Emotional Resilience for Inclusive Educators

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

Rabbi Ruti Regan
Disability should be ordinary

- People with disabilities should be everywhere.

- Inclusion of kids with and without disabilities in schools should be normal.

- It should go without saying that adults with disabilities are leaders and colleagues.

- Accessibility should be expected.

- We shouldn’t have to fight for any of this, but we do.

- We have a long way to go.
We talk about “inclusion” because for generations, exclusion has been the norm

• Very few Jewish adults with developmental disabilities grew up with full access to inclusive Jewish education.

• Very few disabled adults over the age of 30 grew up with full access to inclusive secular education.

• It’s still normal for children with disabilities to be cut off from appropriate education, Jewish and secular.

• “Inclusion” is new, innovative, and difficult.

• We have inherited a big problem.
Persisting on a difficult road

- Change is hard.

- Working towards an inclusive world can be physically and emotionally exhausting.

- It can feel thankless.

- It can seem fruitless.

- It can expose you to heartbreaking realities.

- It can challenge your identity as an educator.

- How do we keep going when it is hard?

- While we work to change the world, what can keep us emotionally stable in the world as it is now?
Don’t blame yourself for the reality that inclusion is hard

- Understanding that inclusion is important doesn’t erase all the difficulties involved.

- No amount of smiling or resolve will make this work easy.

- Persisting in this work is much more emotionally tenable when you understand the reasons why it is hard.

- You can’t make it easy, but you can be brave, you can be happy, and you can be ok.
Inclusion is hard because teaching is hard

• It’s hard to teach, and it’s hard to learn how to teach.

• Moving towards inclusion means teaching groups of people that you haven’t taught before.

• Sometimes you won’t know anyone who has taught your subject to students similar to yours.

• Sometimes there *isn’t* anyone who knows how to teach a class like yours.

• This is inherently difficult work.
Disability is diverse

• There is a standard range of difference in ability we’re taught to expect in kids of the same age.

• Kids with disabilities are more different than that.

• Kids with different kinds of disabilities are often as different from each other as they are from typically developing kids.

• Inclusive education involves a very wide range of problem-solving.
All of these kids could have a disability

- Disability is sometimes equated with wheelchair use — but *all* of these kids could have disabilities.

- Any or all of them could have a speech disorder. Or autism. Or dyslexia. Or PTSD. Or low vision. Or any number of things. (So could the teacher)

- Disability is diverse and you can’t always tell by looking.
Teaching is hard — and we don’t know as much as we should about teaching kids with disabilities.

- Teachers learn what the previous generation of teachers knew, add to it, and pass it down to the next generation of teachers.

- For all the years that kids with disabilities were excluded from school, teachers weren’t figuring out how to teach them.

- You can’t fix all of this by yourself, but everything you figure out can make the world a much better place.
We are learning to teach differently

- Our methods of instruction were created for typically developing kids.
- In order to be fully inclusive, we are going to have to make changes to how we teach.
- There are things we know, and things we are figuring out.
- Creating new ways to teach involves a lot of trial and error.
There’s a lot of missing infrastructure for inclusive education

- Few curricular resources were designed with fully inclusive education in mind.

- Most resources implicitly assume that kids the same age who are being taught together all have the same physical and cognitive abilities.

- Schools of education are in the early stages of figuring out how to teach high-level inclusion skills to their students.

- We are often taught instructional methods without being taught how to differentiate them effectively.

- The teaching experts and mentors you rely on for advice and support may not always know very much about teaching kids with disabilities.
Some examples of mostly-unsolved problems

- How can we include kids with communication disabilities in class discussions and group work?

- How do we include kids with motor skills impairments in early literacy activities and pretend play?

- What are the best ways to teach English-speaking kids with dyslexia how to read prayer book Hebrew?

- How can we include kids who depend on routine to function in field trips and other enrichment activities?

- How can kids who have 1:1 aides participate in developmentally appropriate rule-breaking along with their peers?

- How should we teach inclusion across the curriculum in schools of education?
Give yourself permission to be a flawed teacher

• Beware of sentiments like “If we’re going to do inclusion, we need to do it right” and “Before we do this, we need to make sure we’re ready”.

• There is no such thing as a teacher who always does it right — not with typically developing kids, and not with kids with disabilities.

• The only way to get better at inclusive teaching is to teach inclusively.

• You will make mistakes. You will say and do the wrong thing sometimes. That doesn’t mean it was wrong to try. That means that you are learning.
Working with kids who you don’t know how to teach effectively

- Undoing exclusion means that you will be working with a broader range of kids.
- Sometimes you won’t know how to teach them.
- Sometimes *no one* will know how to teach them.
- This means that you will likely struggle and fail more often than you are used to.
- This can be challenging to your identity as an educator.
- Don’t take it personally, and don’t take it out on the kids.
Don’t make success your identity

• As you include a wider range of kids, you’re probably going to make more teaching mistakes.

• You’re probably going to succeed less consistently than you’re used to.

• This can be emotionally confusing. It can make you feel like you’re getting worse at teaching.

• Keep in mind that you’re actually getting *better* at teaching — you’re making more mistakes because you’re doing harder things.
Remember that error is part of trial and error

- The mistakes you make are worth making.
- When you try more, you fail more — but you also succeed more.
- Don’t expect yourself to know everything in advance.
- Do keep learning and growing.
Value your skills and knowledge

- You know a lot about teaching, and you know a lot about children.

- You have a lot of useful and valuable skills that most people (including most therapy professionals) do not have.

- No profession has inclusive teaching figured out yet. We’re all working on it.

- As we’re figuring out how to teach a broader range of kids, remember that you bring some of the most important expertise there is to the table.
Inclusion is hard because it makes us vulnerable to secondary trauma

- Our society hurts people with disabilities badly.

- Ableism (prejudice against people with disabilities) is pervasive.

- Most people without disabilities are protected from having to feel how much disability discrimination hurts.

- In order to be an effective inclusive educator, you have to find ways to live without this protection.
What is secondary trauma?

- Professionals who are frequently exposed to other people’s trauma often develop trauma symptoms themselves.

- Inclusive education tends to increase exposure to the trauma that people with disabilities experience.

- When you see our humanity, you see our dehumanization.

- Inclusive educators need strategies for coping with trauma exposure.
Trauma exposure in inclusive education

- Inclusive education is justice work.
- Working for justice means facing injustice.
- Awareness of injustice can be traumatic.
  - (Especially when the people being hurt are children you care about.)
  - (Especially when people you admire are part of the problem.)
  - (Especially when you’re part of the problem.)
The price of empathy

- Children with disabilities are often treated in ways that would be considered unacceptable towards typically developing children.

- The more empathy you have for your disabled students, the more you realize that they feel just as much pain and humiliation from this as any other children would.

- Empathy for students with disabilities means that when other people hurt them, you will notice that it matters.

- Once you see it, you can’t unsee it.
Denial can protect you, but it also limits your effectiveness

• One way to protect yourself from secondary traumatization is to avoid noticing the trauma many students with disabilities experience.

• This works — and most people use this method to some extent — but the cost is high.

• If you can’t face the realities of your students’ lives, it drastically limits your capacity to empathize with them.

• It also drastically limits your ability to understand them well enough to anticipate their perspectives and teach them effectively.
Denial is not the only option

- It ultimately works better to face reality.
- It is possible to know about all of these things without breaking.
- The disability rights activist community has coping skills that the inclusive education community needs.
- Disabled people learn to cope with how the world treats us without falling apart — and educators can do it too.
- It’s easier said than done, but it’s possible, and it’s worth it.
Learning to stay oriented

• One reason inclusion work is so hard is that different stakeholders who tell you conflicting things use the same tone of absolute moral certainty.

• Inclusive educators need to be able to hold on to their own sense of right and wrong in the face of people who are very upset.

• It’s much easier to know what is right and what is wrong when you know what is true.

• Getting past the need for denial makes it much easier to stay oriented.
Challenges to staying oriented

- Believing countercultural things can be very disorienting.
- Especially when people whose judgement you rely on in other areas don’t share your values.
- Some of your relationships with colleagues will shift in confusing ways.
- Inclusive educators need ways to stay grounded in the face of opposition.
Understand and accept the price of taking sides in a controversial justice issue

• As inclusive educators, we are taking the side of people with disabilities in the fight against ableism.

• Fighting prejudice means exposing yourself to prejudice.

• The more you oppose ableism, the more ableism will be directed at you (even if you don’t have a disability yourself.)

• Not everyone will want you to succeed in this work.
Disorienting empathy

• Some people will feel sincerely hurt by your commitment to inclusion.

• Some people will sincerely believe that you are wronging them by teaching inclusively.

• The sincerity of their feelings does not mean that they are factually correct or that you’ve done something wrong.

• Their pain is real — and you can’t let it stop you from doing what is right.

• Remember what is at stake for your students.
Committing to inclusion usually means getting exposed to more anger

- From students and families who now feel safe enough to express anger.

- From students and families who expect you to keep promises you’ve made about including them.

- From people who don’t want you to be inclusive, or don’t want you to include certain people.

- From people who want to attack someone for other reasons and think that you have become controversial enough to be a safe target.
When someone is mad at you

- When someone is angry in a distressing way, it can be disorienting.

- It can be tempting to either assume that their anger means they’re wrong, or that their anger means you’re wrong.

- But someone being mad just tells you that they are mad.

- Ask yourself: What are they mad about? Why are they mad about that? What do I think? Why?

- When you are confused, try not to make too many decisions in the moment.

- (But do follow up once you’ve had time to process.)
Take responsibility that is yours — and no more

• Don’t blame yourself for things that aren’t your fault.

• Don’t make excuses about things you *are* responsible for.

• Do keep looking for ways in which you have the power to act.

• Understanding what is your responsibility and what isn’t makes it a lot easier to avoid getting disoriented.
Don’t invest emotional energy in bad-faith conversations

• When people are acting in bad faith, don’t pour yourself into convincing them of things.

• Focus your attentions on people who are interested in listening.

• Vulnerability to bad faith actors is unsustainable.

• When someone is acting in bad faith, you don’t have a persuasion problem, you have a power problem.
Upsetting people isn’t the end of the world.

- It's impossible to talk about disability without ever upsetting anyone.
- Sometimes you will make mistakes that are hurtful to students with disabilities.
- Sometimes you will upset people who resent accessibility and/or disabled students.
- All of this is better than silence.
- Difficult conversations are part of the work of inclusion.
When the problems in your school hurt to think about

- Remember that you are noticing the problems because your school is getting better.
- Remember that you are not causing the problems by noticing them.
- Learn to think about the problems without counterproductive shame.
E.g.: Resist the temptation to forget that kids still exist when they are excluded.

- Inclusion can feel like a step backwards because it makes the ways we are failing disabled kids more visible.

- Teaching kids with and without disabilities together makes us confront the reality of how little we know about teaching many kids with disabilities.

- Social rejection of kids with disabilities also become very visible.

- Inclusion doesn’t cause those problems; inclusion just makes the problems more visible to mainstream educators.
Don’t go into emergency mode every time you notice injustice

- Caring about something as big as inclusion means that you will encounter a lot more injustice than you have the power to fix.

- When so many things are wrong, you can’t constantly drop everything and throw yourself into fixing everything you know needs to be fixed.

- Treating every important problem as an emergency will not give you the ability to fix every important problem.

- (It will just burn you out.)
Don’t rely on panic or physical anger to understand that something is wrong

- When you’re learning to notice that something isn’t ok, outrage can be helpful at first.

- Getting angry and physically upset can help to remind you that something is wrong in the face of others who believe that it is ok.

- Long term, that kind of outrage response is too draining to be sustainable.

- There are a lot of good reasons to scream, but screaming is exhausting.

- It’s important to learn to think about the problem without having that reaction.
Be matter-of-fact

• Talking about disability, ableism, and accessibility problems doesn’t have to be a big deal!

• Being able to talk about all of this in a matter-of-fact way makes a lot of things easier.

• (Even when something is really wrong.)
Remaining aware without being distraught or ashamed

- Noticing an upsetting problem can make you feel like if you’re not fixing it, you’re a terrible person.

- When you don’t actually have the power to fix the problem, this reaction is unhelpful.

- That reaction can condition you to associate noticing the problem with shame — which can lead you to avoid thinking about it.

- Remember that you are not causing the problem by noticing the problem.
Carrying problems with patience

- Sometimes years pass between starting to care about a problem and being in a position to do anything about it.

- This isn’t a failure. That’s just how it is sometimes.

- When you’re carrying awareness of a problem you can’t solve, resist the temptation to slide back into protective denial.

- Having the courage and patience to remain aware of the problem is what will make it possible for you to notice opportunities to solve it.
Make sure that you are listening

• Your students with disabilities need you to listen to them.

• When a student is talking to you about a practical problem they need you to address, don’t change the subject to their feelings.

• When a student is telling you about something they care about, don’t talk over them with half-baked advice.

• Don’t treat the perspectives of your students with disabilities as a problem to be solved. They have a right to be part of the conversation.
Don’t ask your students with disabilities to take care of your feelings about disability

- If you freak out when a student mentions something about their life or comes to you about an accessibility problem, that means they now have two problems.

- Students need to be able to talk about their lives in a matter-of-fact way without dealing with distressed adults.

- Students who need their teachers to fix an access problem don’t need the responsibility of walking their teacher through an identity crisis on top of that.
Remember that kids (and adults) with disabilities aren’t the problem

- It’s really hard to be a kid whose life others feel traumatized by.

- If people are upset by acknowledging your reality, telling them about it can feel like hurting them.

- When it hurts to think about the ableism your students face, make sure that you remember that it’s the ableism that is hurting you.

- Do not attribute the pain you’re feeling to your student when they’re not the one who is hurting you.
Don’t let fear of saying the wrong thing become silence.

- Disability is a taboo topic.
- *Anything* you say is going to violate the taboo to some extent.
- It might feel really embarrassing at first.
- It gets easier.
- As a teacher, this is probably not the first taboo topic you’ve had to learn to discuss.
Acclimate yourself to thinking about disability and disabled experience

- Read books (or other media) written by adults with disabilities, and process your feelings about what you learn away from your students.

- It’s ok — and normal — to have complicated emotional reactions to some of what you learn doing this.

- Working through that is adult work — make sure you’re not asking your students with disabilities to carry the load for you.
It helps to remember that our lives do not consist solely of pain and trauma.

- A lot of awful things happen to disabled people. That is not the only thing that matters.

- Good experiences and bad experiences don’t cancel each other out.

- Disabled people have lives worth living.

- Our disability experiences themselves bring something to the table.
If you can bear acknowledging our reality, then you get to know us — and we are worth knowing.
“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.”

“If I could change three things about how the world sees autism, they would be these. That the world would see that we feel joy—sometimes a joy so intense and private and all-encompassing that it eclipses anything the world might feel. That the world would stop punishing us for our joy, stop grabbing flapping hands and eliminating interests that are not “age-appropriate”, stop shaming and gas-lighting us into believing that we are never, and can never be, happy. And that our joy would be valued in and of itself, seen as a necessary and beautiful part of our disability, pursued, and shared.”

Julia Bascom, “The Obsessive Joy of Autism”
“Disability invites us to rethink the nature of divine power, to jettison the classical image of God as the one who can upend mountains on a whim.

... 

[W]hen God wants something done, brute force simply will not do the job. God cannot pick up a single stone without a human hand to lift it. When God desires direct action in the world of matter, She must inspire and cajole, adapt and orchestrate, trust and yearn. God too, I suspect, finds it occasionally frustrating.

Imagining God in and through my wheels puts a different spin on a critical religious issue. If God wheels through the world, then I suspect She often has an access problem. In this world built for striders, armored against flow and spin, how can we let God in?”

Rabbi Julia Watts Belser, “God on Wheels: Disability and Jewish Feminist Theology”, Tikkun Magazine
Solidarity is stronger than denial

• Empathy for people with disabilities is unbearable when you’re feeling it by yourself.

• Don’t be alone. If no one around you shares your perceptions, find someone who does.

• Find ways to act on what you know and show solidarity.

ADAPT activists on the way to an anti-torture protest
Don’t expect yourself to be able to fix things with a Care Bear Stare

- In the Care Bears movies, the heroes could solve any important problem by caring and assertively telling others that they needed to care.

- Every time they couldn’t solve a problem, it was because they were failing to care enough.

- In real life, caring isn’t enough. You also have to have power.

- Don’t beat yourself up wondering if you are failing to care enough. Look for ways to be powerful.
Don’t expect to erase all of this by being a good teacher.

- The way our culture treats children and adults with disabilities will affect your students’ experience in your classroom.

- It will also affect their relationship with you.

- No matter how good you are, that context is going to matter. Don’t take it personally.

- Strive to teach as well as possible given the context you’re operating in.
Finding power and learning to be powerful

- Most people have more power than they think they have.

- When you accept that caring doesn’t create power by itself, it can enable you to find the things that do.

- You won’t have the power to fix everything you want to fix, but you will have the power to fix something.

- The more you keep looking for opportunities to make change, the more opportunities you can find.
Being brave

- Inclusive education is a justice movement, and a culture change movement.

- All change is hard. All change involves loss. All change involves risk.

- There is a price to be paid for doing this work, but it is worth it.

- Being brave makes you more powerful.

- Integrity is one of life’s greatest pleasures.
Sometimes it helps to be Jewish

- The legacy of centuries of exile and antisemitism has a lot in common with the legacy of exclusion of people with disabilities.

- We know a lot about responding to collective trauma constructively.

- We know a lot about facing intractable problems without falling into despair.

- Leaning on our spiritual tradition can make this work a lot more bearable.

- Inclusion is hard, but coping with centuries of antisemitism is harder.
It is not upon you to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.

*Pirke Avot*
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.