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Awareness

A Newsletter for Special Needs Jewish Education

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Spring Edition:

Looking back and looking forward! The information on Purim activities past and looking forward to Passover. Hoping that this remains a good resource for you all. Please share with friends and colleagues.

As usual, we welcome your input and articles, as well as comments and ideas for future issues.

Sharon Frant Brooks

Thanks – Todah Raba! Thank you to the congregations and individuals that have contributed so far to keep BINA going! We welcome contributions to be able to maintain this service. Any agency or individual who is interested in offering support can send their financial support to:

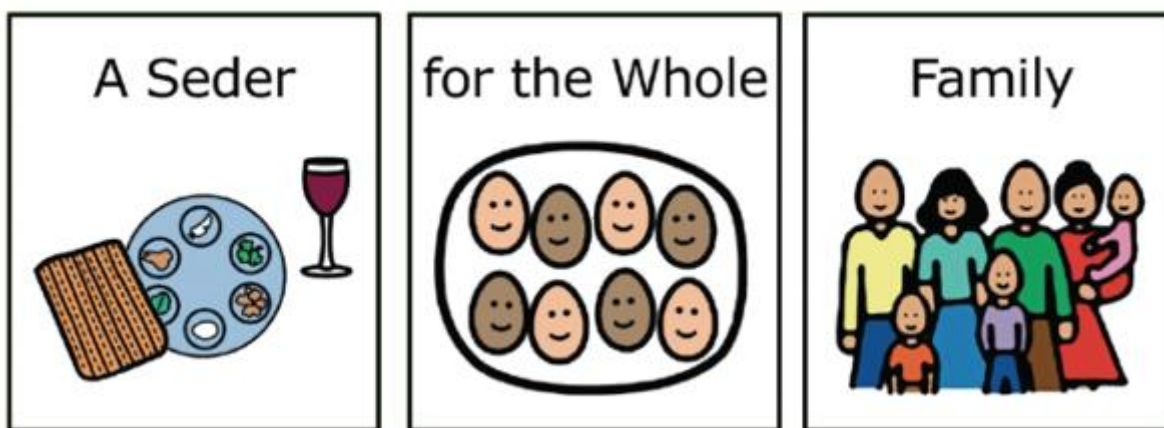
BINA, c/o Adath Israel Congregation – Resource Center Services, att. Hedda Morton, 1958 Lawrenceville Road, Lawrenceville, NJ

More articles are at the end beyond those the ones noted in the Highlights index!

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Special Needs-Friendly Haggadah From Gateways



Gateways is proud to partner with Behrman House Publishers to publish a haggadah for children with special needs. *The Gateways Haggadah* utilizes over 150 picture communication symbols developed by Mayer-Johnson™, the leading creator of symbol-adapted special education materials that assist individuals in overcoming speech, language and learning challenges. In addition to picture symbols for blessings and songs, step-by-step photographs are also used to illustrate what to do throughout the Seder.



Meet Ari Ne'eman, a Jewish disabilities activist hero

[View this email in your browser](#)

Ari Ne'eman Recipient of Morton E. Ruderman Inclusion Award



Ari Ne'eman, national inclusion self-advocate, President of the Autistic Self Advocacy Network and Member of the President's National Council on Disability, is the recipient of the 2014 Morton E. Ruderman Award in Inclusion.

The \$100,000 award recognizes an individual who has made an extraordinary contribution to the inclusion of people with disabilities in the Jewish world and the greater public.

[Learn more about inclusion in the Jewish community »](#) |

Tongue Untied

How my son overcame his debilitating stutter and became an inspirational speaker.

by Judy Yormark Mernick

Over the last 10 years, my 28-year-old son has taught on numerous Jewish educational programs in the US, Canada, Central Europe, Israel and Australia. He received an International MBA, worked at Deloitte as a Strategy Consultant and consulted senior-level executives on their presentations skills. Currently, he works at a unique start-up, mentors entrepreneurs at a technology accelerator, and lives with his wife and children in Israel.

Yes, indeed, I am a “proud Jewish mother.” But there is much more to my son, Moshe, than the above.

Anyone who has known Moshe since he was a child knows that for him, speaking, whether one-on-one or in front of 500 people, is a big deal. Moshe stutters. It began when he was about three years old, at which point we were told to ignore it, as most children who begin stuttering before the age of five stop on their own; it is merely a stage of speech development.

In Moshe’s case, however, it got worse. As he got older, he often was unable to complete a sentence without getting stuck. Even saying his own name was a challenge. Phone calls were extremely difficult for him; he bore the embarrassment of being hung up on when he was unable to identify himself to the person at the other end of the line, who would think it was a prank call. Moshe was talented, bright and athletic; but to him, it was all worthless because he couldn’t talk.

Moshe was teased for his stutter on many occasions, which increased his reluctance to talk. He became angry and resolved to work harder and harder with his speech therapist to help himself overcome his challenge.

When he spoke at his Bar Mitzvah, after tens of hours of intense speech therapy, his therapist and I sat together and cried tears of joy and pride. He spoke so fluently that a relative came to me afterward and commented that he was anxious about the speech for Moshe’s sake, but then he realized that it must have been another of my children who struggled with a stutter because Moshe was flawless!

At 15, Moshe went to Israel to finish high school. He was searching; searching for answers, and more importantly, searching for inner peace. He met mentors and teachers who didn’t see a stutterer; they saw a teenager looking for acceptance and meaning.

Years went by and Moshe came to a place of acceptance. He realized that he was not a stutterer, but he is a person who stutters. Once he accepted that and put it out there, he began to stutter less. It is not uncommon for him to include the fact that he stutters when introducing himself, just to ease his own level of tension.

Since then, Moshe has been sent to Europe and Australia to run youth programs. He is a dynamic speaker who captures the attention of any audience. He is a gifted teacher whose students truly enjoy his classes. His stutter is not *gone*; and there are times when it is more pronounced than others, but the fact that Moshe accepts it makes him infinitely more fluent and comfortable with his audience – whether it is five men in a Talmud class, 50 synagogue-goers, or 500 teenagers.

I believe that Moshe's stutter has not only not held him back, but his struggle with it has propelled him to heights he would not have dreamed possible.

As a parent of a stutterer, I offer the following suggestions to make to those in the same position:

- Encourage your child / student / relative / friend to talk. Let him know that it is what he says, not how he says it, that is important;
- Enlist the help of a speech therapist. If the first professional you try isn't a good match, find another when he is ready and willing to work at it, the methods will help. They will not cure him, per se, but practicing will help him gain the confidence to express himself.
- Meet with the speech therapist to find out how you, his parents, and his teachers can further help him.
- Pray. Pray that the speech impediment does not hinder your child, but that it serves to propel him to even greater heights and accomplishments.

We would not tell a person with crooked teeth not to smile; we would not tell a person who limps to limit his walking. Encourage your child to talk. Let him know there is value to everything he has to say, no matter how difficult it may be for him to get the words out.

About the Author

Judy Yormark Mernick

Originally from Memphis and currently in Toronto, Judy Yormark Mernick is a very proud mother and grandmother. She works as a Law Clerk / Office Administrator, but her primary focus is her family. As such, she is happy to promote her son's campaign to pre-sell his upcoming book, *The Gift of Stuttering*. (Details can be found [here](#).)

A Purim Carnival For All

03/11/2015 - 12:28

Nancy Mager



Celebrating Purim! Courtesy of Gateways

I love being able to give families of students with special needs the opportunity to participate in Jewish milestones and traditions like any other family. This year was the 5th year that we hosted an accessible Purim carnival for our students. Each year, we build a carnival with accommodations and care so that our students will not feel overwhelmed and can participate in some way in all of the activities.

Here's how we did it:

We prepared the students for what to expect before the event. The week prior to the carnival, students read social stories about what to expect at a Purim carnival. We also showed the students photos and videos from the previous year. They learned about what activities and games will be available and what the rules are for each one.

On the day of the carnival, we kept the routine in school familiar. When families arrived at the carnival, they went to their classrooms like they usually do. Students were greeted by their teachers and given a packet with a schedule for the day and stickers which showed pictures of the games and activities available to try. Students were encouraged to look through the choices and select the ones that they would like to try. Then they picked the stickers which showed those activities and built their own activity schedule for the day.

The carnival was spread out in three rooms. One room had gross motor activities like bowling, mini-golf, a hamentaschen toss and a moon bounce. Another served as a quiet break room with bean bags, music on headphones and puzzles and a third room offered crafts, sensory stimulating snacks and a "sensory garden" full of great tactile experiences. The games and activities were run by familiar [Gateways](#) teen volunteers

and each station had clearly marked instructions with visual supports showing students the rules and steps to playing each game. There were also strategically laid out social stories for difficult moments like “how to keep personal space while waiting in line” or “what to do if I don’t win a game.”

Crowds and loud noises were kept to a bare minimum. Activities had simple accommodations, so that everyone could participate (i.e., bowling had a simply made ramp for kids who have trouble swinging their arm and releasing a ball). And, while there were games, prizes and refreshments, there were no winners or losers or exchanging tickets for prizes. The day was simply about making choices, spending time with friends and family, trying new things and feeling safe enough to take risks.

What I love about our carnival is seeing students successfully navigate what could otherwise be an overwhelming experience. Having fewer crowds, simple accommodations for games and allowing the children preview the options with written out expectations in child-friendly language using pictures and colors can make a carnival accessible to all students. I love when I hear that families who were never able to go to a Purim carnival had a wonderful, calm experience and were able to share in the joys of Purim just like any other Jewish family.

We hope that you will take steps to use some of these suggestions and make your Purim carnival more inclusive, so that all your community can feel welcome.

Visit our online [Holiday Resource Center](#) as you prepare for your Passover programs.

Nancy Mager is the Director of Jewish Education Programs for Gateways in Boston.

In Israel: Taking Inclusion To A Larger Level

02/12/2015 - 19:23

Howard Blas



IDF Soldiers. Courtesy of Howard Blas

On a recent visit to a Pikud HaOref, Home Front Command base in Ramle, 14 miles southeast of Tel Aviv, a soldier tells me a very animated story about his role in Operation Protective Edge, Israel's military operation in Gaza: "My job was to copy the papers for our soldiers to drop from planes over Gaza this summer!" The soldier, in uniform with his bright orange beret on his shoulder, happens to have Down Syndrome.

He is very excited about his job in the base print shop. Another soldier with a visible disability proudly recounts the visit to the base the previous day by IDF Chief of Staff, Benny Ganz. "We saluted him and gave him a present – olive oil that we made on the base!"

Twenty five other soldiers with disabilities perform similarly important jobs each day on the base. If Tiran Attia and other visionaries have their way, Tzahal, or the IDF (Israel Defense Forces), may become a "game changer" in Israel for inclusion and for shaping attitudes about people with disabilities.

Tiran Attia, who served for 30 years in the IDF and was a commander of Sar-El, the IDF National Project for Volunteers, serves as head manager of [Yad Layeled HaMyeuchad](#) ("Lend a Hand to a Special Child"), an amuta (non-profit organization) which consists of two programs, "[Magshimim Chalom—Fulfilling a Dream](#)" and "[Shaveh b'Madim-Equal in Uniform](#)."

I have had the privilege of visiting two such army bases during recent trips to Israel – the home front command base in Ramle, and a logistics base near Kiryat Malachi. During our tour, Attia takes me to visit soldiers from the program at various jobsites including the supply room, dining room and print shop. Attia emphasizes several times during our visit, "It should be noted that in Israel, army service is the gateway to successful integration into society and the work force. The nearby Chevrat Chashmal (electric company) already employs 260 workers with special needs."

The program is already impacting the other soldiers through what Attia describes as "the ripple effect. Other soldiers on the base think less of their own problems, they think of the soldiers with disabilities as role models, and discipline problems on the base have gone down."

Arianna Goldsmith, an American olah (immigrant to Israel) works with the soldiers with disabilities as her army service: "The other soldiers see these soldiers come to work and it teaches them, it changes their attitudes."

Tiran, who admits to being skeptical of the program at first, notes, "One mother of a soldier in our program told me, "You have made a miracle!" Tiran was injured during the Second Lebanon War and was visited in the hospital by people with disabilities. "I saw the

love and sympathy they gave to the injured soldiers and I realized they have so much to give – so I started to advocate for them to join the program.”

The program was founded to enable youth with disabilities to realize their dream and serve in the IDF like most young Israelis, for whom service in the IDF is a normal part of life in the years between high school and college. At the same time, the program promotes a more inclusive society and fosters the attitude that people with disabilities can more fully participate in and contribute to society.

I share with Attia our 45 years of experience successfully including campers with disabilities in our eight Ramah overnight camps and three day camps in the United States and Canada. And I stress how both anecdotally and through research, we know that inclusion benefits everyone. For example, [a 2013 study](#), “The Impact of Ramah Programs for Children, Teens, and Young Adults with Disabilities: A Strategic Planning Survey of Special Needs Education Professionals, Ramah Special Needs Staff, Staff Alumni and Parents,” conducted by Dr. Ezra Kopelowitz, shows quite clearly that “Staff and camper alumni who had contact with a Ramah special needs program report major impact on their personal and professional lives. At Ramah, this happens on a massive scale, as each summer, 7,500 campers—some in each camp with both visible and invisible disabilities-- and over 2,500 university aged staff members, populate our camps.

Attia and his colleagues don’t need to be convinced—and they see the potential for inclusion and shaping of attitudes on a massive scale. Yossi Kahana, Director of Development for [Aleh Negev-USA](#) and co-founder of the program, believes strongly that “If every soldier in the IDF has the opportunity to work side by side with people with disabilities, the potential to change attitudes in Israeli society is tremendous.” Kahana now has a personal as well as a professional connection to disabilities. “I’m the father of a child with special needs. My older son is serving in the army and my younger son, Gershon, who is nine years old, is autistic. My dream is that my younger son will one day join his brother in the army.”

As the IDF continues to include soldiers with disabilities on an even larger scale, they will no doubt shape the attitudes of an entire society!

Howard Blas is the director of the Tikvah Program at [Camp Ramah in New England](#) and of the [National Ramah Tikvah Network](#). Howard also serves as a teacher of Jewish Studies and bar/bat mitzvah to students with a range of disabilities and “special circumstances.” He holds masters degrees in both social work (Columbia University) and special education (Bank Street College of Education). Howard received the S’fatai Tiftakh Award from Boston Hebrew College’s Center for Jewish Special Education in 2012

and the 2013 Covenant Award for Excellence in Jewish Education. He writes regularly for many Jewish publica

Deaf Rabbi Busier Than Ever With Chanukah Plans



Rabbi Yehoshua Soudakoff worked to organize and oversee the first public Chanukah menorah-lighting ceremony last year at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., attended by about 100 students, faculty and community members.

Chabad Rabbi Yehoshua Soudakoff has a full plate right now. As one of just a handful of Deaf rabbis in the world, the 23-year-old plans to shuttle between three East Coast cities, where he will be hosting hundreds of Deaf and hard-of-hearing Jews at Chanukah celebrations tailor-made for their community's culture and needs.

The biggest celebration is set to take place in Lower Manhattan at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, where Soudakoff expects approximately 200 people. The party will include a grand menorah-lighting ceremony with a 9-foot-high menorah designed by Ellen Mansfield, a Deaf Jewish artist from Frederick, Md.; a guest appearance by Douglas Ridloff, an American Sign Language (ASL) actor; and, of course, Torah thoughts from Soudakoff himself.

The other two events will be held in Rochester, N.Y., and in Washington D.C.—each of which is home to a university for Deaf and hard-of-hearing people, in addition to a sizeable Deaf community.



Soudakoff even has his own logo to go with the celebrations: the ASL word for Chanukah, formed by two raised hands each with four fingers extended upward, topped by eight flames.

Last year's first-ever public menorah-lighting ceremony on the campus of Gallaudet University—the Washington, D.C.-based liberal-arts university where all programs and services are geared for Deaf and hard-of-hearing students—was something that Steve Brenner, past president of the Washington Society of Jewish Deaf, calls “one of the most unique happening among the Jewish Deaf community in the Greater Washington area for the past 50 years.”

In the presence of approximately 100 students, faculty and community members, Soudakoff explained that the Jewish struggle in the Chanukah story has many parallels to the Deaf story. “The Jews were a minority,” he signed from the podium, “battling against a foreign culture that attempted to assimilate them. And yet, in the end, the Jews won the battle to retain their Jewish identity.



An artist commissioned by Soudakoff prepares a Deaf-themed menorah.

Deaf people can relate to this, as we have struggled for years to strike the right balance between functioning in a hearing world, while being comfortable and even proud of our Deaf identity. Jewish Deaf people, of course, are a minority among minorities. And yet, we are here today, celebrating our Jewish Deaf identity as never before.”

He was assisted in the lighting of a 9-foot-high menorah by Gallaudet University President Dr. Alan Hurwitz and Provost Dr. Steve Weiner.

“It was thrilling for the audience to recite our Chanukah blessings in ASL with Rabbi Soudakoff,” says Brenner.

Like last year’s Washington event, the New York City celebration will be streamed live over the Internet with simultaneous voice translation and captions.



The invitation to Soudakoff's New York Chanukah event for the Deaf features the Statue of Liberty signing "Chanukah" in ASL, with each finger topped by an orange flame.

A Unique Culture

Although his message is often similar to that of his hearing counterparts, Soudakoff notes that being Deaf gives him an important “in” with the Deaf community, which has a unique culture that is often misunderstood or overlooked by others. Through his organization—The Jewish Deaf Foundation—he has founded an overnight camp for Jewish deaf boys; led a group of Deaf young adults from Russia on a trip to Israel; and hosts regular online Torah classes in ASL on the [Jewish Deaf Multimedia](#) website and on [Chabad.org's Jewish.TV](#).

And he says there’s always more to do.

As Brenner quips: “We need 20 clones of Rabbi Soudakoff to send to many big cities where there are large groups of Deaf people.”

But for the short term, Chanukah calls. The rabbi has menorahs to assemble, reservations to tally, speeches to prepare, and, of course, lots of latkes and doughnuts to order.

For more information, visit the [Jewish Deaf Foundation](http://JewishDeafFoundation.org) website or email rabbi@jewishdeaffoundation.org.



The logo for the celebrations can be seen on this yarmulke: the ASL word for "Chanukah," formed by two raised hands each with four fingers extended upward, topped by eight flames.



Gallaudet University President Dr. Alan Hurwitz assisted in lighting the 9-foot-tall menorah last year for the Deaf community.



Provost Dr. Steve Weiner also participated in the memorable ceremony last year.



An invitation to Soudakoff's Chanukah event for the Deaf this month in Rochester, N.Y.

Video of Chanukah menorah lighting in sign language:

http://www.chabad.org/multimedia/media_cdo/aid/2424400/jewish/Menorah-Lighting-with-Sign-Language-ASL-at-University-for-the-Deaf.htm

Celebrating the Asperger's Way



The following post is by Danny's Mother:

Raising a son with Asperger's, we often had to celebrate in a different way. And, you know what? It was really fun and very memorable for all of us. Here are three examples:

When Danny turned 12, we were on vacation in Seattle. To celebrate his actual birthday, Danny didn't want a party or special dinner, but instead requested a tour of Microsoft Headquarters. Fortunately, we had a business acquaintance whose son coordinated a fabulous tour of the campus. I really didn't understand all of the technical terms or descriptions of software – but Danny did! He was focused, happy, thrilled, and social doing something that he wanted to do.

Danny was raised Jewish, and that meant we celebrated his Bar Mitzvah at age 13. To prepare, he studied for months to learn to read Hebrew, learned some prayers, and wrote a speech about the meaning of his Torah portion. (A lot for any 13-year-old!) On his Bar Mitzvah day, he led services, and then we had a celebration. We had just had the diagnosis of Asperger's, so I had a little better idea of what we should NOT do to celebrate. We shouldn't invite too many people. We shouldn't make too much of a fuss of him. We shouldn't celebrate with loud music. This was not the normal celebration of our community, but it was perfect for Danny. At the party celebrating him becoming part of the adult-community, instead of having lots of loud screaming teenagers dancing "YMCA," we had a magician performing. Instead of expecting Danny to participate in any games, he was the judge. And, instead of him arriving into the room with full fan-fare, he sat on his Dad's lap watching close-up magic.

High School Graduation Day was perfect for Danny. My husband and I dreaded the thought of Danny having to sit through a few hours of speeches and a long line of students waiting to get their diplomas. So, when Danny said he really didn't want to go through with the graduation ceremony, we were a bit relieved. But, we knew the importance of celebrating milestones, so we asked Danny for some alternative ideas. What he came up with was spectacular. On the day of everyone else's graduation ceremony, we drove the 1 ½ hours to Los Angeles, had dinner at an Italian restaurant where "picky-eater" Danny could be assured of finding something he'd like on the menu, and made our way to an outdoor venue to attend a symphonic concert featuring the music of video games called "Video Games Live." Although my husband and I felt like we were in a foreign culture in unfamiliar territory, we were elated to see Danny very comfortable and happy and singing or humming along to every song.

Celebrations are important but we quickly learned that we had to do things Danny's way. And, we had fun



My Life with Asperger's

Despite the fact that I can be awkward, Asperger's is something I can use to help better other people's lives.

by [Craig Kohn](#)

Sometimes in life there are situations, people, or times that at first seem like they are worthless or in some cases detrimental, but in time you find out how they come to change your life so much for the good. This is my story.



I have [Asperger's](#) or high functioning autism. I was diagnosed when I was a kid. This does not mean I am what most people think of when they think of a person who has a disability – someone who lives such a different life than you do. That is not me. I am able to function on a level like everyone else. Even people who work with Asperger's have a hard time seeing how I have it now.

As a young kid it would have stood out a little more because I wasn't as good with social skills as I am now. Less developed social skills is one of the big characterizations of autism. Some examples for me were that I used to not smile much (as opposed to now when I almost always have a smile on), I wasn't as good at conversations, and I didn't have the best eye contact. I was always in regular classes, and was able to interact with my peers. Asperger's wasn't so much a part of my life because it didn't negatively affect my life. That was until I went to college.

In college I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do, but wasn't having much luck figuring out what I wanted to do. I looked at a lot of careers, but none of them fit my interests, skills, and that I would be able to do the course work. A lot of people suggested that I try accounting because I would avoid social situations, and my stutter wouldn't be a problem. I tried it, but I could tell that it was not for me because being secluded to a desk didn't feel right for me.

I also looked at Speech Pathology as I had gotten my diaphragm to start working (through deep breathing meditation that a friend of mine got me into) and was getting rid of my stutter by myself. I liked the idea that I could help improve other people's lives. But I later found out the cost of graduate school – and the fact that I didn't focus so much on my secular classes – were going to stop me in that path.

After I graduated from college I went back home to try to figure out what I wanted to do. I found out about the human services field where you help other individuals out, and looked at working with disabled individuals. I got a total of 7 interviews, but didn't get anything. Then while in New York I was put into contact with someone I knew back from Kansas who worked at one of the agencies for disabled people. She helped me get several part time jobs that added up to be full time work. My jobs involved helping other people gain skills to help

them do better in life. It turned out that most of the clients I received had Asperger's like me (but lower functioning than I ever was).

My biggest advantages came from me having Asperger's.

I was able to prove myself in helping my clients in meeting the goals set for them. I could see that both my supervisors and the parents were amazed at the work I was doing. My biggest advantages came from me having Asperger's, as I had more knowledge than most people on what Asperger's is and that I could get fixated on my work. What I mean by that is that some people with Asperger's have one or a few narrow interests that they get really into. They can be extremely interested or focused on that item enough that they are able to become very knowledgeable in that area very easily. With my work I was always looking to see how I could challenge my clients to grow, and I got myself more educated on dealing with individuals with [Asperger's](#). I provided good enough work that in less than 6 months that I got all 4 of the agencies I worked with to give me letters of recommendation.

I also talked to some of the people I knew from Yeshiva University who I realized have Asperger's, most of them EXTREMELY intelligent (one of the possible effects of this disability), to see if I could also help the extremely high functioning population like myself. I realized that even though I could see that they had the skills needed to have a successful relationship they were not sure about dating with their social skills, or were having very bad luck. One guy told me how because the *shadchanim* (matchmakers) looked at Asperger's like any other disability (which is a very wrong view of Asperger's in some cases) he wasn't getting many girls suggested to him.

Now I am starting to take my experience to work privately to coach, in person and through skype, individuals with Asperger's, to help them better function and reach their goals in life. I now realize despite the fact that I can be awkward, Asperger's for me is an advantage and is something I can use to help better other people's lives.

You can visit my blog at <http://craigkohntheaspergerscoach.blogspot.com>

Parenting a Child with ADHD

By Anonymous

Most children are excited about school. But for my eight-year-old daughter, school presents serious challenges. The odds are heavily stacked against her. I can see and feel her apprehension as she checks her supplies one last time. She climbs onto my lap in need of extra reassurance. As she presses herself against me, I stroke her freshly washed hair, and softly tell her over and over again how much I love her. That she will do it. That she will succeed. In her own unique way.



On her forehead there is an invisible label which reads: “ADHD.” This word entered my life and became part of my vocabulary nine months ago, in a doctor’s office. Looking back, I realize that by the age of two years it had become quite evident that she was more active and more difficult to manage than the average child. However it didn’t occur to me at that time that anything was actually wrong. I guess I chalked it up to personality.

It didn’t occur to me at that time that anything was actually wrong I do remember that I was busy with her from the moment she awoke until she closed her eyes. In order to deal with her hyperactivity and her ability to destroy the house (literally), I practically moved into the park, which was, thankfully, around the corner from my apartment. I guess I could have won the Guinness world record for “mother that sits most in the park”! I sat there for practically seven years! It was either playgroup/school, or park. Rain or shine, there we were.

In the winter, I would bundle us both up with layers of clothes. In the rain, we wore rubber boots and plastic raincoats. In the summer, we wore sunscreen! I was equipped. I would wrap up supper for two and bring it to the park. The park table didn’t have a tablecloth she could pull off! The park didn’t have walls to climb on, cabinets or dressers to unpack, or beds to jump on. It had slides, monkey bars and swings, and plenty of grass to run on. Exactly what she needed! And that is how I managed. I am a solution-oriented person, so for me this was the solution.

Unfortunately, it didn’t solve her academic problems and the social and emotional issues that came along with the territory. Our finances also suffered, as my plans to “return to work after the baby gets big enough” never materialized. She was a full-time job in herself. That left us to manage on my husband’s modest salary.

One day, in the middle of her first-grade school year, I received a phone call from her school informing me that a meeting had been scheduled and I was expected to be there. In the back of my mind, I knew that the time to face the obstacles had come. So there I sat on a metal folding chair (my husband was unable to take off from work to attend), looking across a scratched metal desk, at the school principal and the assistant principal and her teachers! Although they were very polite and genuinely concerned for my daughter's wellbeing, I felt like a sheep against the wolves. They did not bite my head off as I expected, but they did say that my child was falling behind in her studies, both English and Hebrew, and that she is very disruptive in class. Further details included getting up when she feels like it, doesn't follow instructions, blurts out answers without being called on . . . As if that wasn't enough, they informed me that she was a "disaster" socially. They instructed me to take her to a psychiatrist, to have her evaluated and treated as needed.

I wasted no time in getting this matter under control. I made lots of phone calls and did extensive research trying to find the most competent psychiatrist. When my daughter was finally diagnosed, I had mixed emotions. I was relieved to know that a heretofore incomprehensible situation was at least making some sense. I also felt that a problem that has a name can also have a solution. However, at the same time, I felt overwhelmed and isolated. I was concerned that this diagnosis could become a label which would be used to judge and condemn my daughter. I wondered how she would manage to make it through school and in the world at large.

I had no support from my husband, who was in denial, and kept on insisting that ADHD is not a real disorder. "What she needs," he insisted, "is an iron hand!" He, like many parents, had difficulty coming to terms with the fact that his child was not like everyone else.

I had no support from my husband, who was in denial, and kept on insisting that ADHD is not a real disorder Having a longstanding aversion to any kind of medication, for me to accept the fact that my child might need stimulants in order to enable her to function in school was not easy. (By the way, I am sure that many of you are wondering why an overactive child needs stimulants. My daughter and her ADHD counterparts seem to be the proud owners of brains that have underdeveloped attention spans. Ritalin targets this part of the brain, and assists in improving concentration and focus.) After much research, I was ready to comply with her doctor's recommendations, and she began taking a fairly low dosage. Although she had some side effects at first, such as trouble falling asleep and a decrease in appetite, with time these symptoms diminished entirely, and I must confess that it has made a huge difference in both our lives.

Things settled into what could be considered a routine. Surprisingly, the semi-respite gave me time to stop and think (a luxury which I had not had for a long time), and I realized that underneath my relief was a strong feeling of loss and disappointment. Unconsciously, I had envisioned a child who, like me, would be a star student and a social butterfly.

Wave after wave of anger and self-pity washed over me. Why was I elected to deal with this problem? Why did my daughter, my innocent child, have to struggle with this disability? Why couldn't my husband be more supportive? Why couldn't outsiders be more compassionate and understanding when she acted up?

These questions lingered in my mind as I went through the motions of living. One evening, after a typically exhausting day, I sank onto the couch, leaned back my head and closed my eyes. A few seconds later (that's how it felt to me, but it might have been longer), I opened my eyes, ready to finish up the evening routine, and saw my daughter standing quietly next to me. I was more than a little bit surprised, since I couldn't recall ever seeing her standing still. She looked at me with an adult-like seriousness, and asked, "Mommy, do you love me?" I felt my mouth drop open and my throat tighten. I reached out, pulled her on my lap and held her tightly. "Of course I do!" I whispered. "I love you very much!"

After she had fallen asleep and I was washing up in the kitchen, I thought about what had just happened. I had been taking care of business and doing what needed to be done, but I had not been taking care of myself. I had not been nourishing myself physically, emotionally and spiritually, and that had resulted in feelings of resentment, which my daughter had obviously sensed. I began paying attention to my eating habits, by cutting out the junk foods, and including vitamin-rich foods and extra supplements in my diet. I joined a dance/exercise group. I also added a whole range of "spiritual vitamins and exercises" which I would like to share with you.

The first one, of course, is Vitamin A—**Acceptance**. I learned to accept my life as is.

The second vitamin is Vitamin B—**Belief**. I believe that nothing happens by chance. Everything is part of a master plan orchestrated by a loving G-d, and both our gifts and our struggles are tailor-made to guide us toward spiritual growth and development.

Vitamin C is **Courage**. I have the courage to move on despite uncertainties and fears.

Vitamin D stands for **Determination**. I am determined to overcome my weaknesses and become G-d-centered instead of me-centered.

Vitamin F? You guessed it—**Faith**. I reaffirm daily that G-d accompanies us and supports us every

step of the way.

Vitamin G is **Gratitude**. When I actively look for things to be grateful for, I am pleasantly surprised. Wherever I look, I see blessings. I notice the times my daughter does well and is manageable. I have begun to say “thank you” to G-d for the miracle of life. I have begun to smile.

Vitamin H—**Humor**. I can’t stress enough the importance of finding the funny bone in ourselves and our lives, and tickling it. I am beginning to respond with amusement rather than frustration. I am beginning to lighten up. There is so much to laugh about.

And last, but not least, is vitamin P—**Prayer**, which, as far as I’m concerned, is much more effective than Prozac. As I recite Psalm 121, “I lift my eyes to heaven, from where will my help come?” my questions dissolve. “My help will come from G-d! The One who created heaven and earth.”

I am her social worker, and she is my one and only client We sit together on the front stoop and review the contents of her backpack, making sure that nothing is missing. The big yellow school bus pulls up, and the door unfolds. My daughter jumps up, her blond hair curling around her face in a halo of disarray. She glances back at me, and in that split second, the look in her eyes tells me what is in her heart and mind. She knows that from me she will always receive unconditional love. As she mounts the bus steps, I know that she will have the coping skills needed to march through the day. If there is something that she cannot handle, she will report back to me and receive validation and support. I cannot always rescue her. I cannot always solve her problems. But I can provide a sympathetic ear and, when she is ready, discuss ways in which she can handle the issue. In situations which escalate, I can intervene and advocate for her. I am her social worker, and she is my one and only client.

The school bus rumbles down the street, and my upstairs neighbor comes down to meet me with her two-month-old baby and a bag full of supplies. She is very glad to get out of the house for a few hours, and considers me the ideal babysitter. My neighbor hurries off to her uncle’s sweet shop, where she will decorate gift baskets and socialize. She is more than happy to split her paycheck with me, giving her a little pocket money and me the extra income needed to get through the month. I hold my tiny neighbor in my arms and he smiles up at me. After I feed and change him, he will keep me company while I do the housework. His placid demeanor never ceases to amaze me. By the time my daughter comes home from school, I will be ready to take her to the park, where we will eat supper and do some homework.

My life has not turned out as pictured or planned, and that is fine with me. Instead of a pampered princess, I am becoming a courageous heroine. My daughter looks up at me, and trust and

admiration are reflected in her eyes. Our journey is far from over, but we both are learning to enjoy the ride.

BY ANONYMOUS

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A Sensory Friendly Passover Seder

<http://www.friendshipcircle.org/blog/2011/04/15/a-sensory-friendly-passover-seder/>



This year, when I am planning my [Passover seder](#), I have been thinking of ways to make it more child and sensory friendly. As you may know, Part of the Seder includes a lengthy amount of time spent on reading the [Hagadah](#) and retelling the story of the Jewish people's [exodus](#) from slavery and the land of Egypt. On [Passover](#) an effort is made to engage the children. We encourage questions and make sure the children are part of the seder. For children with special needs the Passover seder can be very difficult to sit through and can also be very overwhelming.

My own children can barely make it through ten minutes of a regular dinner before they are out of their seats. If I offer vegetables, one child is likely to gag. If I ask the other one a question, I may never get her to stop talking and eat her dinner. Needless to say, when it comes to Passover this year, I have put a lot of planning and preparation into making sure my children stay actively engaged. Below I have provided tips to making your passover seder a child and sensory friendly one.

Hoping your Passover is a "Sensational" one

(The story of Passover is long and detailed and unfortunately we can't give you all the details here as this post would be 9,000 words long instead of 900. Terms and practices that you may not be familiar with have been linked to content from www.passover.org where you can learn more about Passover at your convenience)



Sight

Make sure your child has a [Seder plate](#). Before the seder begins show him or her where each item belongs on the seder plate.

Give your child a [haggadah](#) not one with just words but with many, many pictures and just a few words.

Make a visual schedule of the Passover seder so your child knows what to expect and when to expect it.

Use passover [boardmaker](#) style pictures from igateways.org to let your child visualize the story of Passover.



Smell

Passover brings many new foods and many new smells. On Passover we refrain from eating any [leavened](#) products derived from wheat, barley, oat, spelt or rye. So that rules out bread, cakes, pizza and much more. Many different types of food are made which causes some unfamiliar smells.

One of the strongest smells is the [Maror](#) – Horseradish Root. Prepare your child for the different smells they may encounter especially when it comes to the maror



Touch

The seder is full of new objects to touch and feel.

As part of the seder we dip a vegetable into salt water. Make sure your child gets a chance to do some dipping as well

[Matzah](#) comes in many forms. Try and get some [Shmurah Matzah](#) for a different look and feel. There is a part of the Seder when we [break](#) the middle matzah. Make sure you give your child the opportunity to break their matzah in half!

Before we eat the Matzah we [wash](#) our hands. For many children with Sensory Processing Disorder playing with water has a great calming effect.

[Korach](#) Time is sandwich making time. Help your child create a sandwich of Matzah, Marror and a little bit of [Charoset](#).

To keep busy during the seder make sure to pick up some [Passover Toys](#).



Hearing

[Traditional Passover songs](#) are usually sung by the seder. Try and practice some of the more popular ones ahead of time so they are more familiar and more comfortable. Aside from the singing, your child will hear some of the traditional Hebrew prayers being recited at the seder



Taste

There are a number of different [foods](#) eaten on Passover. If you have a child who is a picky eater, ask if you can bring foods you think your child might eat or have them try some of the foods ahead of time such as Matzah, gefilte fish, charoset or even horseradish. If they decide that they don't like it, you won't feel obligated to make them try it. Better yet, they will have gotten that fear of tasting it out of the way ahead of time and may enjoy the meal all the more so.

PASSOVER CUSHION
FOR LEANING



Vestibular

The vestibular system contributes to balance and to the sense of spatial orientation. It is the sensory system that provides the leading contribution about movement and sense of balance. As we drink the [four cups of wine](#) (or grape juice) and eat the Matzah it is customary to lean as a sign of freedom. Show your child how you are leaning and ask him or her to copy

you Make sure that your child understands just how far they should lean. Provide them with an armchair to limit them from encroaching on someone else's space.



Proprioceptive

This sense refers to how we move and where our limbs are in relation to our own bodies. Keep in mind that seder is probably the longest time your child will sit at a table all year. They are not expected to sit that long at a desk, even at school. Provide them opportunities to get up from the table and walk around.

Have your child help serve food or clear the table.

Ask your child to [act out](#) being a slave by carrying a heavy bag of books over their shoulder and pretending that it is bricks.

Act out the plagues such as jumping like frogs or falling over like cattle. Re-enact the splitting of the sea. Hold up blue sheets and have children walk through them.

Making the Four Children Speak to Us on Passover

Posted: 04/18/2011 7:49 pm EDT Updated: 06/18/2011 5:12 am EDT



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One of goals of the Passover seder is to make this ancient, traditional ritual speak to us today. On Monday night, throughout the world, Jewish people will retell the story of the Exodus with the commentary of the *haggadah*.

For me, the most poignant part of the seder ritual is the section describing four different individuals. These four children have been used as metaphors throughout the ages to show the varied personalities of humankind. They have been portrayed in creative ways through art and other media. [Jay Michaelson recently compared the Four Children to characters on the hit TV show "Glee."](#) Michaelson writes:

"Glee is ... among the most 'out' Jewish shows to grace the small screen. Like the show's gay, disabled, multiethnic and differently sized kids, what's interesting about its Jewish characters is how their difference marks them as 'other,' but, precisely as it does so, includes them in a very 2011 world in which difference is the one thing we all have in common. As it happens, the four Jewish characters in McKinley High School's glee club map quite neatly onto the four children of the Passover seder, and the way each of them performs his or her Jewishness shines a different light on American Jewish identity, and on the themes of the Passover holiday."

A few years ago, I compared the Four Sons (recently changed to "Four Children" for egalitarian reasons) to four distinct male students I had taught over the years in various Hebrew School settings. I recognized that the descriptions of the Four Children resonate with different learning styles and abilities. I have changed the names of the students to protect their privacy.

Teaching to All: The Four Children in Our Classrooms

Several of my young students have made lasting impressions on me as a teacher. However, four of these students in particular, and specifically my interactions with them, have helped define me as a teacher and influenced my educational methodology.

During my second year of Rabbinical School, I was asked to teach a class of unruly seventh graders in a suburban New Jersey synagogue school. Out of the 15 or so seventh graders, there was one over-achieving sixth grader. Ethan had been pushed up a grade because he consistently claimed boredom in his previous years of religious school. After the first rough month, I effectively established proper classroom management, but one student remained disruptive. Once I recognized that Ethan had to be challenged in more advanced ways than the other students did, we connected. His interests lay in grasping difficult Talmudic concepts and halakhic disputes. While the other students worked to make sense of the Hebrew language, Ethan spent class time deciphering pages of Talmud and then he would review them with me after class. To this day, we're still teaching each other, as I spend a couple of

hours at his home each week introducing him to the texts I've encountered in rabbinical school.

Then there was Andrew. Andrew was the first student I met on my first day of teaching fourth grade afternoon religious school during my first year of college. I could tell instantly that he was what teachers would label as "the bad kid." And sure enough, he spent his time in class testing me. It wasn't a normal day in class if Andrew didn't question the point of even attending Hebrew school at all. As a rookie teacher without much supervision, I made a ritual out of sending Andrew out of the class each time he misbehaved following numerous warnings. It was only after a frank discussion with him before class one day that I realized the problem was mine. I might have been teaching the right information, but I wasn't teaching it in the right way for Andrew. That class was a watershed moment because from that day on, I approached Andrew differently as a learner, and he responded by changing his attitude in the classroom. Andrew was my star student the following year in fifth grade and in the subsequent sixth grade. Last year during Pesach, we had a chance to sit together, catch up and study a little Torah. I took the opportunity to wish Andrew well as he prepared for his first year of college.

When I received a phone call asking if I would consider tutoring a young boy named Jonathan, I was given a stern warning from his mother. "Jonathan, well, he has a learning disability. It's severe. You know, he's just not a real smart kid and he couldn't handle Hebrew school." I accepted the challenge nevertheless, and discovered that Jonathan learns best when the material can be connected to his interests. We talked about Judaism in hockey terms -- his favorite sport. I would ask Jonathan about a rule in professional hockey, and then, I would explain a rule in Judaism. And since he could only concentrate for small amounts of time, we would study the Hebrew alphabet or holidays or Jewish values, and then take a break and schmooze for a few minutes. The relationship developed, and after four years, I officiated at Jonathan's bar mitzvah. The boy who was told he wouldn't have a bar mitzvah because he'd never be able to read Hebrew led the congregation in a beautiful Havdallah service and taught us how he understands his role as a responsible member of the Jewish community.

Another student who made an impact on me as a teacher, perhaps without ever knowing that he did, was Kevin. Kevin was a fourth grade boy with autism whose parents requested that he be mainstreamed into religious school even if it just meant sitting in the back of the room and watching the other children learn. He rarely spoke, and when he did, it was never applicable to the class's conversation. One day, as the other students worked

on an art project, I handed Kevin some paper and some markers. I asked him to draw whatever he wanted. He put marker to paper and depicted the various themes of Rosh Hashanah -- the exact topic the class had been discussing the week prior. Kevin didn't, and indeed couldn't, articulate that he understood the lesson until I asked him to respond in the way that best suited his learning style. His disability made him the student who just didn't have the capacity to respond -- or at least not in the normative way. *K'neged arba'ah banim dibra haTorah* -- Four students, four very different types of learners. And four very different approaches that I, as a teacher, had to utilize.

Howard Gardner, a professor at Harvard, defines seven types of intelligences. Some students, he explains, are more skilled with language, while others are more logical or spatially perceptive. Some learn by physically acting out new skills, and others are better listeners. Some learn better in groups, and others are more introspective. These are the multiple intelligences. It's no secret that we each learn best in different ways, but the million-dollar question is how teachers can best teach to all students, to all learning styles. This is the central objective of my rabbinate: to be a Jewish educator who can reach each student in the most optimal way for that student to best comprehend the content knowledge. And it is a challenging objective. As a student of Gardner, I understand that I cannot value any one of the intelligences over another -- and therein lays the challenge of meeting each student's needs as a learner.

The debates among educators today focusing on the best practices for teaching are not new to us. In fact, we see them come alive each year at the Pesach seder. The midrash of the *arba'ah banim*, the Four Children, presents four individuals who ask about the tradition in very different ways. The wise, the rebellious, the simple and the one who does not know how to ask. They are four very different learners who need to be addressed as individuals. And the Rabbis of the Mishnah, in their wisdom, understood this well. In Mishnah Pesachim, they prepare us for the seder by teaching *u'lefi da'ato shel ben aviv melamdo* -- that parents are meant to share their Jewish identity with each child "according to his or her intelligence," taking into account background, age, personality, attitude and learning style. Perhaps without possessing the language that Gardner introduced to us more than 20 years ago, the rabbis still understood the concept of multiple intelligences.

We see this elaborated on in Pirkei Avot -- the Teaching of the Sages. We learn about four types of students. *Maher lishmo'a u'maher l'abed* -- quick to understand but quick to forget. *Kashe lishmo'a v'kashe l'abed* -- one who understands with difficulty but seldom forgets. *Maher lishmo'a v'kashe l'abed* -- quick to understand and seldom forgets much like our wise child at the seder. And *kashe lishmo'a u'maher l'abed* -- learning is difficult for this

student and when knowledge is gained, it is not retained. Further, in Pirkei Avot, metaphors are attributed to these four learners: the sponge, the funnel, the strainer and the sifter. These mishnayot describe four diverse learners, but they do not advise on how to best instruct them. The haggadah addresses this need.

The seder is a pre-packaged curriculum that considers the multiple intelligences. Dr. Ron Wolfson characterizes the seder as "a talk-feast in four acts." And throughout these four acts, a variety of teaching methods are presented, making the seder a model for teachers. The Pesach seder, as a system or process, demonstrates that we need to have a supply of pedagogical tools at our disposal when presenting information.

Throughout the evening and into the night, the seder keeps our attention and that of the children. It does this through experiential learning, with songs and games, with show and tell, through interpretive text study, and by way of a forum for questions and dialogue. The seder plate, the eating of odd mixtures of food, the mnemonic devices, the telling and re-telling and the catchy tunes are all ways to attract our varied learning styles. And if we want everyone at our seder to truly feel a part of the Exodus from Egypt, as is the mitzvah, then it is incumbent upon us to provide the telling, the haggadah, in a manner that allows everyone to receive the Tradition in the best way possible. We must draw on our creativity for this to work. And we must not give up. We must be persistent, telling the same story over and over in different ways until we get it right for every learner assembled in front of us.

Maimonides saw the need for this approach as well. He suggested ways to arouse the children who are too bored or cynical at the seder. His words encourage us to invent our own provocations for these types of children. He understood the intention of the rabbis in trying to stimulate inquiry and, perhaps before his time, Maimonides saw the need to motivate those who were apathetic at the seder due to alternative styles or barriers to learning.

The complication about how to teach to the multiple intelligences is that there are more than just four types of learners. And there are more than just seven intelligences to consider. Each of us possesses characteristics of the Four Children. And we each respond best to different teaching techniques depending on the subject, depending on the environment and depending on our mood. The Four Children provides a strategy for addressing four different aspects of each student.

Rashi, the medieval French biblical commentator, questions the placement of the Four Children text in the haggadah. He explains that we are not likely to

think that it is connected to the section preceding it, but it is. In fact, he reads the section *Baruch hamakom baruch hu* right into the Four Children section, telling us that it is *samuch*-- connected. Thus, Rashi's understanding is that we are praising the Holy One for giving us the Torah and making it accessible to each of us, alluding to the characteristics of the Four Children. Reading Rashi with our understanding of the multiple intelligences, we, in effect, are thanking God that the Torah addresses different learning styles. I also understand this to mean that we are grateful for God's gift of the Torah, but it is now up to us to figure out how best to teach it to our children and to others. Just as we are partners with God in creation, so too are we partners with God in education.

Being God's partner means having to accept that there are those for whom barriers exist to learning due to a disability. This poses a challenge to both the learner and the teacher. In Judaism, we are empathetic to those for whom disabilities get in the way of learning. Some of our greatest leaders had disabilities. Both Yitzchak and Ya'akov suffered from blindness in old age. Moshe, our leader par excellence, suffered from a speech impediment. And a handful of our rabbinic sages experienced disabilities that did not hold them back from being links in the chain of our tradition.

Our Torah teaches us that we must not put an obstacle before the blind. This directive can be understood to mean that we must try to not teach in a manner in which the student will comprehend. We must teach so that the student will succeed. We must focus on their strengths rather than on their weaknesses or disabilities.

On the subject of special education, Rabbi Reuven Hammer wrote 25 years ago that "the responsibility of the Jewish community springs from the traditional Jewish emphasis upon the importance of education not only for the elite, but also for everyone." We, as educators, do not want to label children or pigeonhole them into broad categories as the haggadah does, but we must identify their strengths as learners. And we must detect what barriers exist to learning for them, so we can work around those barriers and make the necessary connections for educational success.

Today, the Conservative Movement's Solomon Schechter schools are addressing the growing need for special education by reaching out to those with exceptional learning styles and individual requirements. Camp Ramah's Tikvah program is a national model for excellence in summer education for those with learning challenges. And a new organization is providing a wealth of special needs services for children with learning disabilities, creating a new, cutting-edge curriculum for Jewish day and synagogue schools.

MATAN co-founder Meredith Englander explained the goals of the curriculum in a recent article in the *New York Jewish Week*: "In each class, you are likely to have students who experience success through different modes of learning. This multi-leveled curriculum presents varied lessons, each coded with a special symbol indicating a particular learning style, such as tactile, experiential, kinesthetic, auditory or visual, providing different levels with different learning modes."

The learner who is unable to phrase the right questions might possess a barrier to learning. It is up to us to help these learners in the *she'eno yode'ali'ol* category construct the necessary questions. From the haggadah, we learn that asking the right questions is an essential component of the learning process. The Four Questions that the youngest child at the seder traditionally asks are also a pedagogical tool. They are spoon-fed to the child to precipitate dialogue and encourage question asking from all the participants at the seder. But they are also used to teach the child who might not come up with questions on his or her own, that questioning is important and it is how we learn.

Wednesday night at your seder, I encourage you to ask your guests about their own learning styles you would have seen that there exists a wide variety of approaches to learning at the table and that's precisely why the rabbis created the seder in such a way. Think of your seder as a classroom with a multiplicity of learning behaviors, with a wide-range of social and emotional paradigms. Just as educators cannot teach in one voice to the entire classroom and expect 100 percent reception, neither can we expect our seder to be one-dimensional. We must teach to each individual in a unique way.

The Book of Proverbs advises *chanoch lana'ar al pi darko* -- "Train a child according to his way." This is the lesson I have learned as a Jewish educator over the past few years. While Ethan, Andrew, Jonathan and Kevin may not always fit precisely in one of the Four Children categories of the haggadah, they each, in their own way taught me about how they learn as individuals. They taught me how I must teach to be successful, always keeping in mind the learning needs of each individual student.

Education is a balancing act. We must embrace all of the learning styles represented by the *arba'ah banim* and tailor our haggadah, our telling of Jewish history, to each other's intellectual capacity, attitude and interests. Only then will we all have the merit of fulfilling the central mitzvah of this festival: *b'chol dor vador chayav adam lir'ot et atzmo k'ilu hu yatza mi'Mitzrayim* -- that in every generation we must envision ourselves as having been part of the Exodus from Egypt. If the educational approach is personal, then our encounter with history will be a personal experience as well.

Rabbi Jason is on Facebook.