Ingathering Disabled Exiles in Israel Education

Ruti Regan, Rabbinic Disability Scholar in Residence, Matan
www.matankids.org @mataninc
Looking for the questions

• Looking for the right questions is a key part of any type of inclusive education.

• In Israel education, what questions do we need to be asking about disability, accessibility, and inclusion?
Three kinds of access

• Access to **participation**

• Access to **educational content**

• Access to **group membership**
Participation: Being There and Doing things

• Being disabled, present, and participating.

• Are learners with disabilities present in Israel education?

• Are the learners with disabilities taking an active role in the Israel education activities?

• Do those things involve interaction with other learners (with and without disabilities)?
Content: Learning things

• What are you teaching your students about Israel?

• Are learners with disabilities understanding what you are teaching?

• Are learners with disabilities asking questions, expressing opinions, and contributing ideas to the conversation?

• Are others responding to their contributions in a substantive way?

• How do you know?
Group membership: Belonging

- Full inclusion means being part of the group.

- What shared experiences define group membership?

- Are learners with disabilities sharing the experience that define group membership in Israel education?

- What shared stories define group membership? How are learners with disabilities part of the Israel education storytelling?

- How do you know?
Israel and Group Membership

• For most of our communities, Israel is one core component of Jewish identity.

• Stories about Israel and Zionism are usually one defining part of Jewishness.

• Being part of the Israel story is usually an important part of community in the diaspora.

• Are we including everyone in the story? Who is left out?
What stories are we telling about Israel?

Who is part of the story? Who isn’t?

What happens when Jews don’t see anyone like themselves in Israel stories?

What happens when Jews only see people like themselves in Israel stories?
Stories about making aliyah

• In many communities, a defining story is “All Jews can move to Israel if they want to.”

• Sometimes the story is even “Every Jew really *ought* to move to Israel.”

• Are all of our learners seeing themselves as part of “everyone”?

• Do learners with disabilities see themselves as people who could make aliyah if they chose to?

• If a student with a disability wanted information about making aliyah, where would you get it?
Past, present, and future

• When you tell stories about early supporters and opponents of Zionism, are they ever about people with disabilities?

• What about stories about pioneers who made aliyah and built Israel?

• Stories about what Israel is like now?

• When you tell stories about the possible futures of Israel, do any of the characters have disabilities?
“Passport to Israel”

- Passport to Israel activities are in part to help students see themselves as people who could visit Israel.

- Inclusion is partly about designing activities your students can do, and partly about selecting activities that tell stories your students can be part of.

- What real world things are the activities you’ve selected representing?

- Could every student enjoy doing some of those things for real? How?

- How is each student part of the story about visiting Israel?
The Story of Israel Trips

- Israel trips are part of the story of many Jewish community, eg:
  
- “All of our eighth graders go on an Israel trip”.

- “All congregants are encouraged to come on the Israel mission”.

- “This pluralistic trip to Israel is for everyone.”
Are Jews with disabilities part of the Israel trip story?

- Eg: Are eighth graders with disabilities welcome on the Israel trip? Will they be fully included in all three senses?

- “I am a student in this school and that means I will go on the Israel trip in eighth grade” is part of the shared story, even for the youngest students.

- Students who can’t count on being welcome on the trip are excluded from this shared story from the moment they enter the school.

- This exclusion will affect many experiences students have, including what it means to them when Israel is mentioned.
Planning for access

• Beware of “We can’t go there because of David’s needs”, that’s both inaccurate and unfair to David. Don’t talk that way and don’t allow your students to talk that way.

• There are more amazing things to do in Israel than it is possible to do on one trip, and many of them are accessible.

• You’re not missing out on Israel. You’re planning awesome accessible things rather than awesome inaccessible things.

• It may make sense to divide the group sometimes. If so, make sure both groups have something cool to do.

• Make access part of the planning, every time.

• Work with a tour guide who listens to you and takes these concerns seriously.
Making inclusion explicit

• If you don’t talk about accessibility, people will assume that your trip is inaccessible.

• What do materials describing/promoting the Israel trip say about accessibility?

• How is accessibility part of your planning process?

• What do the registration forms say about accessibility?

• How are you communicating with tour guides about access?

• How are you discussing accessibility planning with parents? With seventh and eighth graders? With younger students?
When you don’t find a solution for the trip itself

- If a student is not able to go on the trip, how can you make sure they are still part of the story?

- What’s being done to include them in pre-trip activities and post-trip activities? How are they part of the group in those moments?

- How can you make sure that they’re being treated as an equal rather than an object?

- What’s being done to support them while their classmates are in Israel?

- Are they allowed to talk about their thoughts and feelings? Is anyone listening to them and validating them? Who?
Are our students meeting Israeli adults with disabilities?

• Have your students ever had a conversation with an Israeli with a disability? Have you?

• Do programs in your area with shlichim ever have shlichim with disabilities?

• Are any teachers or members of your community Israeli adults with disabilities?

• What happens if Jewish children never meet adult Israelis with disabilities?
Are our students meeting Israeli peers with disabilities?

- If your program is for children, are any Israeli children with disabilities included?

- If your school has a pen pal program, do any of the participants who live in Israel have disabilities?

- If your program takes a trip to Israel, do your students meet peers with disabilities?

- What happens when Jewish children don’t meet Israeli children with disabilities?
Who sees themselves in the story?

- Have these children ever seen pictures of Israeli kids and adults who look like them?
- Have they ever heard a story starring an Israeli who uses adaptive equipment?
- Did the Israeli in the story do something besides be disabled?
- Was it about something other than Israel’s accomplishments in medical technology?
- When the story about Israel is told, are they part of it?
How do students see each other in the stories?

- When these kids talk about “kids in Israel”, who are the characters in that story?

- Are any of the characters in the shared “Kids in Israel” story wheelchair users? Do any characters use other adaptive technology?

- Do any characters have an intellectual disability? A learning disability? ADHD? A chronic illness? An Ashkenazi genetic condition?

- Are any characters in that story autistic? Blind? Deaf? Otherwise disabled?
What are they imagining?

• When these kids think about “Kids who live in Israel”, what kind of community do they imagine?

• Does the world they’re imagining include kids with disabilities like they and their peers have?

• Does it include the adults they and their peers will grow into?
Who is part of our story?

• What does “Israel is the Jewish State” mean to these kids?

• When they hear “Israel is the Jewish State”, are they able to see themselves as fully Jewish?

• When they hear “Israel is the Jewish State”, are they able to see all of their classmates as fully Jewish?

• Are they all able to see one another as equally Jewish?
Who is part of the conversation?

- During class discussions about Israel, is she called on and taken seriously?

- When she asks questions related to disability, does she get an answer?

- When being a girl and/or having a disability is relevant to what she feels or thinks about the topic at hand, is she allowed to say so?

- Are the teacher and others students expected to engage with the points she makes? Including when she mentions disability or gender?
Eg: What response would this question get?

All Israelis go to the army.

What would I do in the army?
What about this one?

All Israelis go to the army.

Can you go to the army if you can’t read?
What if another student in the class asked?

All Israelis go to the army.

Do people with CP go to the army?
Existing in Hebrew

- In many Diaspora communities, Hebrew is part of Jewishness, regardless of Hebrew proficiency.

- Jews who see Hebrew as part of Jewishness need connection to Hebrew-speaking culture that affirms Jews like them.

- Awareness that conversations are happening about-by-and-for Jews like you in Hebrew affirms Jewishness; believing that they aren’t happening is very isolating.

- Do your students believe that people like them are part of the conversation in Hebrew? Do they believe that all of their classmates are part of the conversation in Hebrew?

- How do you know?
In Hebrew-speaking programs

• Students who are expected to communicate in Hebrew need to learn disability-related vocabulary

• They also need at least occasional direct exposure to disability related stories or materials in Hebrew.

• When speaking Hebrew is part of someone’s Jewish identity, discussing disability in Hebrew affirms that it is a legitimate Jewish topic

• This is particularly important for students with disabilities, because they need to be able to describe themselves in Hebrew and be understood by their peers.
Storytelling

• What kinds of Israel stories are important in your community?

• Do you know how Israelis with disabilities are part of these stories?

• (If applicable: Do you know how Palestinians with disabilities are part of these stories?)

• Do you know how Diaspora Jews with disabilities are part of those stories?

• Do you talk about what you know? When and how?

• What stories do you need to learn?
Looking for the stories

• Disabled people are everywhere, and disability is part of many, many stories.

• Stories are everywhere.

• You can find out a lot by getting into the habit of listening for disability-related information and stories.

• (A caveat - people are not stories, and are not education objects. Respect boundaries.)

• You can find out a lot from disability organizations — and you can also learn a lot just by paying attention.
For instance

• When you find out about an interesting Israeli author/actor/scientist/activist/etc, notice whether their bio mentions disability.

• Look for references to disability in Israeli-and-Israel-related TV/videos/media

• Have disability in mind when you browse Israeli bookstores, Jewish bookstores, and related websites.

• Museums and tourist sites often tell stories about disability. (It’s also worth paying attention to accessibility features, especially if you plan trips.)

• And so on. There is a lot of information available in all kinds of places.
Questions you might ask in conversations with Israeli organizations

• “Does your civil rights division work on disability rights?”

• “Are there any kids with disabilities in this school?”

• “Do you hire disabled employees?”

• “Are any people with disabilities in leadership roles?”

• “Is your program/building accessible?”/“What do you do to make your program/building accessible to people with disabilities?”

• “Do you have a nondiscrimination policy?”
Found in a science museum store in Haifa
Keshev: The Israeli Organization for ADHD

- These books (and a few other things) were put in the museum store by this organization.

- I went to the museum just because I like science museums, and I noticed the disability stories because I’m in the habit of looking for them.

- The title of the big book is “אני בסדר”, which means “I am ok” and is a pun on “I am organized”.

- The smaller books are a book of tips for parents, and a book of tips for teachers from (or at least attributed to) kids with ADHD.

keshev.org
Some stories I found:

• There is a Hebrew-speaking organization that promotes a positive view of kids and adults with ADHD.

• Some of their materials address people with ADHD directly (As opposed to just parents/professionals/teachers).

• They have a lot of tips. Some of them are about school, and some of them are about feeling good about yourself as a person with ADHD.

• Their website has sections for “children and teenagers”, “adults”, and “students and soldiers”.

• (In the US, the military doesn’t allow people with ADHD to serve. I had never heard of Israeli soldiers with ADHD before.)
Keshev affirmation magnets

- Jews are saying these things in Hebrew to encourage adults to value kids with ADHD
- “Believe - because a child doesn’t always believe in themself”
- “Celebrate - even the small successes”
- “Investigate - Perhaps you will learn something new”.

- If you are watching this webinar, you probably have at least one student who would benefit from knowing this.
Bizchut: The Israel Human Rights Center for People With Disabilities

• Bizchut is an advocacy organization protecting the legal, human, and civil rights of Israelis with disabilities. bizchut.org.il

• One of their slogans is “Bizchut v’lo b’chesed”, “By rights and not by charity”.

• Jews struggling for their rights as people with disabilities need to know that disabled Israelis are fighting for their rights in Hebrew.

• Bizchut stories are about rights, rights violations, and rights successfully defended.
Some Bizchut Disability Rights Stories

• Bizchut successfully fought for voting rights of Israelis with disabilities, in part by winning a court case in 1999.

• Bizchut efforts made it possible for people with significant disabilities to testify in court against people who hurt them. They developed communication and investigation methods, and fought for an innovative law guaranteeing the right to use them.

• Bizchut is working towards the full inclusion of Israeli children with disabilities in regular schools.

• Bizchut supports the rights of adults with disabilities to control their own lives. They work to limit the use of restrictive guardianship, and promote supported decision making that preserves legal rights.
Noticing apparent absence

• When you can’t find any reference to disability or disabled people, that’s a story too. Thinking about the questions apparent absence raises can help you to learn other stories:

• “Are there any students with disabilities in this school?” (and “Where do kids with disabilities go to school?” and “Do universities accept students with disabilities?”)

• “I’ve never seen any people with disabilities in this town. Why not? Where are they? Are they institutionalized somewhere?”

• “I’ve never seen a person with a visible disability working in a story in this city. Why not? Where are they? Does every employer discriminate?”
A Related Caution: Who is the story about?

- Jews with disabilities need stories that are about people like them, in which their voices are taken seriously.

- Are disabled Jews in the story speaking for themselves? If not, the story is probably really about someone else.

- What do the disabled Jews in the story think about it? Did anyone ask them?

- If only parents or therapists etc are quoted, then the story is probably about the parents and therapists.

- If nondisabled Jews are described as having opinions, and disabled Jews are only described as having needs and feelings, the story is probably about the nondisabled Jews.

- Did the Jews with disabilities in the story write the story? If so, the story is probably about them.
Who are iconic disability in Israel stories about?

• Many feel-good pro-Israel stories focus on disability-related technology.

• Sometimes the story is along the lines of “Israeli tech fixes disability!!!” or “They were trapped in disability, but Israeli technology relieved their suffering!”

• What do Israelis with disabilities think about the technology? Aside from the PR story, is anyone actually using it? How useful do they find it?

• What do Israelis who use the invention actually think and feel about it? How do they actually feel about their disabilities, and their lives before and after they got the technology?

• Were any people with disabilities involved in designing the technology? Were their opinions taken seriously?

• Are Israelis still respected when disability remains important?

• Who is the story about?
Another example: Who are stories about the IDF Autistic Unit 9900 about?

- Are any of the stories written by autistic soldiers? Why does this matter to your autistic students and their classmates?

- When autistic soldiers are quoted, are they allowed to say anything beyond “I like it” or “I feel included?” Are they allowed to talk about discrimination, their accomplishments, their ambitions, or anything nuanced?

- When a soldier’s struggles in school and life are described, who is quoted? Is it their opinion, or their parents’ opinion?

- Real autistic people differ from one another. Do the stories about autistic soldiers reflect this, or are autistic soldiers described as more-or-less interchangeable? Do different soldiers express different feelings, perspectives on autistic strengths and weaknesses, opinions about the program, experiences, and understandings of autism?

- What do autistic people who aren’t part of the program think about it? What do autistic people who aren’t good at reading maps do in the army? What about autistic women?

- When people talk about autistic strengths and weaknesses, do any of them say “we”, or do they all say “they”?
The Community of People on the Autistic Spectrum in Israel

• One place to find autistic Israel stories from an autistic perspective is אס״י, www.acisrael.org.

• ACI is run by-and-for autistic people in Israel.

• Some of their stories are about rights; some are about community.

• One of their stories is that autism should be celebrated as part of human diversity.

• In 2016, ACI celebrated Autistic Pride Day.
To Recap: Who is the story about?

- Is the story about Israelis with disabilities, or are they objects in someone else’s story?
- Do pro-Israel stories related to disability take the perspectives of disabled Israelis seriously?
- What do Israelis with disabilities think? How do you know?
- Do your students and their peers see themselves in any stories? How do you know?
Ingathering disabled exiles in Israel education

• In most of our communities, relationship to Israel is an important part of Jewish identity.

• Relationship to Israel is developed through shared experiences and shared storytelling.

• Students with disabilities need to see themselves in shared Israel stories.

• Students need to see all of their peers, with and without disabilities, as having an equal part in the Israel story.

• When our shared story of Israel is told without reference to disabled Jews, it separates Jews with disabilities from their communities.
Strengthening Our Communities

• Some of the work of improving storytelling is difficult.

• It may involve facing difficult truths, and having awkward conversations.

• It will almost certainly involve making embarrassing mistakes.

• Don’t panic, and don’t give up. It's hard because it’s hard. The important thing is to treat people with respect, keep trying, and keep learning.

• It is not upon us to complete the work, but neither are we free to desist from it.
About the #SymbolStix images

- © 2016 SymbolStix, LLC. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

- [https://www.n2y.com/products/symbolstix/](https://www.n2y.com/products/symbolstix/)

- Highly recommended resource. $79/year subscription gets you access to the whole symbol library with 30,000 symbols

- Lots of Jewish content
Matan Pledge

tinyurl.com/matanpledge

• 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.