְפֵי אֱלָפִים וְרַבֵּי  
רַבּוֹת פְּעָמִים. הַטּוֹבוֹת  
שֶׁעָשִׂיתָ עִם אֲבוֹתֵינוּ  
וְעִמָּנוּ

**Liturgy for Shabbat Morning**

# Our bodies in prayer and mitzvot

- No body is perfect.
- No body is adequate to fully praise God.
- No body is disqualified from praising God.
- We're all in exile in an imperfect world.
- We all use what we have.
- We are all created in God's image.

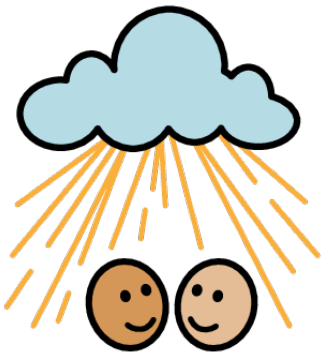


# We are an embodied tradition

- Judaism involves the whole body.
- Brains and bodies matter.
- Actions matter.
- Disabled people are neither above nor beneath this.
- Exempting us does not solve the problem.







# Inclusion in commandedness



## Talmud Bavli, Kiddushin 31a

Rav Yosef [who was blind] said: At first I would say: If someone would tell me that the *halakha* is in accordance with Rabbi Yehuda, who says: A blind person is exempt from the mitzvot, I would make a banquet for the rabbis, as I am not commanded and yet I perform. Now that I have heard that which Rabbi Ḥanina says: **Greater is one who is commanded and performs it than one who is not commanded and performs it**, on the contrary: If someone would tell me that the *halakha* is not in accordance with Rabbi Yehuda, I would make a banquet for the rabbis.

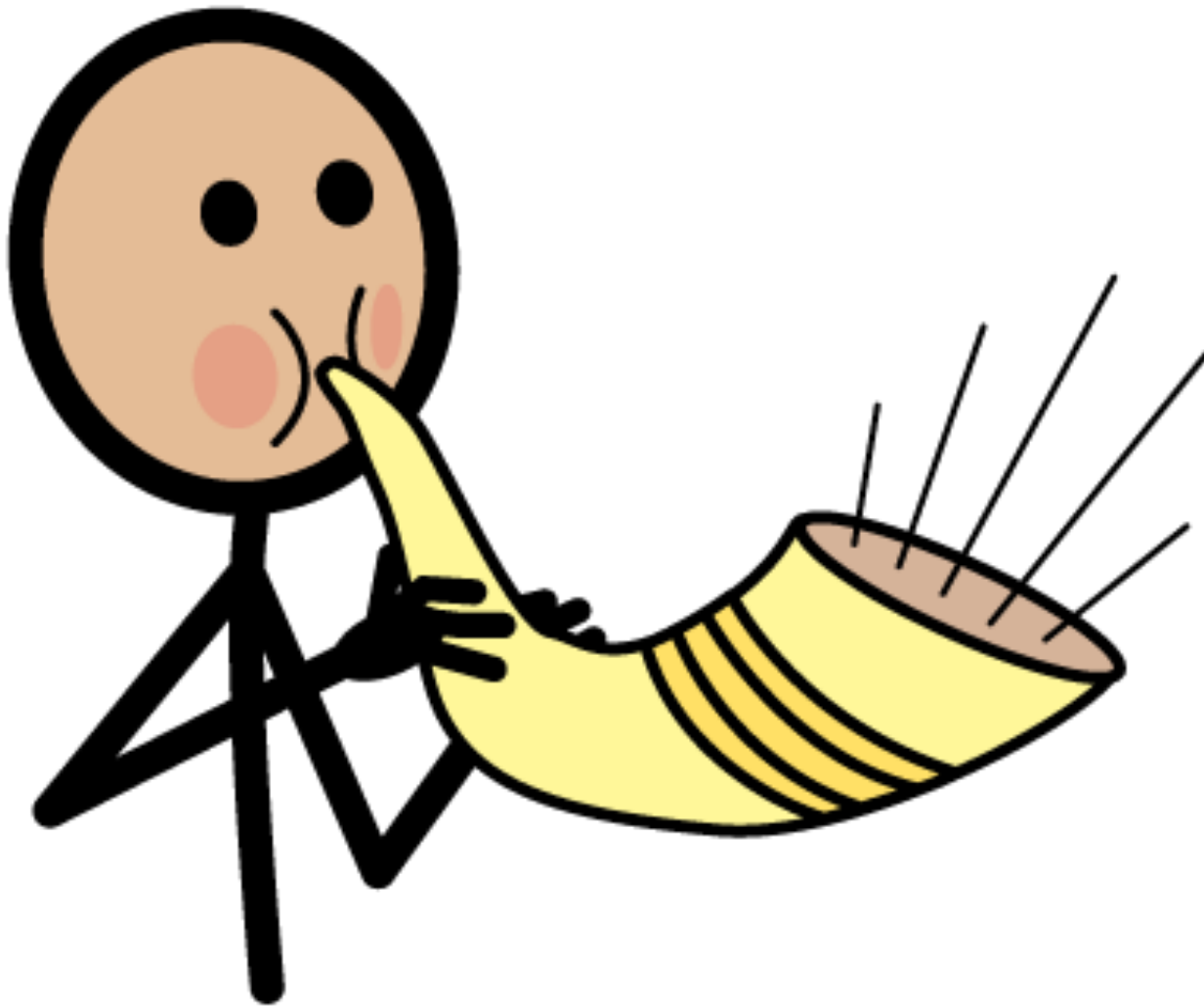
אמר רב יוסף מריש ה"א מאן  
דהוה אמר לי הלכה כר"י דאמר  
סומא פטור מן המצות עבידנא  
יומא טבא לרבנן דהא לא  
מיפקידנא והא עבידנא השתא  
דשמעיתא להא דא"ר חנינא  
**גדול מצווה ועושה יותר ממי  
שאינו מצווה ועושה** אדרבה  
מאן דאמר לי דאין הלכה כרבי  
יהודה עבידנא יומא טבא לרבנן

# Taking disability into account in our understanding of mitzvot



- Disabled Jews are part of the covenant.
- Our understanding of mitzvot needs to have room for disability.
- We can't afford to treat disabled observance as alternative or as a pale imitation.
- Our observance is equally real and our Torah is equally sacred.

# Disability experience on Yom Kippur



עַל חַטָּא שְׁחַטָּאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ בְּאִנּוּס וּבְרָצוֹן:  
וְעַל חַטָּא שְׁחַטָּאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ בְּמֵאֲכָל וּבְמִשְׁתֵּה.

For the sins that we  
have committed  
willingly, and for  
those we have  
committed under  
duress.

For those sins  
we have  
committed  
through food  
and drink.



# Willingly - sometimes we do it on purpose

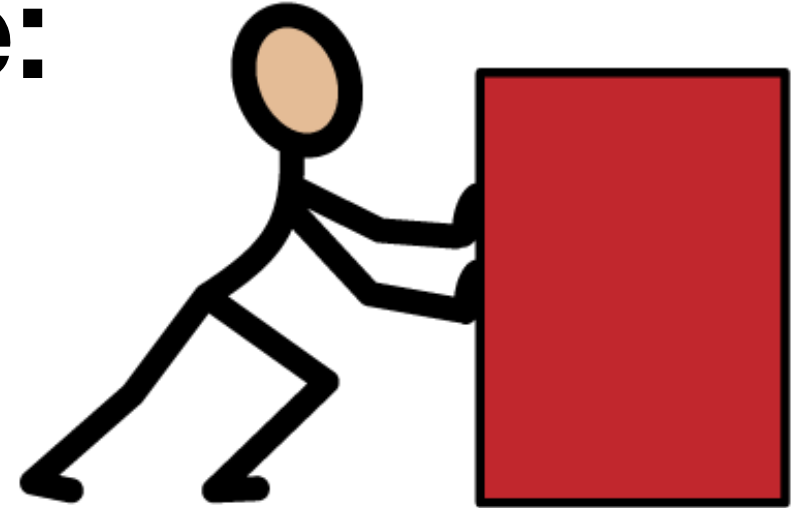
- “I shouldn’t have to teach those kids”/“That’s just not how I teach”.
- “That’s not the image we want to project”/“Is this really a good use of our resources?”
- Are students excluded on the grounds that “we feel he’d be better off in a place more equipped to meet his needs” when no such place exists?
- “We don’t need a ramp, there are no disabled kids in this school”.
- Are children with disabilities denied enrollment in your program in order to prevent your school from having a high percentage of disabled students?
- How else might we be willfully excluding disabled Jewish children from Jewish education? What can you do about it?

# Under duress - sometimes we exclude people against our will

- None of us live up to all of our best intentions.
- Sometimes we don't know how to do the right thing.
- Sometimes what's needed costs more money than we have.
- Sometimes we are unable to do the right thing because we're overruled by people above us in the hierarchy.
- Sometimes we're terrified of the consequences we'd face for doing the right thing.
- What we do under duress, we still do.
- We are responsible for what we do, even if we didn't want to do it.

# Some things duress can look like:

- “The budget won’t allow for it”
- “I’d like to, but...”
- “Liability”
- “Parents vehemently object to inclusive policies because they think disabled students will draw attention away from their children”.
- “No one is trained for that”
- “My board won’t allow it”
- “Our donors would withdraw funding if we did that.”



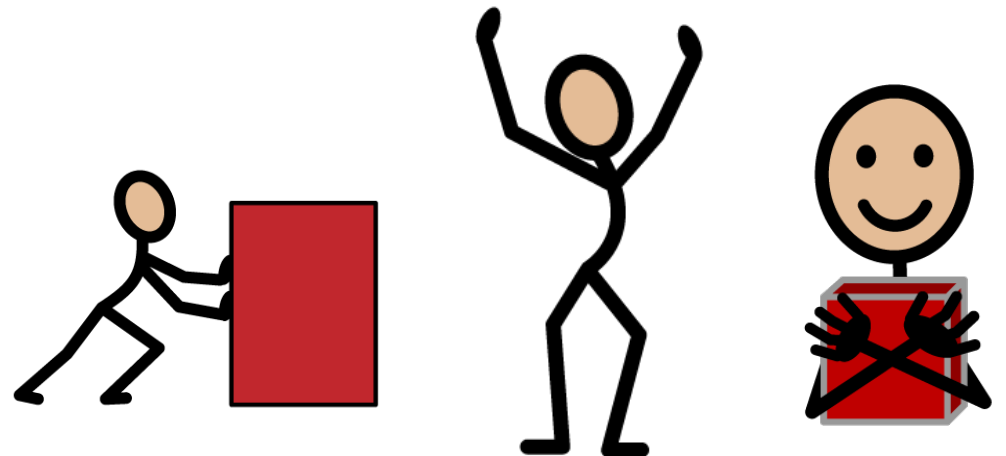
# Teshuva for sins committed under duress

- What have you done under duress that you regret?
- How might you be able to gain more power to do the right thing this year?
- What have you seen others do under duress? How might you be able to support them in doing the right thing this year?
- How might you have pressured people to do the wrong thing? What can you do to support them in doing the right thing this year?



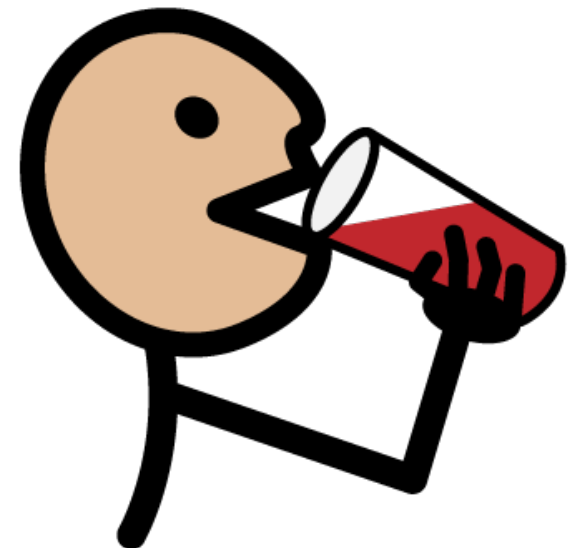
# Teshuva is also about holding on

- You will likely come under pressure to do the wrong thing at some point this year.
- Some people may try to make you ashamed of your work towards inclusive Jewish education.
- Think about what you're proud of. Think about what you want to hold on to. Think about how you're going to resist pressure to let go of it.



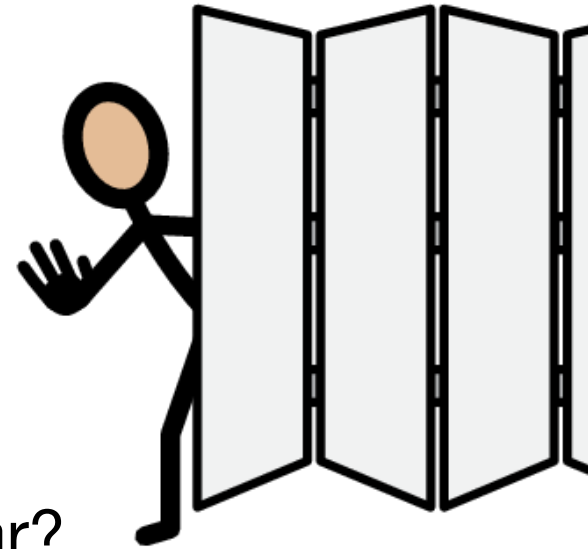
# For those who are unable to fast safely, eating is a mitzvah

- Too often, we treat medically necessary eating and drinking as a sin committed under duress.
- We hide it, and say things like “everyone is fasting”.
- Being disabled is not a sin.
- Our observance is observance.



# Pressure to be invisible

- Those who must eat or drink are often pressured to do so out of view of others “to avoid making the fast more difficult for others”.
- What about the effect this hiding has on disabled experience with Yom Kippur?
- Is making prayer more difficult for those who must not fast seen as a problem?
- Why is noticing disabled people’s mitzvah observance seen as a burden too heavy to bear?



# Yom Kippur as a valuing of disability experience

- When I could fast, fasting made me weak, wobbly, and less cognitively capable.
- That opened up certain possibilities for prayer and teshuva.
- I now often experience those physical effects naturally.
- This year, it occurred to me: It seems that Judaism treats those experiences as spiritually significant and spiritually valuable.
- To the extent that nondisabled people enter into them on the holiest day of the year.

# A possible lens on a very problematic text.

Rava, and some say Rav Hisda, said: If a person sees that suffering has befallen him, he should examine his actions. As it is stated: “We will search and examine our ways, and return to God” (Lamentations 3:40). If he examined and found nothing he may attribute it to dereliction in the study of Torah, as it is stated: “Happy is the man whom You afflict, Lord, and teach out of Your law” (Psalms 94:12).

And if he did assume dereliction in the study of Torah, and did not find this to be so, he may be confident that these are afflictions of love...

Brachot 5a

אמר רבא ואיתימא רב חסדא  
אם רואה אדם שיסורין באין  
עליו יפשפש במעשיו שנא' (איכה ג. מ.)  
נחפשה דרכינו ונחקורה  
ונשובה עד ה' פשפש ולא מצא  
יתלה בבטול תורה שנאמר (תהלים צד.)  
(אשרי הגבר אשר תיסרנו יה  
ומתורתך תלמדנו ואם תלה ולא  
מצא בידוע שיסורין של  
אהבה...

# What if this text isn't about punishment?

- What if the point is that these experiences can be understood as spiritually significant?
- What if it turns out that disability experiences open up spiritual possibilities?
- What if the Talmud and the liturgy is teaching us that our bodies ought to be valued?
- What might it look like to operate in Jewish contexts with the assumption that our bodies and experiences are always valuable?

# Another text that values us:

Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

"It was for this reason that Adam was first created as one person, to teach you that anyone who destroys a life is considered by Scripture to have destroyed an entire world; and anyone who saves a life is as if he saved an entire world." And also, to promote peace among the creations, that no man would say to his friend, "My ancestors are greater than yours." And also, so that heretics will not say, "there are many rulers up in Heaven." **And also, to express the greatness of The Holy One [blessed be He]: For a man strikes many coins from the same mold, and all the coins are alike. But the King, the King of Kings, The Holy One [blessed be He] strikes every man from the die of the First Man, and yet no man is quite like his friend. Therefore, every person must say, "For my sake the world was created."**

לפיכך נברא אדם יחידי, ללמדך,  
שכל המאבד נפש אחת מישראל,  
מעלה עליו הכתוב כאלו אבד  
עולם מלא. וכל המקים נפש  
אחת מישראל, מעלה עליו  
הכתוב כאלו קים עולם מלא.  
ומפני שלום הבריות, שלא יאמר  
אדם לחברו, אבא גדול מאביך.  
ושלא יהו מינין אומרים, הרבה  
רשויות בשמים. ולהגיד גדלתו  
**שלהקדוש ברוך הוא, שאדם  
טובע כמה מטבעות בחותם  
אחד וכלן דומין זה לזה, ומלך  
מלכי המלכים הקדוש ברוך  
הוא טבע כל אדם בחותמו  
שלאדם הראשון, ואין אחד מהו  
דומה לחברו. לפיכך כל אחד  
ואחד חייב לומר, בשבילי נברא  
העולם.**

# A caveat: Spirituality is not a substitute for accessibility

- Do not lecture Jews with disabilities on the need to reframe their perspective.
- Do not feel that your refusal to accept discrimination is unspiritual.
- Our anger in the face of discrimination is part of what we bring to the Torah.
- Accessibility is a mitzvah.

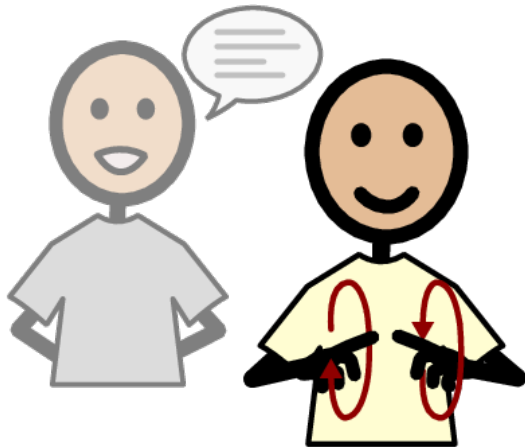




# The obligation to avoid discrimination

Lev. 19:13 לא־תַעֲשֶׂק אֶת־רֵעֶךָ וְלֹא תִגְזֹל לֹא־תִלִּין פְּעֻלַּת שְׂכִיר אֶתְךָ עַד־בִּקְרָה:

Lev. 19:14 ¶ Do not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind. You shall fear your God: I am YHVH.



# To be continued...

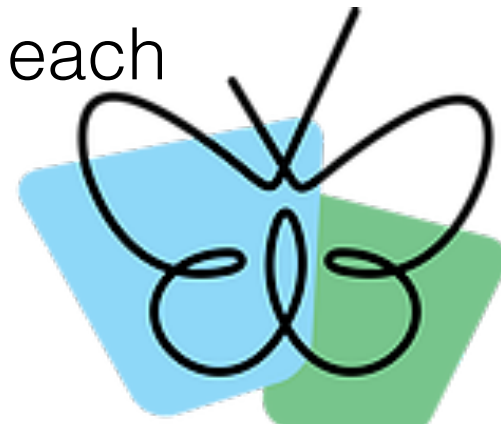
- Torah is a never-ending Jewish conversation.
- The Jewish conversation about disability never ends, because disability is part of everything the Torah addresses.
- JDAIM is an opportunity to expand and deepen the conversation.
- Stay tuned...



# 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.

matan





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- Lots of Jewish content

