The Matan Disability Acceptance and Inclusion Pledge

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We made the Matan Pledge because inclusion is hard
Teaching is hard

- Teaching in general is hard.
- For centuries, teachers have worked to figure out how to teach well.
- Teachers receive tools from previous generations, and add their own.
- It would be much harder to start from scratch.
Inclusive teaching is harder

- People with disabilities have been excluded from school.

- People with disabilities have been institutionalized and segregated.

- Because people with disabilities were excluded and neglected, teachers did not learn how to teach them.

- You are at the beginning. You are figuring out the things that will make it much easier for future generations.
Looking for the questions

• You are on the ground figuring out how to make inclusion work.

• Part of that is figuring out what questions to ask.

• The Matan Pledge is a tool to help you find the questions.
The three elements

- Disability
- Ability
- Humanity
Humanity

- Everyone is a real person
- Everyone is unique
- Everyone has thoughts and feelings
- Everyone learns and grows
• Everyone has abilities.

• Everyone can develop their abilities.

• Everyone can do things that matter.
Understand that disability is important

- Having a disability means that something about your brain or body works differently.
- Bodies are important.
- Brains are important.
- Life experiences are also important.
- Questions about inclusion are often questions about disability.
Don’t try to look past disability

• If you try to look past disability, all you see is your own reflection.

• Your students need you to see them as they are.

• Part of that involves acknowledging disability.

• And asking questions about how disability matters in this teaching situation.
Primary and secondary differences

- **Primary** differences are differences in how someone’s brain/body works.

- **Secondary** differences come from differences in experiences.
Students with disabilities are different from other students in some big ways

- **Primary** physical and/or cognitive differences that are the direct result of disability
- **Secondary** differences that come from differences in experiences
- **Secondary** differences that come from social stigma or being misunderstood
Some examples of primary differences related to movement

• Moving more slowly than other people the same age

• Being unable to walk

• Being unable to hold small objects, or having more difficulty

• Finding climbing more difficult

• Uncontrolled body movements
Secondary differences related to movement and motor skills

- Games that promote social and cognitive development assume that children have similar movement abilities.
- Children who are less mobile, or have fine motor impairments, or other movement differences may not be able to participate.
- Moving differently is a primary difference; being left out is a secondary difference.
Secondary differences related to stigma and discrimination

• Children spending most (if not all) of their time in environments that weren’t designed with them in mind.

• Children referred to as “failing” repeatedly before they are old enough for kindergarten. (You can’t flunk being a toddler!)

• Children disappointing adults in their lives in ways that they have absolutely no control over.

• Children experiencing very difficult things without emotional validation (often because adults “don’t want them to feel different”)

Secondary differences related to stigma and discrimination

• Being left out of adult education because “inclusion” efforts focus on “children with special needs”.

• Being seen as solely a recipient of services, and not a potential leader.

• Not being able to get in to the building community events are held in.

• Employment discrimination.
Secondary differences related to therapy

- Children with disabilities often experience physically or emotionally invasive therapy.

- It often involves things that would be considered unacceptable ways to treat typically-developing children.

- Sometimes ordinary activities of childhood are turned into therapy.

- That has an impact on how children see themselves, the world, and unfamiliar adults.

- This doesn’t always go away in adulthood.
Therapy-related secondary difference examples

• Students may expect everything in their lives to be similar to therapy.

• People who have experienced painful or physically invasive therapy may expect that unfamiliar adults will hurt them.

• Or may be less likely to report pain when they feel sick.

• Learners who experience intense behavior therapy may expect all activities to be teacher-directed or staff-directed.

• Or may not understand the difference between learner-directed exploration and “errorless learning”.

• Children and adults who are subjected to things other people their age aren’t may expect to be treated unfairly.
Primary and secondary differences can be positive.

• One secondary difference is participation in disability culture, which often regards some primary differences positively.

• For example, the Deaf community communicates in ASL, values being Deaf, and refers to “deaf gain” rather than “hearing loss”.

• The Autistic community has a positive view of flapping, other forms of stimming, intensely focused special interests, echolalia and other autistic traits.
And speaking of disability culture....
“No amount of smiling at a flight of stairs has ever made it turn into a ramp. Never.”
Stella Young
“Not Your Inspiration”

“Smiling at a television screen isn't going to make closed captions appear for people who are deaf.”
“No amount of standing in the middle of a bookshop and radiating a positive attitude is going to turn all those books into braille. It's just not going to happen.”
"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."

Asking the questions

• “I will not look past their disabilities; I will seek to understand.”

• How does disability matter here?

• How does disability affect my students’ physical or cognitive experience?

• How does it affect their perspective?

• Where are the barriers? How can I build bridges?
Recognizing Ability
Rabbi Yosef [who was blind] said: At first, I said that if someone said that the halakha agrees with Rabbi Yehuda who says that a blind person is not obligated to keep the commandments, I would throw a party for the rabbis! Because I am not obligated and yet I do it anyway!.

Now that I have heard the opinion of Rabbi Haninah that one who is obligated and performs is greater than one who is not obligated and performs — on the contrary, if someone tells me that the halakha is not like Rabbi Yehuda I will throw a party for the rabbis!
Beyond “Unique Gifts”
Beyond “Unique Gifts”

• We have more to offer than our God-given uniqueness.

• We can also offer things that came from us.

• We have thoughts, opinions, knowledge, and accomplishments.

• (And rights!)
Moses was not an inclusion student
Recognizing uniqueness isn’t enough

- Everyone is unique
- Not everybody has a disability
- The differences between disabled and nondisabled people matter.
- So do the things that people with disabilities have in common.
Similar to developmentally appropriate practice…

- All people are unique, and most people the same age have certain things in common.

- Teaching preschool is different from teaching middle school

- When you teach a mixed-age group, age similarities and age differences are both important.
Developmentally appropriate practice isn’t enough

- Developmentally aware teachers develop a sense of what the range of difference is among people the same age.
- People with disabilities are more different than that.
- People with disabilities also have things in common with each other.
Disability-informed teaching

• Teaching in a way that takes disability into account

• Understanding disability well enough to account for it

• Universal design

• Differentiated instruction
Universal design

• Universal design means designing things so that they work for everyone.

• For example, building a flat entrance or a ramp instead of stairs.

• Or designing an activity that does not depend on speech.
Differentiated instruction

• Students learn the same material

• In multiple different ways.

• Adapted for their learning needs.

• (Eg: reading level, motor skills, vocabulary, communication, etc)
Inclusion is a pedagogical content knowledge problem

- Knowing the subject material
- Understanding how the subject likely looks to your students
- (Including preconceptions and misconceptions).
- Teaching strategies for students’ learning needs
Beyond trying

• Standing at a cliff and flapping my arms real hard won’t turn them into wings.
• Believing in myself won’t create the ability to fly.
• Trying hard won’t end well.
“Can’t” is important

• Part of supporting ability is acknowledging the things that we can’t do.

• Banning “can’t” doesn’t create abilities. It creates silence.

• My limitations exist whether or not I’m allowed to acknowledge them.

• My body exists whether or not I’m allowed to talk about it.
Acceptance is the opposite of giving up

• Accepting disability makes it possible to find adaptive strategies.

• If you want your students to fly, don’t pretend that they are birds.

• Help them to find or create airplanes.
Doing things differently

• Disability doesn’t mean we can’t do anything!

• It means that we can’t do *everything*.

• And that we often need do things differently.

• We are matter-of-fact about adaptation for age-related reasons…

• …we could be matter-of-fact about disability-related adaptation too.
It’s ok to be different
It’s ok to have things in common with other people with disabilities.
No cause for alarm...

- Training wheels are an adaptive strategy
- So is a ramp for bowling
- Or for mobility
- So are big crayons for little hands
- What else might need an adaptive strategy?
The right to do hard things

- People who want to recognize disability sometimes have the misconception that everything we do needs to be “easy”, “successful”, or “errorless”

- But we have the right to do hard things.

- And to have and express feelings without being pressured to give up.
Looking for questions

• What support can enable my students to do more things?

• How am I making room for both “can” and “can’t”?

• Am I expecting students to be birds, or helping them to find airplanes?

• Are learners with disabilities leading? Are they creating? Are they doing hard things?
Recognizing Humanity
8) These are the obligations of a father to a son:
- To circumcise him.
- To redeem him.
- To teach him Torah.
- To teach him a trade.
- To marry him to a wife.

And there are those who also say: to swim.

Rabbi Yehuda says: Anyone who does not teach his son a trade, it is though he has taught him robbery.
We grow up
What does the *hacham* say?

"What are these testimonies, statutes and judgments that YVH our God commanded you?" (Deuteronomy 6:20)" And accordingly you will teach him all of the laws of Passover

Even up to the point of, "We do not eat an afikoman after [we are finished eating] the Pesach. (Mishnah Pesachim 10:8)"

"מה אמרerea הוראה? מה העדות והמשפטים והחקים אשר ציווה לנו אלהינו אתכם. לא אכלה אתם אחר מפטיון פסח: אם מפסירין אימו הפסח לאפייהו:"

![Image of four stick figures raising hands with text overlays in Hebrew and English]
We are not always kind to the hacham.

- Enthusiasm isn’t always welcome.
- Especially when it’s disruptively detailed attention.
- Or not exactly the topic we’d intended to cover.
- The hacham’s questions are often dismissed as showing off, or as a “perseveration”.
- Being praised as “smart” or “a little professor” doesn’t mean that people listen to you.
What does the *rasha* say? "What is this business to you?!" (Exodus 12:26) "'To you' and not 'to him.' And since he excluded himself from the collective, he denied a principle [of the Jewish faith]. And accordingly, you will blunt his teeth and say to him, "'For the sake of this, did YHVH do [this] for *me* in *my* going out of Egypt' (Exodus 13:8)." 'For me' and not 'for him.' If he had been there, he would not have been saved.
We are not innocence objects

- One of the most dehumanizing things people say about disability is “Oh, people with Down’s Syndrome are so sweet and sunny!”

- Or “Autistic people are so open and honest!”

- We’re all people.

- We do things for reasons.

- Seeing us as having the capacity for wickedness and rebellion is part of seeing us as human.
She didn’t “have a behavior”

• We don’t have behaviors.

• We do things.

• And we have our reasons.

• Sometimes they’re good reasons; sometimes they’re bad reasons.

• But they’re always ours.
What does the tam say? "'What is this?' (Exodus 13:14)"

And you will say to him, “YHVH took us out from Egypt with a mighty hand, from the house of slavery' (Exodus 13:14)."
Taking the tam seriously

• People who ask simple questions are often dismissed as lazy.

• Or as insincere, or as making a disruptive joke.

• Sometimes people won’t know/understand things that seem self-evident to you.

• Make room for simple questions.

• Presume good faith.
The one who does not know how to ask

And [regarding] the one who doesn't know to ask, you will open [the conversation] for him. As it is stated (Exodus 13:8), "And you will speak to your your son on that day saying, for the sake of this, did YHVH do [this] for me in my going out of Egypt."
There are a lot of reasons people can’t ask

• Insecurity.

• Expecting from past experience that they will be ignored.

• Lacking background information.

• Not having a method of communication others understand.

• Others aren’t willing to listen.

• Others assume they can’t learn.
Presuming competence

- Students often understand more than they can demonstrate.
- Don’t want for students to prove they understand before you teach them.
- Keep trying; keep offering openings.
- Address students directly, even if they don’t respond in a way you understand.
- Watch for possible communication.
- Find ways to support communication.
Where’s his paper?

- This looks like a nice picture of inclusion but…
- The walking students have materials for the activity.
- The student using a wheelchair does not.
- …this kind of thing happens a lot.
Learning from disability community....

- The Torah taught me that we’re all created b’tzelem Elohim, in God’s image.
- The disability rights community taught me how to mean it.
Even though many of them are atheists...

“God didn’t put me on this street to provide disability awareness training to everyone who happens by. In fact, no god put anyone anywhere for any reason, if you want to know.”

Seek out perspectives of adults like your students

- And remember that your students are different.
- Because they are different people. (And may be a different age).
- But adults like them who have written about disability have a lot to say that will help you to teach better.
Remember that we are not interchangeable.

- *Some* autistic people are eight year old boys who like trains. (And that means different things to different people).

- Some of us are *adults* who like trains.

- Some of us like stories.

- And some of us are adults who like Torah and become rabbis.

- And so on…
Poem: “Telling” by Laura Hershey

Telling
Laura Hershey
What you risk telling your story:
You will bore them.
Your voice will break, your ink
spill and stain your coat.
No one will understand, their eyes
become fences.
You will park yourself forever
on the outside, your differentness once
and for all revealed, dangerous.
The names you give to yourself
will become epithets.
Your happiness will be called
bravery, denial.
Your sadness will justify their pity.
Your fear will magnify their fears.
Everything you say will prove something about
their god, or their economic system.
Your feelings, that change day
to day, kaleidoscopic,
will freeze in place,
brand you forever,
justify anything they decide to do
with you.
Those with power can afford
to tell their story
or not.
Those without power
risk everything to tell their story
and must.
Someone, somewhere
will hear your story and decide to fight,
to live and refuse compromise.
Someone else will tell
her own story,
risking everything.
Boundaries
Erasing people with “help”

• No amount of help will make a disabled student just like everyone else.

• No amount of help will make them into an ideal student.

• Everyone needs space to figure things out, and make mistakes.

• Your students are people. Let them be people, imperfectly.
Honoring partial presence
Honoring partial presence

• “Be fully present” is a lot of vulnerability to ask of someone who can’t count on being fully welcome

• “Be fully present” is a lot to ask of someone who can’t count on being able to participate in activities as planned.

• Respect wariness and reservations. Don’t try to coerce trust.

• Honor partial presence, and respect the parts of themselves that people bring.
Don’t talk like an IEP evaluation

• We have to use deficits-based stigmatizing language to make the case for services.

• That isn’t actually an appropriate way to talk about people.

• Don’t do it when no one’s making you.
“Should”
Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5 asks, “Why was Adam created alone?”

To express the greatness of The Holy One [blessed be He]: For a human 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 person from the mold of the First Person, and yet no man is quite like their fellow. Therefore, every person must say, “For my sake the world was created.”
People are not clay
Don’t try to make us in your image

- People often try to make us into their image of what they think people should be.

- But we’re *already* people.

- God already made us in God’s image.

- We don’t need to be remade in yours.
Some questions to ask:

- Are the feelings of learners with disabilities respected? How?

- Are the boundaries of learners with disabilities respected? How?

- How are learners with disabilities being treated? Would you consider that acceptable if they weren’t disabled?

- How do students with disabilities have space to make mistakes and figure things out?

- Are you seeing a person, or a treatment plan?
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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