

# Rabbi Lauren Tuchman Webinar Series Week 3

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[www.rabbituchman.com](http://www.rabbituchman.com)

Modern voices: Lifting up the lived experiences of Jews with disabilities in the educational and ritual spheres

Please note:

In this course, we value interactive participation. To make for a more seamless and smooth experience, we ask that folks type in the chat as much as possible and Daniella will read comments throughout. If typing is not accessible, please indicate that in the chat and we will use a stacking method to allow for more voices to be heard. A stacking method is a means of creating an online order for speaking. Step up, step back. If you tend to speak often, step back a bit to allow for other voices to be heard.

## **Source 1: How Braille Put Jewish Texts at my Fingertips by Arielle Silverman, published on The Union for Reform Judaism website in 2017**

Louis Braille was born in Coupvray, France, in 1809. When he was 3 years old, he accidentally poked himself in the eye with his dad's awl and became blind. At age 12, he started playing around with an embossed alphabet that had been used by the military to exchange messages in the dark, and by the time he was 15, he had created what we call braille today.

In his short 43 years, Louis Braille brought literacy to a group of people who, until then, could only read and write using raised print letters – which posed practical challenges. The six-dot code Louis Braille created is simple enough for almost anyone to learn (simpler, I would contend, than print) yet elegant enough that it can be written in many languages.

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I was born almost completely blind, 150 years after Braille's creation. My parents didn't know much about blindness, but they quickly committed themselves to two things: ensuring that their older daughter and I would both love to read, and providing both of us with a strong foundation in Jewish traditions and values. During my preschool years, I spent four days a week at a local preschool for blind children, where I learned the English braille code, and I spent one day a week at a Jewish day school, where I learned to recite Jewish blessings by ear.

When I was about 7 years old, my parents ordered a braille *siddur* (prayer book) for me from the Jewish Braille Institute (JBI) in New York. When I went to the synagogue with them, I proudly carried my *siddur* and tried to read along – but I didn't yet know the Hebrew braille alphabet.

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At our synagogue, Hebrew wasn't taught until the fourth grade, but I begged my parents to teach me so I could participate in services. They didn't know the code themselves, so they reached out to JBI again and got me a Hebrew braille primer. As it turns out, there is much overlap between the English and Hebrew alphabets in braille, with Hebrew braille written from left to right and only a few new symbols to learn.

After I studied my Hebrew primer, I was so excited to go to the synagogue and read all the familiar prayers for myself. Most exciting of all, I could read aloud alongside my family during responsive prayer, and participate in silent meditation.

My Jewish education continued, culminating in my bat mitzvah when I was 13. JBI prepared my Torah portion in braille, and I used braille to conduct the service, read from the Torah, and present my prepared *d'var Torah*. My bat mitzvah experience was identical to that of my sighted classmates.

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Braille is the simplest way for a blind person to read independently, but not everyone promotes its use. Some argue that audio-recorded materials should be used instead, but sighted people have not collectively switched from print reading to audio. There are clear advantages of reading, in print or braille, instead of being read to. Audio recordings and text-to-speech technology have a place in my life, but there is no substitute for braille, especially in the tech-free Shabbat service. Listening to a recording would isolate me in prayer, but with braille, I can pray aloud or read along silently, while still immersed in my prayer community and their voices. Braille gives me the flexibility to interact with the liturgy in the same ways as my fellow Jews reading it visually.

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The irony is that technology, sometimes thought to “supplant braille,” actually makes braille easier to produce than ever before. Modern braille printers and digital “braille displays” can place braille at a person’s fingertips in seconds. Digital braille displays make braille more portable than ever before. Braille can be used by people with low vision, the totally blind, and those who are deaf-blind, both young and old. I have known people in their 90s who learned the braille alphabet after becoming blind in old age. Though producing braille in both Hebrew and English can pose some technical challenges, libraries like JBI have the expertise to make this happen.

Two hundred years after braille’s invention, we are blessed with the ability to convert print into a myriad of formats. All of these alternative formats have their advantages, but I cannot overstate the simplicity, flexibility and equivalent access that braille offers. As Jews we value literacy, and by offering our blind congregants access to ritual texts in braille, we give them the best opportunity to participate fully in our community.



**Source 2: Why Would the Rabbis Offer a Blessing for Our Differences?** BY RABBI REBECCA DUBOWE , 2/09/2016  
THIS WAS ALSO PUBLISHED ON THE UNION FOR REFORM JUDAISM WEB SITE.

Generally speaking, I'm not easily offended - but I did have a problem with this blessing the first time I stumbled upon it:

*Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu, melech haolam, meshaneh ha briot.*  
Blessed be the One who created us differently.

How dare the Talmudic rabbis direct others to offer a blessing because I am different?

During Jewish Disability Awareness and Inclusion Month, I consider this blessing. I now look beyond what seems like a judgment call toward others and embrace what I believe to be the rabbis' intent in including it as part of our Jewish laws and customs.

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I think the rabbis were being honest in acknowledging the discomfort that many feel upon encountering someone who is “different.” They truly saw that every human being was a creation of God, to be celebrated for what they can do, rather than as an object of focus for what they cannot do. To bless *must* be the initial response – rather than to judge – notwithstanding the challenges that poses to us, as individuals, and as members of families with disabilities and unique needs.

Professionally and personally, I have witnessed the beauty in how the “different” can bring together families, their friends and their Jewish communities. In particular, I was privileged to be part of the process as Aubree Bella became a *bat mitzvah*.

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The news that they were finally going to have a baby girl was cause for excitement for David and Marla and their sons, Nathan and Eli. Aubree's loving parents were deeply committed to raising a Jewish family. David taught in the religious school, while Marla was an instructor in the temple's preschool. Both were passionate about inspiring children to embrace the Jewish faith, and both had received national recognition and awards for their achievements in Jewish education.

Aubree's arrival, however, turned their world upside down and tested their faith.

## **Source 2: Why Would the Rabbis Offer a Blessing for**

**Our Differences?** BY RABBI REBECCA DUBOWE , 2/09/2016

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Aubree's birth was a difficult one, and it was far from certain that she would live. She had experienced severe trauma that resulted in multiple disabilities to her, including cerebral palsy and vision impairment. It was clear that should she survive, Aubree would face many difficulties.

Her devastated parents called me and asked that I visit Aubree at the hospital. Once there, I found their baby girl struggling to breathe, with tubes all over her body. But I also saw a beautiful soul, a gracious fighter determined to live.

As I held her hand, tears flowing down the faces of her weary and worried parents, I tried to find the right words. Ultimately, I offered this blessing: "May Aubree's light shine and show us the way, as she is a child of God like all others. And, one day, she will have a *bat Mitzvah*." Her parents chuckled, but I truly believed it.

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And Aubree did survive. David and Marla quietly stepped away from synagogue life due to the overwhelming nature of their daughter's needs and to grapple with the confusing feelings that came with the question of why this happened to their family – but at the appropriate time, they still entered Aubree in religious school. It was too important to this family not to do so.

Moving beyond the awkwardness and their desire to protect their child from stares and questions, Marla and David knew the synagogue community would welcome and accept their daughter. The clergy, too, were willing to work with their daughter – and looking forward to it.

As her bat mitzvah approached, Aubree watched patiently as I performed the sacred act of tying each of the four *tzitzit* (knots) of her *tallit* (prayer shawl). Every day, she talked about this *tallit*, which she knew was her very own; she was going to wear it at her *bat mitzvah*.

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On the day she was called up to the Torah, Aubree squealed with delight as the *tallit* her family and friends had designed for her was draped over her shoulders. Aubree's brothers and father chanted from the Torah while she stood proudly next to them, and the hankies and smiles throughout the synagogue signaled a triumph that had brought us all together in celebration and joy for Aubree, this special child of God.

Thinking of Aubree's *bat mitzvah*, I am reminded of the intent behind the rabbis' command to offer a blessing when seeing someone who is different: It is that we are all different and blessed, and we should accept others free of judgment. *Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu, melech haolam, meshaneh ha briot* - blessed be the One who created us differently, indeed.