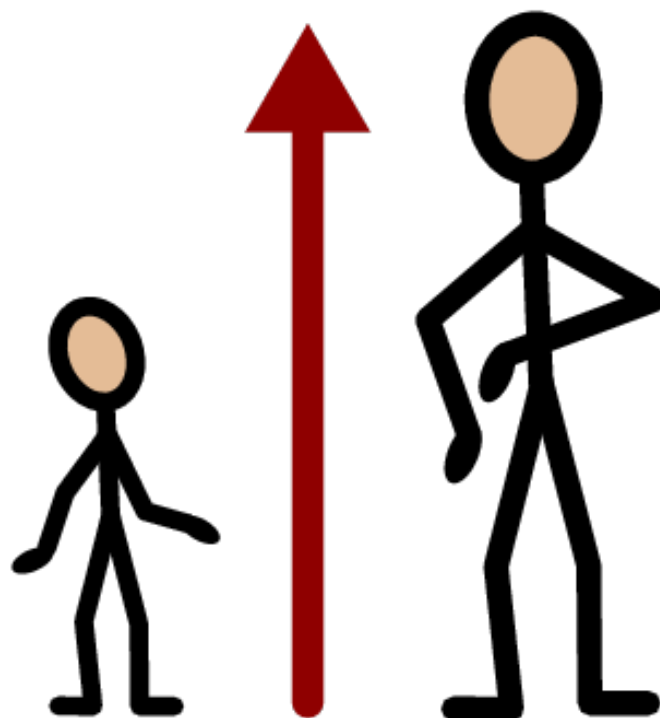


# B'nai Mitzvah Ritual for Adolescents with Disabilities

Rabbi Ruti Regan



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window for link to  
CART captions.**



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Adapting B'nai Mitzvah ritual is hard because we have strong normative expectations



*“All they have to  
do to be bar/bat  
mitzvah is wake  
up on their 13th  
birthday.”*



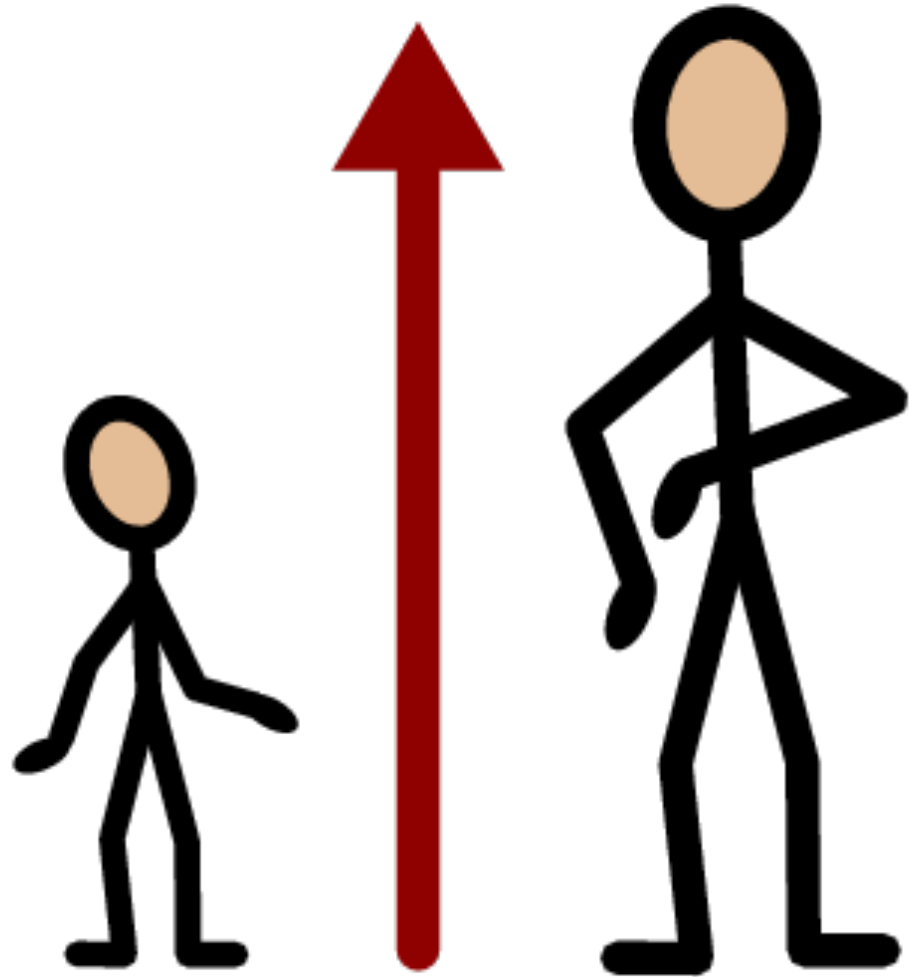


# Really?



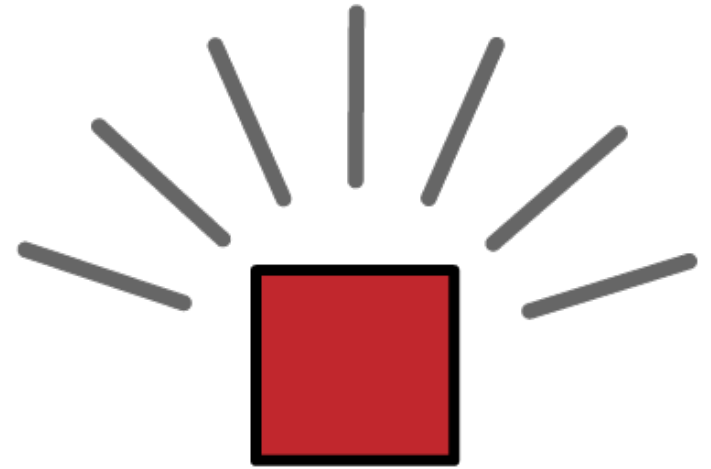
- If so, why do bat and bar mitzvah ceremonies make sense for anyone?
- Why do adult women who were denied the opportunity as children seek it out as adults?

B'nai mitzvah ritual does  
important things



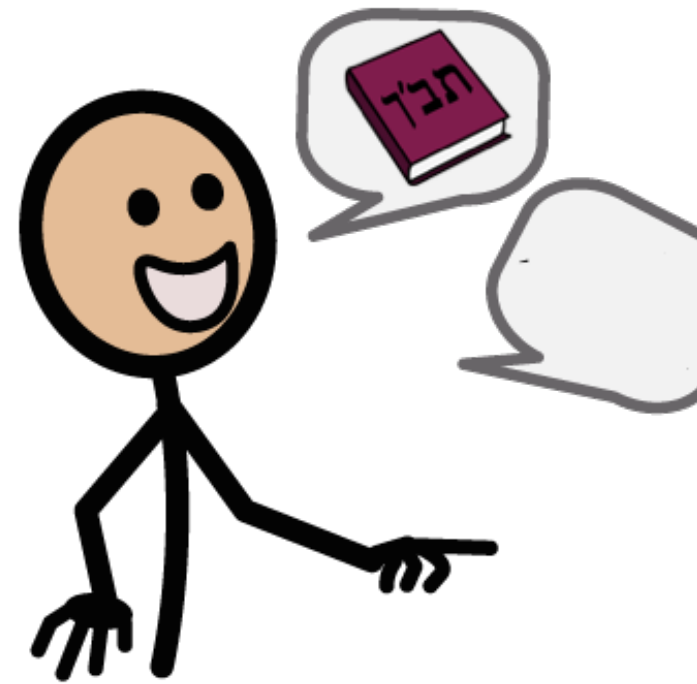
# Puberty is a big deal

- Changing bodies.
- New experiences.
- New social and academic demands.
- Growing emotional and cognitive maturity.
- Developmentally crucial separation from parents.



# Emerging Jewish Adulthood

- Jewish context for overwhelming transition.
- Shifting Jewish status.
- Move towards mature Judaism.
- Acting as an adult in some respects.



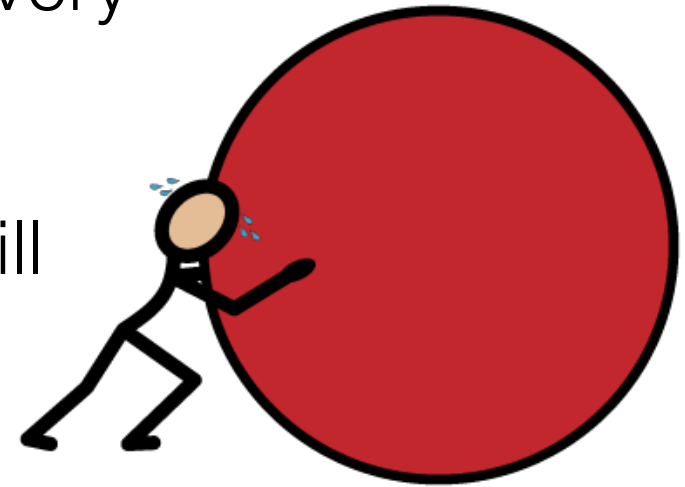
# Some Acts of Jewish Adulthood

- Leading prayers that children can't lead; leynning, etc.
- Giving a d'var Torah that adults will listen to.
- Defeating Hitler by making it to bat mitzvah/not intermarrying/intending to have Jewish children eventually.
- Being allowed to decide whether or not to keep going to religious school.
- Being old enough to annoy rabbis and cantors by having a party that they consider inappropriate.



# It's hard to be a Jew

- Our religion is beautiful and it is also very demanding.
- We carry generational trauma, and still deal with antisemitism.
- Bar/Bat Mitzvah ritual helps children learn how to bear adult Jewish burdens.



# Some of what what we typically ask

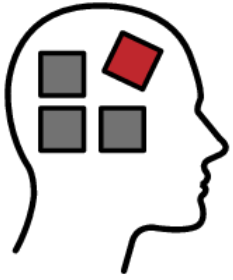


- We expect 12-13 year olds to speak and sing publicly, in front of important people in their live.
- At an age in which most kids experience changing bodies and intense self-consciousness.
- Even if they don't know Hebrew.
- Even if they've never studied music before. Even if they're untalented and uninterested.
- This is a really intense thing to ask of kids. And they do it, routinely.
- This is made possible by a large body of knowledge of teaching methods for this material.
- We have a lot of methods that work — and the capacity to develop more.

# Some of what we typically offer

- Respect for Jewish competence and accomplishment.
- Support in developing maturity.
- Affirmation of significance in the Jewish community.
- Celebration of who they are at an age at which others find them difficult, and at which they may not like themselves very much.
- A framework for the changing parent-child relationship.
- An attentive audience that they earned.
- **Jewish adolescents with disabilities need these things too.**



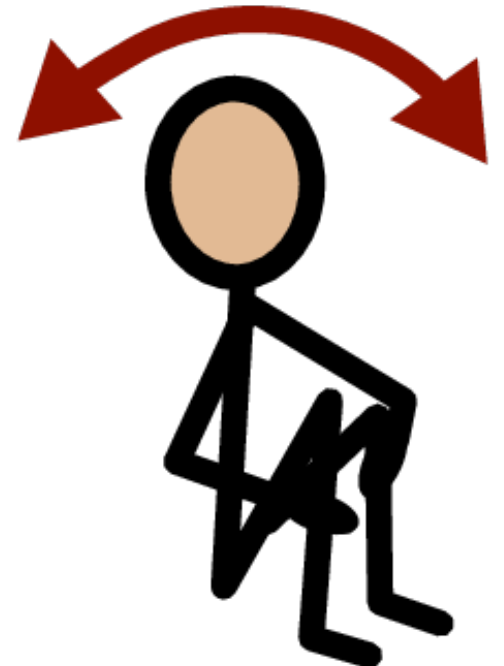
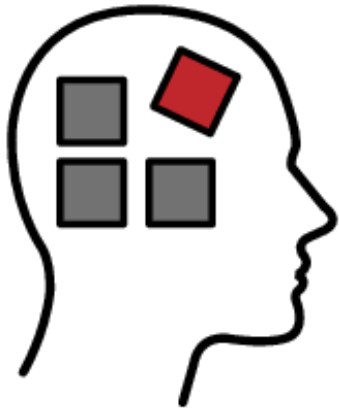


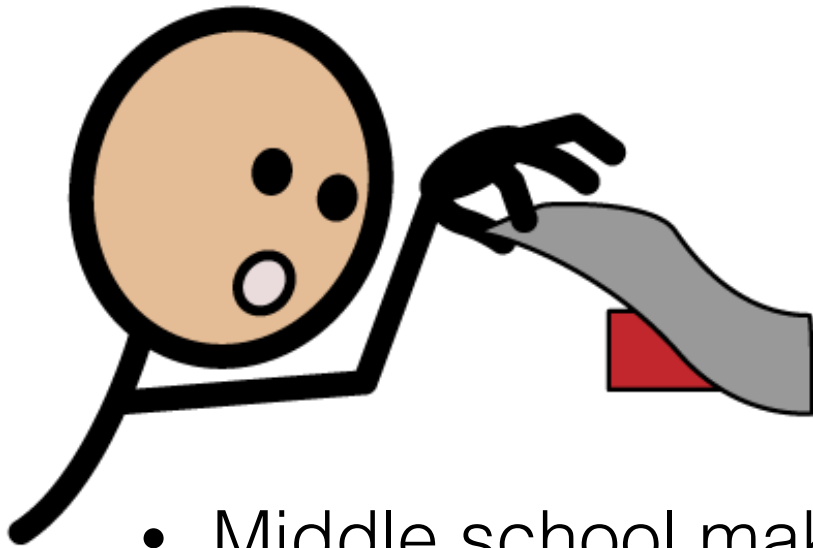
# Emerging adulthood as a disabled Jew



- Jewish adolescents with disabilities have the same need for transition ritual as nondisabled peers
- The details of how this is done are sometimes different, for a number of reasons.
- One reason is that adolescents with disabilities are experiencing different social realities than their nondisabled peers.

# Puberty with a disability



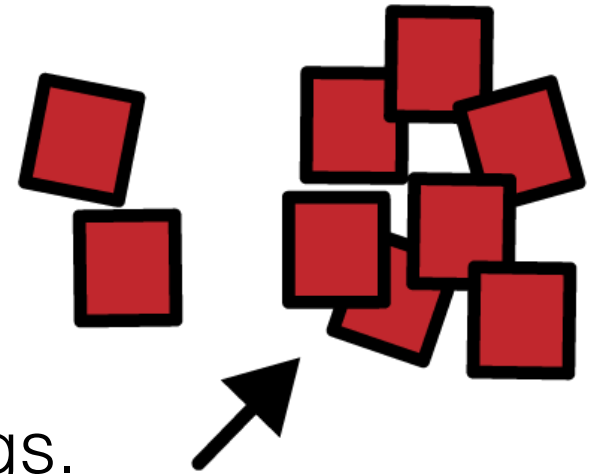


# Disabilities can become apparent

- Middle school makes new demands.
- Kids who were able to cope with the academic demands of elementary school sometimes face barriers in middle school.
- Increased social demands for conformity.
- Increased expectation of self care skills, which some kids may not be able to acquire.

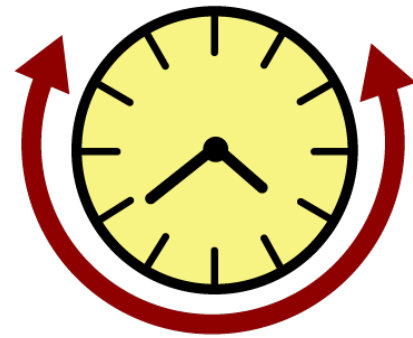
# Disabilities triggered or magnified by puberty

- Hormonal changes can cause new problems.
- Medication may stop working.
- New seizure disorders.
- Growing larger can complicate things.
- New or worsened mental health problems.
- Menstrual problems or migraines.



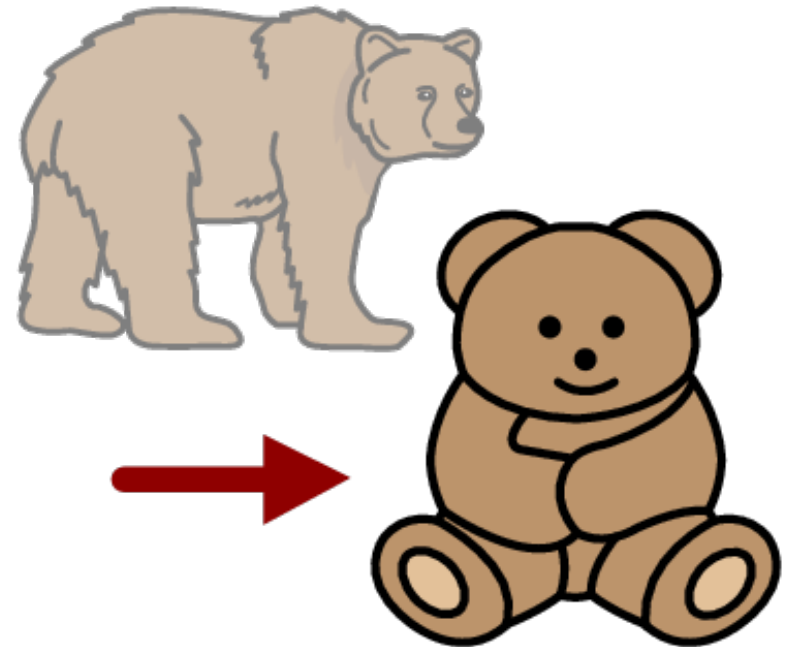
# Not growing out of disability

- When kids are younger, it's often possible to imagine that they will grow out of it.
- Or that therapy can cure them.
- Or that their impairments won't matter so much when they're older.
- Puberty is often when it becomes apparent that they will stay disabled.
- We need to create ritual that can make it clear that they are \*still becoming adults\*.

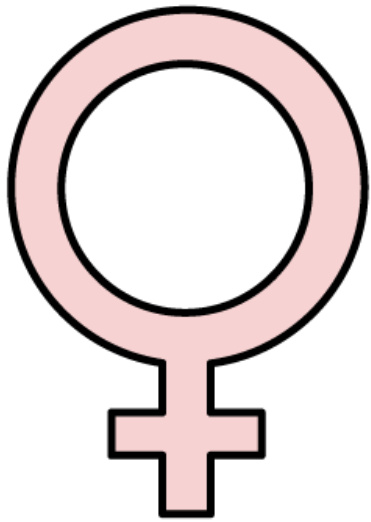


# Puberty in kids with disabilities is often treated as meaningless

- “Mental age”.
- Treated as incapable of developing sexual and romantic attraction.
- No transition of physical and emotional boundaries.
- Enmeshment.



This is particularly  
complicated for  
LGBTQ disabled kids.



# Solidarity in B'nai Mitzvah ritual



- Kids with disabilities have to fight for their adulthood.
- We need to be on their side.
- We need to create substantive transition ritual with room for disability.

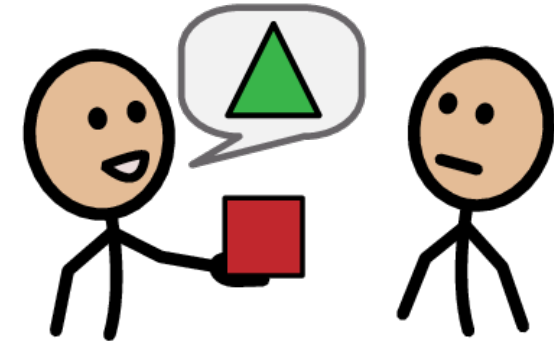


# Can your community imagine this child as an adult?

- Are they part of “Jewish continuity”?
- Are there adults like them in the community?
- Are they treated like adults?
- (If you say “special needs”, the next word people think is “kids”).
- What message is their bat or bar mitzvah sending about their adulthood?



# Trying to 'make it meaningful' can undermine solidarity.



- It already means something!
- “Making it meaningful” implies that there isn’t anything meaningful happening.
- B’nai mitzvah ritual is a Jewish response to an inherently meaningful life transition.
- We don’t need to make it meaningful. We need to engage with the meaning.

Ritual that feels meaningful  
can mean the wrong thing

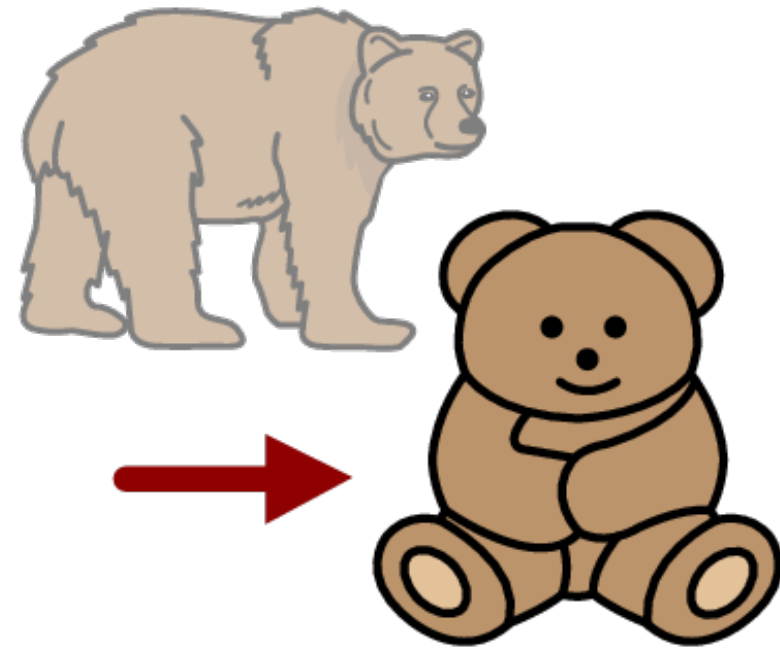


Feeling moved — and going  
to the wrong place

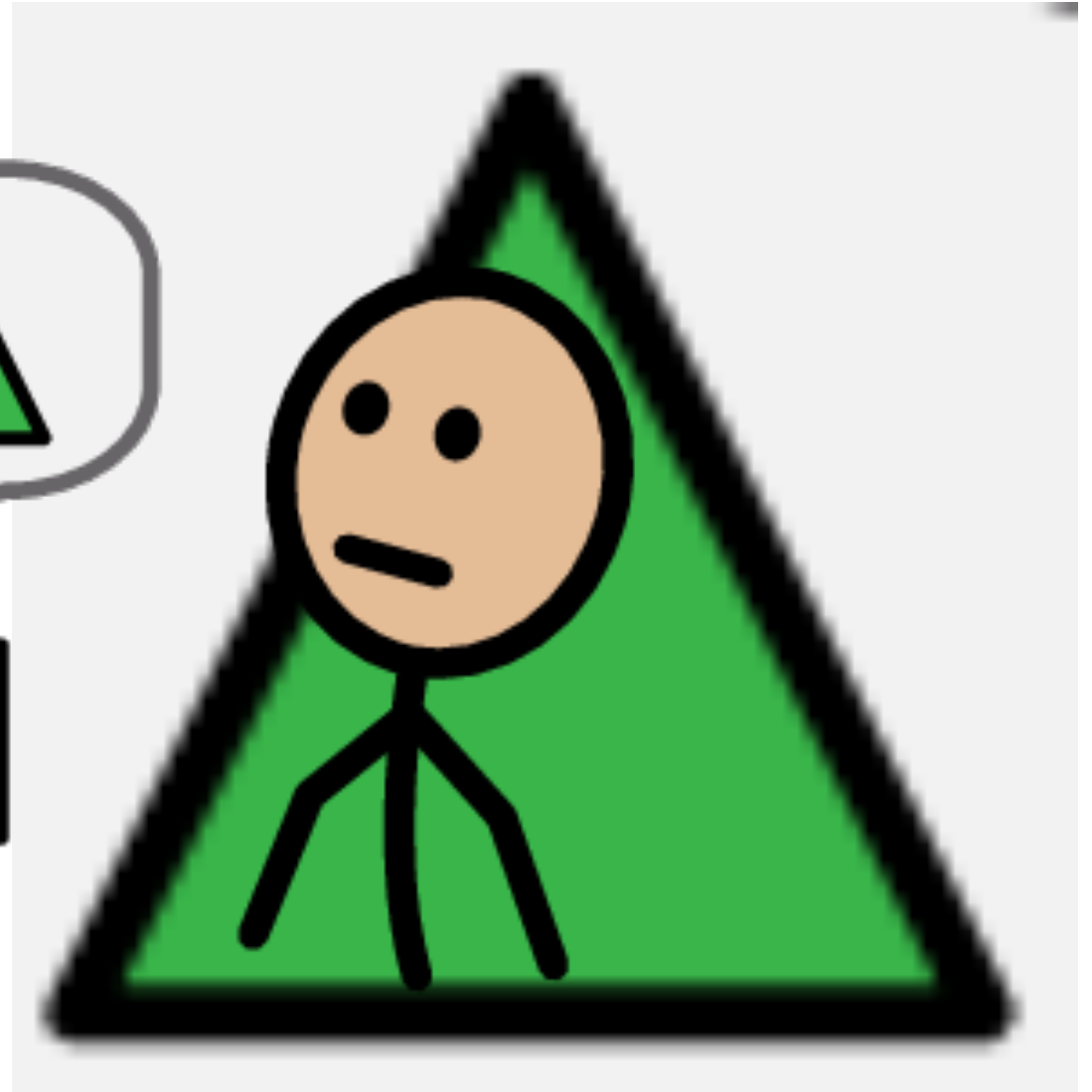
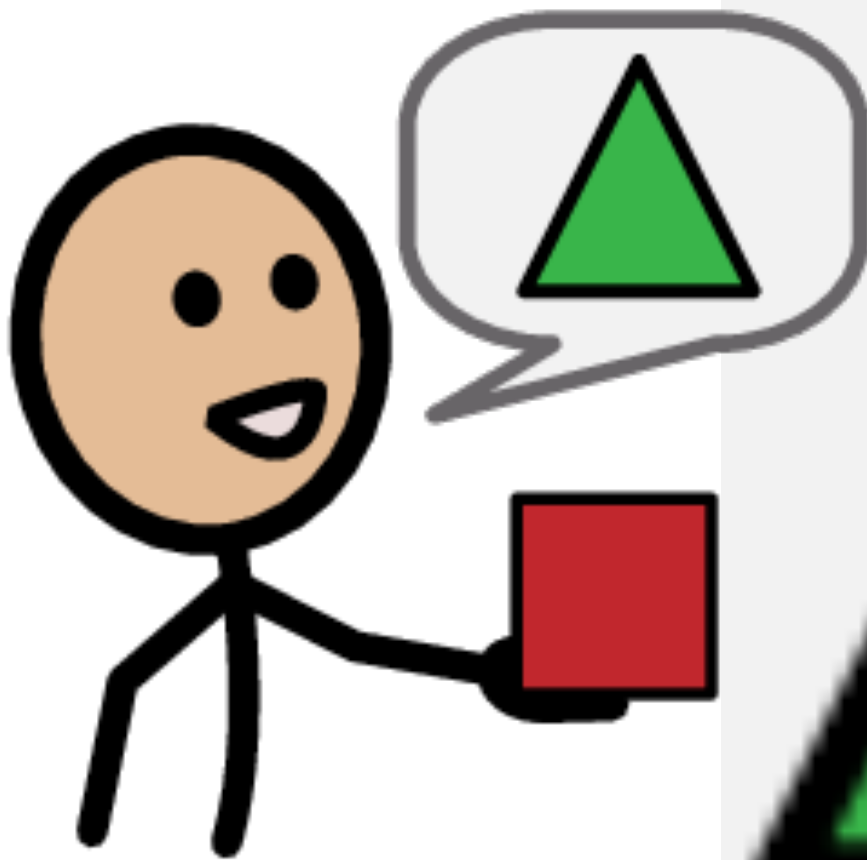


# B'nai mitzvah can feel like pretending.

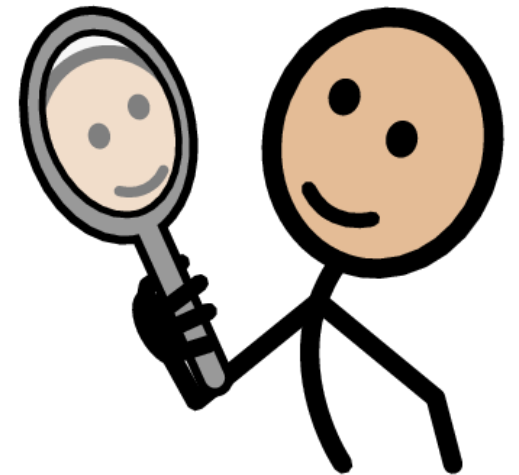
- That a disabled child's puberty has significance.
- That a disabled child is really moving towards Jewish adulthood.
- That their maturity is worth celebrating.
- That anything of real ritual significance is happening.



All of those things are true, but  
they are not always believed.



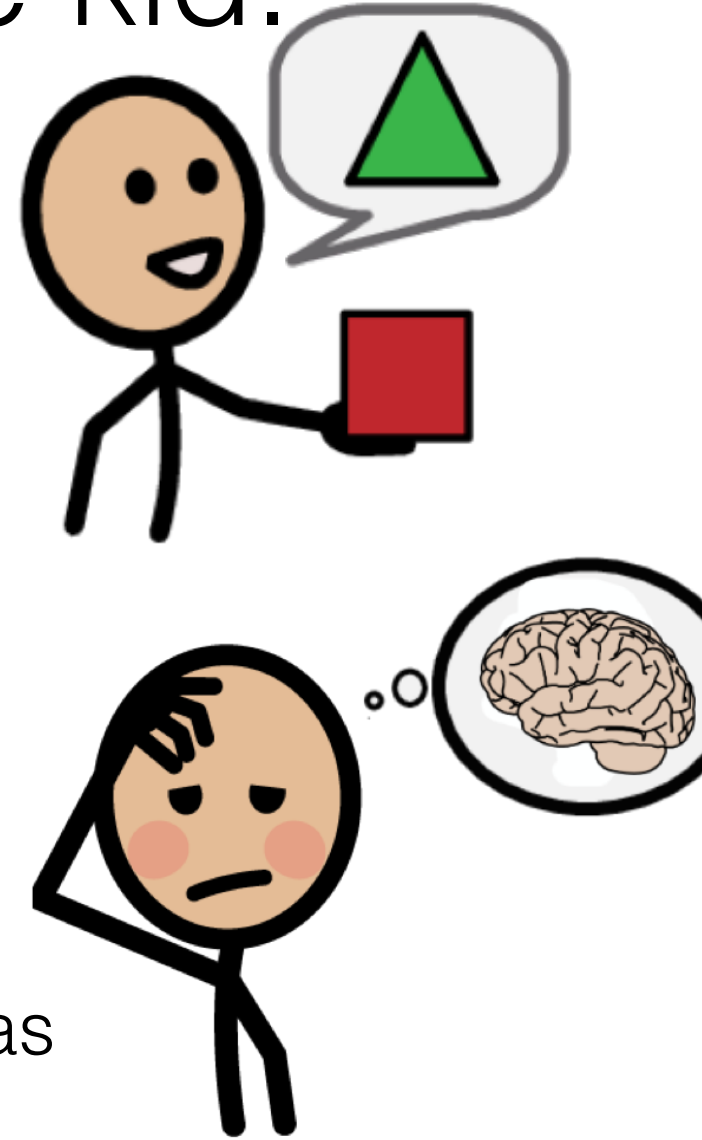
People often feel moved by their willingness to pretend.



- People think that the child's puberty isn't really meaningful and that they will never really be an adult.
- And that therefore this isn't a real bar/bat mitzvah.
- But that it's laudable to pretend that it is, and to 'give them an experience of feeling included'.

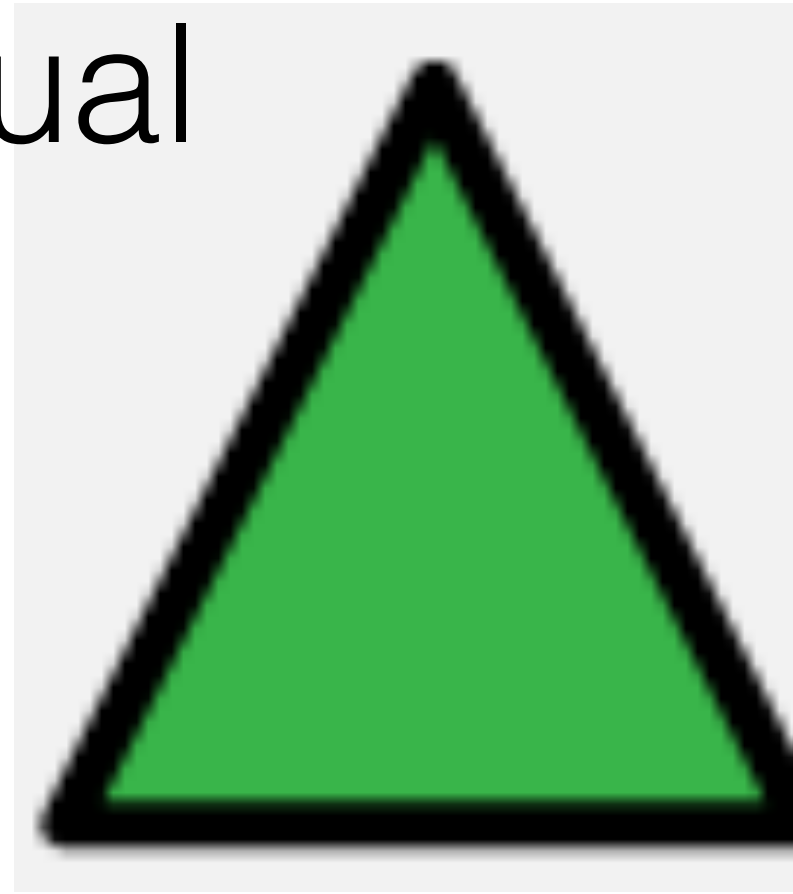
# Idealized pretending is degrading to the kid.

- Socially valued community members get the ritual experience of feeling moved by their inclusivity.
- Disabled kids get treated as ritual objects rather than ritual actors.
- They get the message that their maturity is not worth celebrating.
- And that they will never be regarded as real adults.



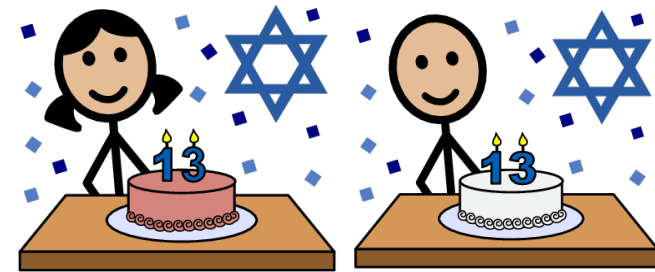
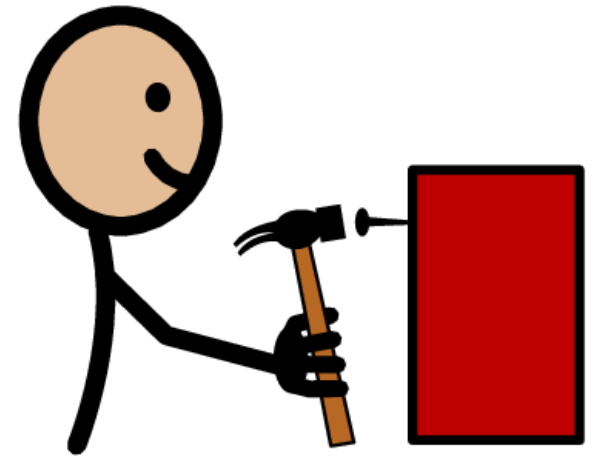
# Honest ritual

- Keeping mind that something inherently significant is happening to the person you are working with.
- They are going through puberty.
- Their adulthood is emerging.
- This is an inherently meaningful event.
- Bar/Bat mitzvah effects an important transition.
- Adolescents with disabilities need ritual that is both effective and honest.



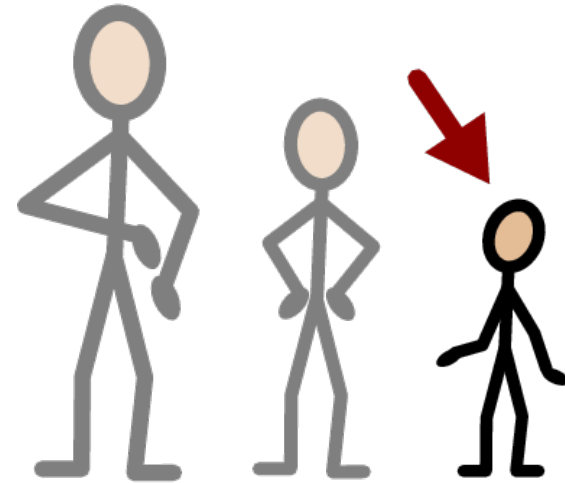
# Effective transition ritual

- Ritual must be effective as well as honest.
- Effective ritual does real things.
- An effective bar or bat mitzvah process and ceremony changes those involved.
- (And the relationships between those involved).

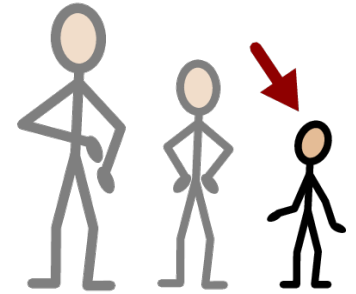


# Don't focus on the spiritual needs of the parents

- As with b'nai mitzvah for typically developing kids, it can't be exclusively about what parents want.
- When b'nai mitzvah is all about the parents, developmentally necessary separation is undermined.
- Kids with disabilities are not their parents; they need to be recognized as separate people.
- Involving parents is appropriate and necessary; focusing on parents is counterproductive.

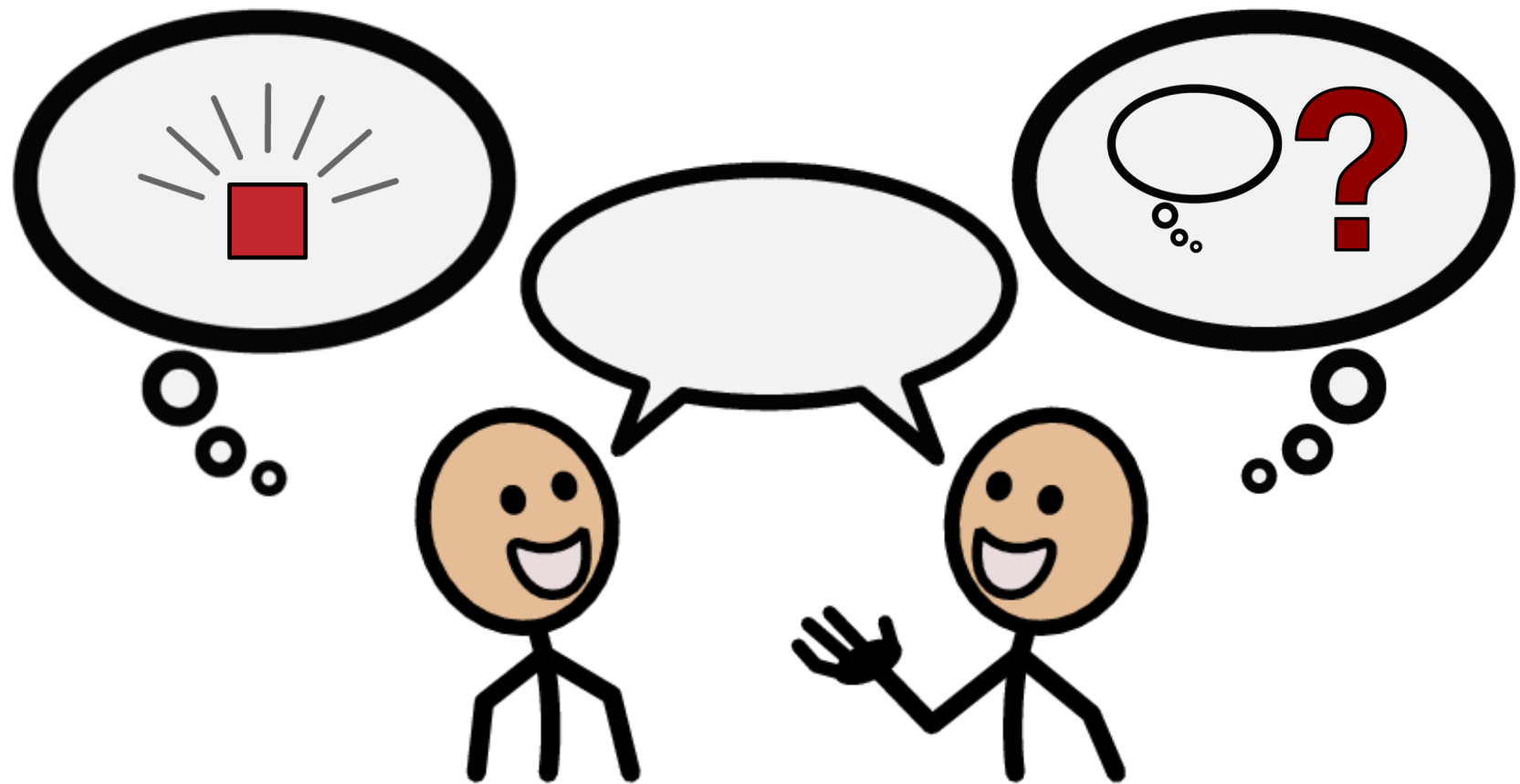


# Include barukh sh'patarani



- ברוך שפטרני מעונשו של זה
- “Blessed is the one who has exempted me from this one’s punishment”
- Something significant is happening — ritualizing the move towards adult responsibility.
- Ritual act of separation matters, especially for disabled kids.

# Talk to them directly

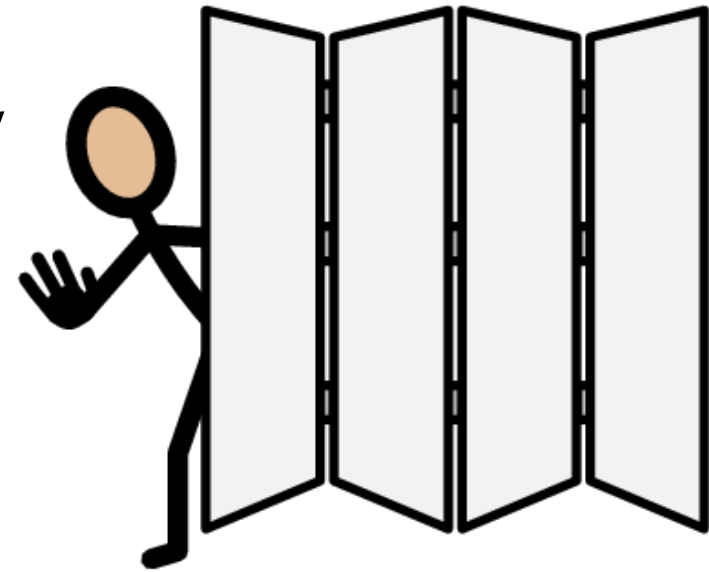


# What if they can't talk?

- Talk to them directly anyway.
- Learn about their communication methods.
- A presentation about communication and showing respect to those with communication disabilities:  
<http://www.uctv.tv/shows/When-Listening-is-Complicated-Skills-for-Honoring-the-Individual-Perspectives-of-Every-Person-with-Disabilities-32191>

# Age appropriate physical and emotional boundaries

- Remember that disability doesn't erase puberty.
- Don't touch them in ways that would normally be considered inappropriate at their age.
- Don't do things that would normally be considered inappropriate with an adolescent of the opposite gender.
- (Even if they initiate it.)
- Be thoughtful about what you do and don't discuss with their parents.



# Treat them as obligated



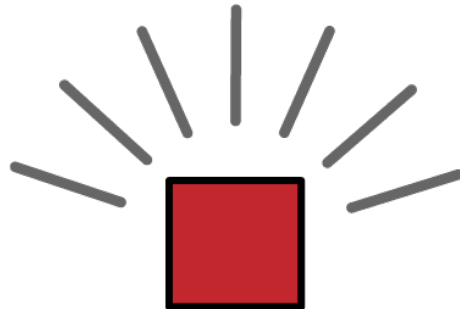
# Kiddushin 31a

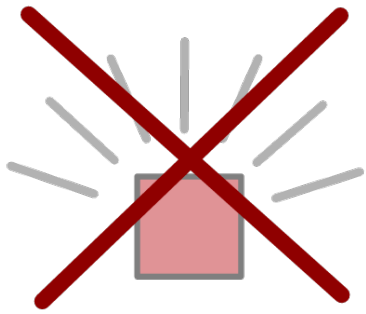
## *It is better to be obligated*

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 exempt from mitzvot), I would throw a feast for the rabbis! Because I am not obligated and yet I observe.

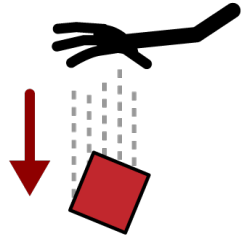
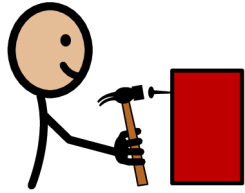
Now that I have heard the opinion of Rabbi Haninah that one who is commanded and performs is greater than one who is not commanded and performs — on the contrary, if someone tells me that the halakha is not like Rabbi Yehuda I will throw a feast for the rabbis!

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 ממני שאינו מצווה ועושה  
אדרבה מאן דאמר לי דאין הלכה  
כרבי יהודה עבידנא יומא טבא  
לרבנן.





# Don't start by dropping requirements

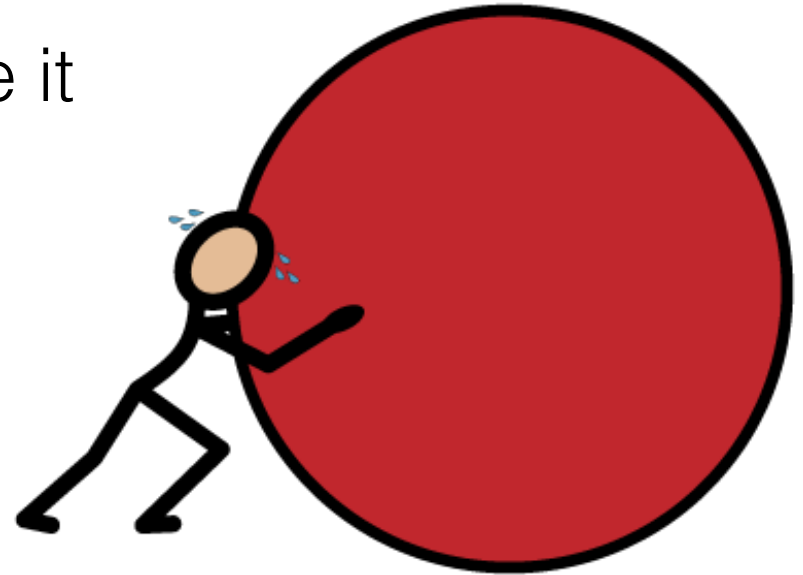


- Err on the side of assuming there's a way to make it work.
- Look for effective teaching methods.
- Look for ways to adapt ritual elements rather than eliminate them.
- Spend significant time thinking about options before concluding that requirements should be dropped.



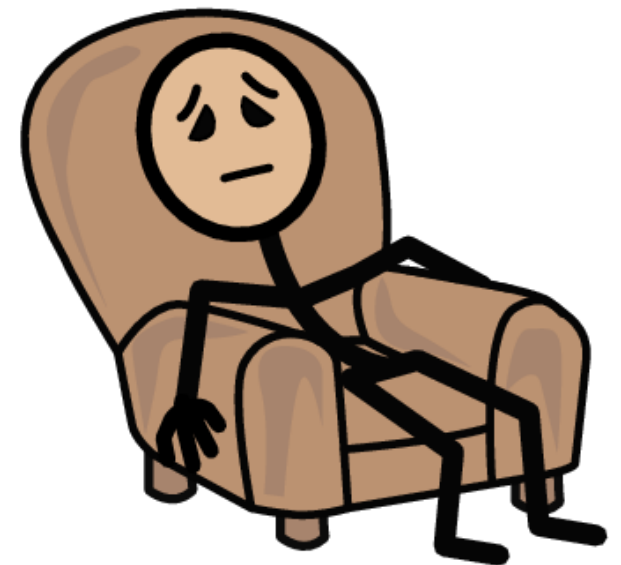
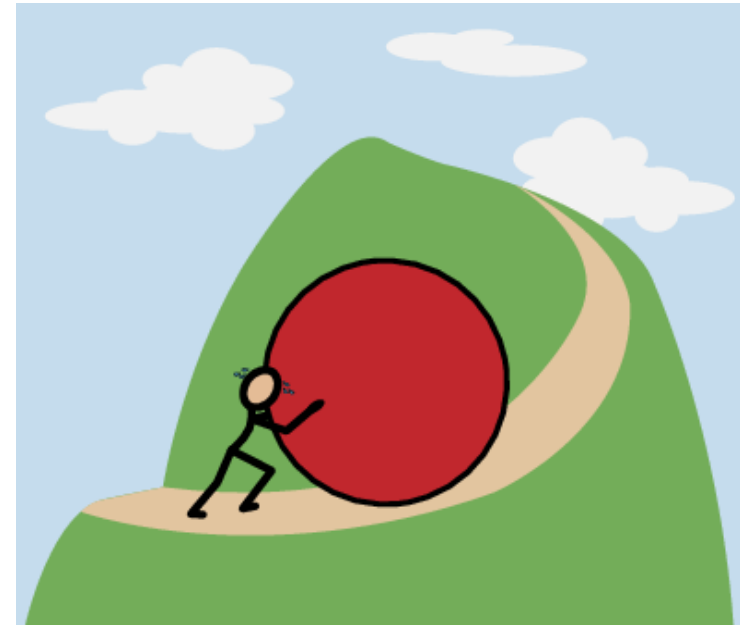
# B'nai Mitzvah ritual should involve doing hard things

- Having a disability doesn't make it easier to be a Jew.
- Jewish children with disabilities grow up to bear heavy Jewish burdens as adults.
- They have the same need for ritual that can prepare them for the difficulty of being a Jewish adult



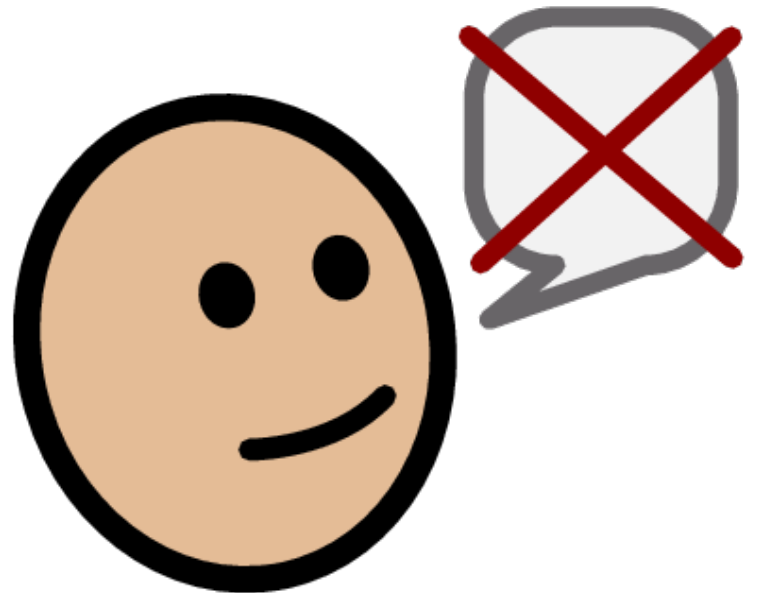
# **Don't expect them to work 10 times harder than everyone else.**

- We ask a very nearly unreasonable amount of effort from 11 and 12 year olds as it is.
- Working ten times harder than that won't help them learn to bear adult burdens. It will burn them out.
- Time and energy spent working much harder than everyone else has to come from somewhere.



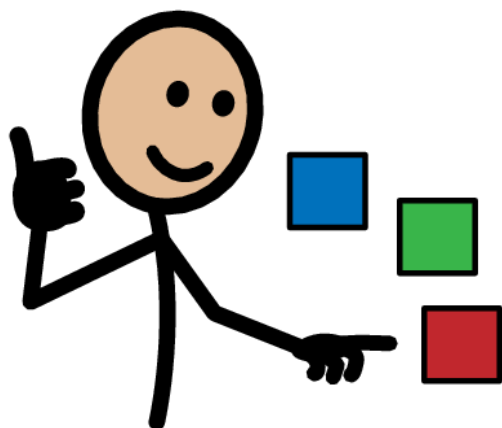
# What if a kid can't or shouldn't do all of the usual things?

- Some things require speech.
- Some things require vision.
- Some things require literacy.

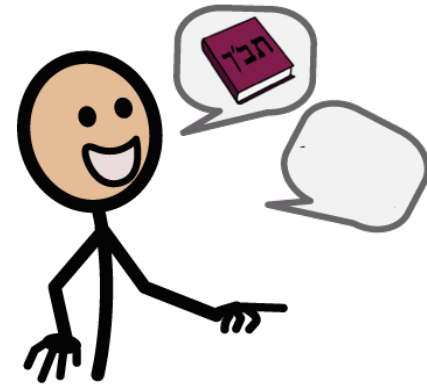


# Being obligated doesn't always mean doing everything yourself.

- Most of us don't lead prayers all the time.
- Other people do it for us.
- Teach the concept of shlichut.
- Involve them in deciding who and how someone will do the obligatory things on their behalf.
- Relying on someone else is different from being exempt.



# Find something real that they can do.



- The existing ritual has many parts.
- Most people can do some part of it in a real way.
- (New forms of participation can be created too, but it's harder to pull off.)
- Celebrate accomplishment.
- Don't fake it.



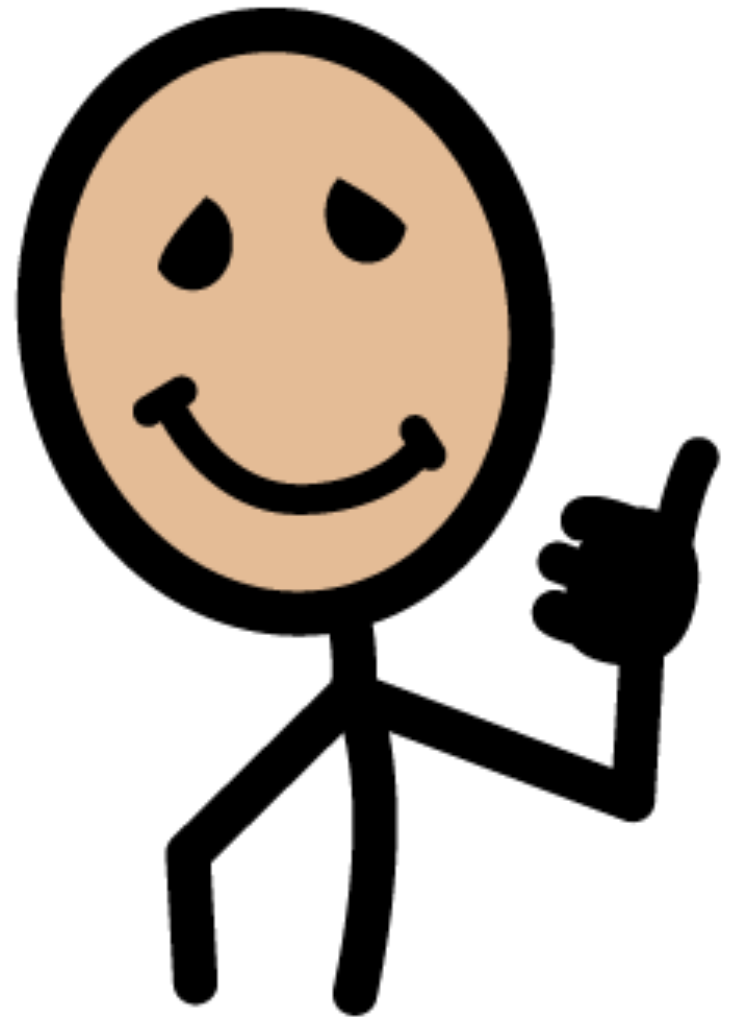
# Do something that would be obviously inappropriate for a young child

- If Bar/Bat mitzvah looks the same as a siddur ceremony for elementary school, that's a problem.
- Adolescents with disabilities are not little children.
- They need significant ritual responsibilities that recognize their maturity.
- (Eg: Carrying the Torah is significant because there are consequences if you drop it.)



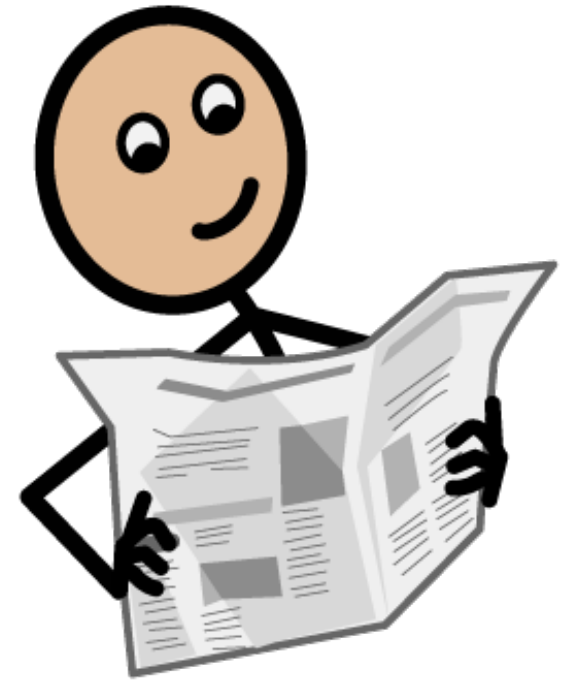
# Watch your tone

- When disability is involved, it's easy to slip into saccharine modes.
- Feeling awkward can lead to making cutesy jokes.
- That is not the message you want to send.
- Don't be this guy. Perform respect instead.



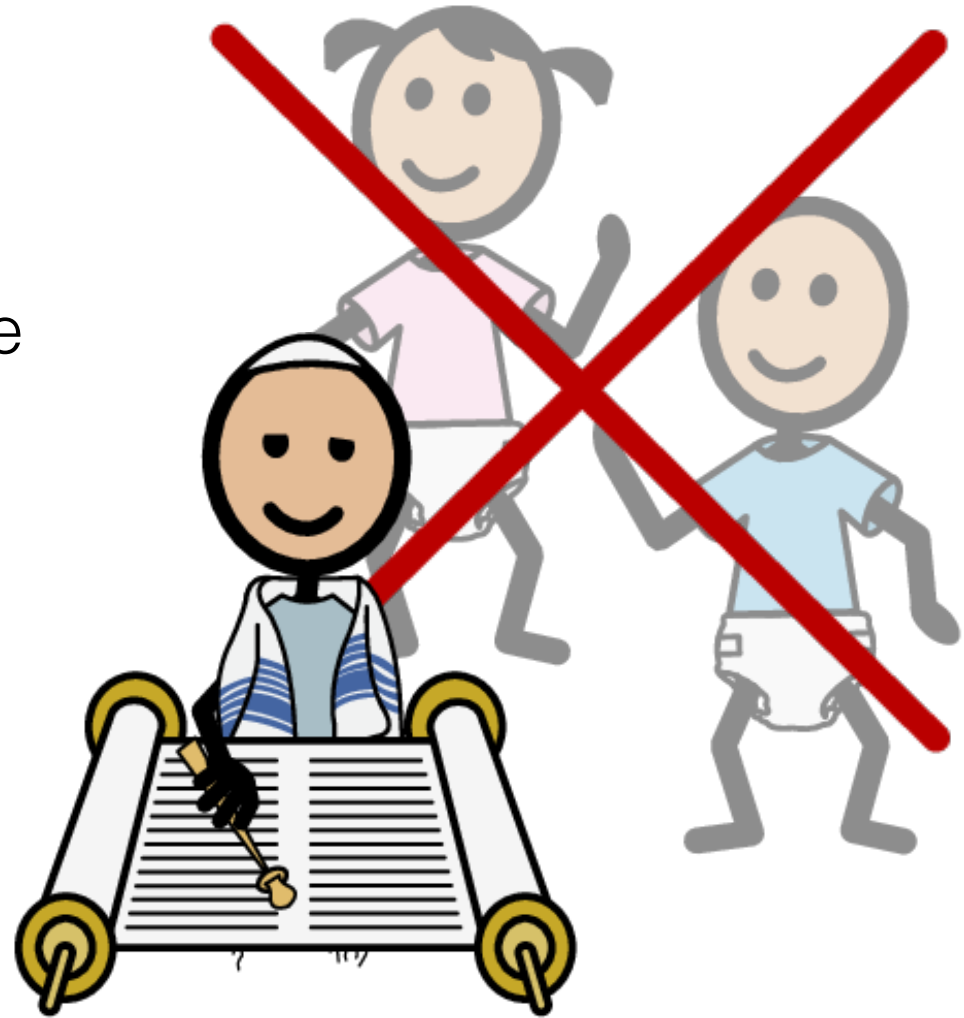
# Don't call the paper

- A kid in a community having a bar or bat mitzvah should be normal, not newsworthy.
- News articles shift focus away from the bar/bat mitzvah kid.
- Warm fuzzy stories about a community's inspiring inclusivity undermine the purpose of the ritual.



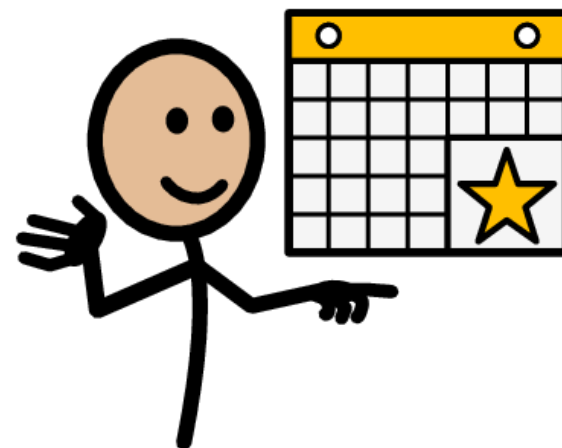
# Don't make them look cute.

- Respect maturity.
- Don't talk baby talk.
- Don't call them cutesy things like “a smart cookie” or “adorable”.
- Don't mock their desire for respect.
- No one wants to look adorable and cute when they're just emerging as an adult.

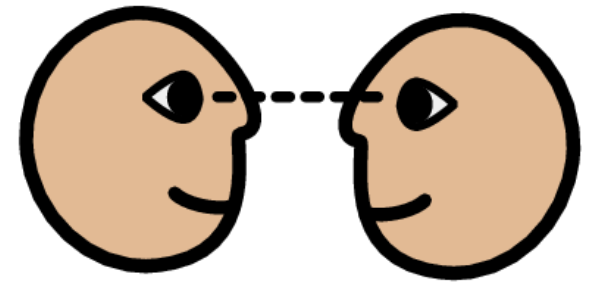


# Honest celebration of accomplishment.

- Talk about what they did, and your respect for their accomplishments.
- Be honest. Don't exaggerate or say over the top things about trivial actions.
- (It's also generally best to steer clear of "you're so inspiring". Having a bar or bat mitzvah should be normal.)
- Adolescents with disabilities can do things worth celebrating.



# Avoid inappropriate eye contact with the congregation.



- While your student is leading prayers or giving a d'var Torah, the congregation should be listening to them.
- Model appropriate behavior by looking at your student.
- If you give a blessing or speech to your student, look at them while you're doing it.
- Don't distract the congregation with inappropriate eye contact.

# Pay attention to the message the music is sending.

- Music sets a mood.
- Music sets emphasis.
- Music sends a message about what is worth taking seriously.
- If you are a musician, use your skills to figure out whether the music is sending the right message. If you are not, consider asking a musician for feedback.





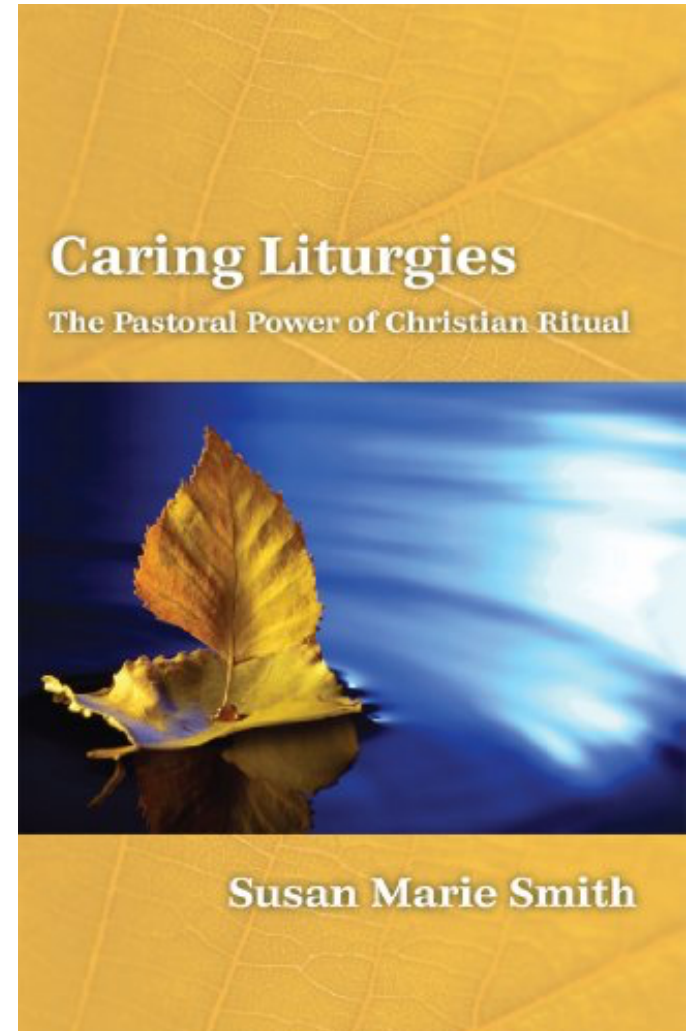
# Learn from adults with disabilities



- Seeing adults with disabilities shows you that adulthood and disability are compatible.
- This is countercultural, and does not happen by itself even for disability advocates.
- Listen to adults with physical, intellectual, sensory, learning, and other disabilities.

# A useful book: *Caring Liturgies*

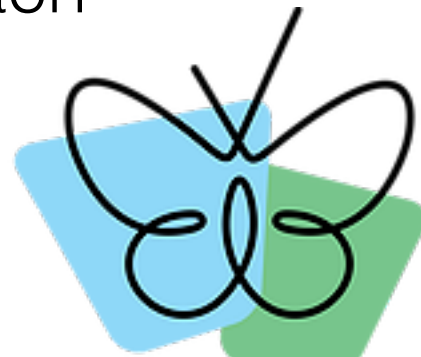
- Susan Marie Smith
- Very useful book on customizing rituals in effective ways.
- From a Christian perspective, but much of it transfers



# 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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