Religious Communities and the Obligation for Inclusion

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Nathan Weissler is a college student in the Washington, DC area where he grew up. He hopes to major in psychology. After graduation, Nathan hopes to work in the inclusion field.

The question of how a religious community should be welcoming and inclusive is something that I have thought about for many years. At the age of four, my family learned that I was on the autism spectrum. Throughout the years, I have had a variety of experiences regarding being included and all experiences offered critically important perspectives on the topic. One of the aspects of inclusion that I have thought about particularly is the role that clergy members and Jewish communal leaders should have in this area.

Although there are many crucial roles for clergy and community leaders tin this context, I will choose to highlight seven that in my opinion are especially vital.

1. **Role-modeling:** One of the most important contributions that clergy members and communal leaders can make to the area of inclusion is role-modeling. Indeed, the actions that a clergy member or community leader takes can, and frequently does, convey important messages. The concept of *btzelem elokhim*, that all people are created in the image of G-d, is vital and communal leaders and clergy members should convey that fundamental truth through their actions. For instance, I was once attending a program and one of the rabbis in the program asked if I would be willing to join a class beginning in

the middle of the year for students arriving mid-year. I still recall the rabbi telling the students, on the first day, that I would be participating in the class and that he felt that I, like all other participants, would make valuable contributions. The class was a truly positive experience and is a cherished memory to this day. I understood instantly that the message being sent was that being welcoming and inclusive should come naturally and will never forget that very warm welcome!

2. **Avoid viewing inclusion as charity:** I would also encourage communal leaders to refrain from viewing inclusion as an act of charity or *chesed*, or to otherwise behave in a patronizing manner. I cannot speak for others but to view inclusion as *chesed* or charity would for me undoubtedly imply that being included is a privilege as opposed to a right that is inherent in being part of a community. Including and welcoming everybody is a responsibility incumbent upon the community, particularly clergy members and communal leaders. It is therefore enormously important to do one's best to avoid even unintentionally communicating that inclusion is anything less than a full right.

3. **Listening and accepting that everyone has different strengths and challenges:** This is somewhat similar to role-modeling, as clergy members and communal leaders have potential especially in this context to help set an overall communal tone. There have been numerous occasions when I have felt that different people haven't truly been listening to me. For example, there have been times when I have wanted to try to do things that people have felt that I couldn't do and there have been times when I have felt strongly that I couldn't do things that people have thought I could and should. One point that I regularly emphasize is that G-d gives everybody unique strengths as well as challenges. I think that living with special needs has helped me to appreciate my strengths more and has made me more aware of my limitations. A strength that I have is a photographic memory, particularly for dates. If I have a conversation ten years or so ago, for example, I often can remember the date and sometimes even the day of the week!

On the other hand, I have made a decision to not attempt to learn to drive, despite the fact that I sometimes wish I could, because I think that driving would make me anxious to such an extent that I wouldn't be able to focus on driving safely. Occasionally, when people have told me that they wish that they had a photographic memory, I ask, "Do you drive?" Often, the answer is, "Yes." I then say, "Well, I don't and that's something that I'm unable to do. You can do something that I would like to do and I can do something that you wish you could do" and cite that as an example of G-d giving us all our unique areas of strength and challenge. It might sound obvious but people, regardless of whether they have special needs or not, are the most authoritative sources on what they can and cannot do! Additionally, it is crucial that clergy members and Jewish communal leaders convey the truth of people having different abilities in how they interact with people who have special needs in their communities, and with all people. Taking that knowledge to heart has potential to substantially impact how they respond to different situations and to help set the overall tone for communities.

4. **Actively seek out opportunities:** I would also advise communal leaders and clergy members to actively seek out opportunities for individuals who have special needs to use their strengths. That is an ultimate way in which one can let people with special needs know that they, as people, are valued. At my family's synagogue, for several years, I did writing for children's programming for several years about the Parashat Hashavua (weekly Torah portion). It is hard to overstate how important that experience has been in my continued development.

5. **Make sure that actions match words:** It is easy to say that one is inclusive but what will truly give those words meaning is conducting oneself in a manner that is consistent with those words. In addition to creating a general environment favorable to inclusion, there should ideally be a group of people dedicated to putting ideas about inclusion into action. Although an environment favorable to inclusion is a necessary first step, it is just that, a first step, on the way to meaningful action. Furthermore, if there is a committee addressing inclusion, it is critical that individuals who have special needs serve on the committee. That directly relates

to the point, discussed earlier, about people who have special needs being given opportunities to use their strengths.

6. **Staff training:** Another area of importance is training of synagogue staff by a professional. Very simply put, people cannot do things if they don't know how to do it. There have been instances when people in leadership positions in the Jewish community unintentionally behaved in ways that, to me, did not feel inclusive and later expressed genuine regret. Staff training is thus a critical means of helping to guarantee that our communities will be welcoming and inclusive.

7. **Creating opportunities for individuals who have special needs to be clergy and communal leaders:** I cannot stress enough the importance of there being opportunities for individuals who have special needs to become clergy and communal leaders. As important as statements of aspirations to continually become more inclusive and actions in that direction truly are, it is harder to make a more powerful statement of commitment to inclusion and acceptance, as a fundamental, nonnegotiable right, than to regularly create opportunities for individuals who have special needs to serve in leadership roles and for communities to embrace that reality. Furthermore, in my opinion, individuals who have special needs serving in leadership roles sends a signal to other people with special needs in the community about their absolute right to be accepted and included.

In conclusion, I want to say that it is all right to make mistakes. We often learn from our mistakes in ways that we might not otherwise. We are only human but a test of communal leadership is a willingness to do things differently if a mistake has been made and being willing generally to think and do things differently. Indeed, my final piece of advice to clergy members and communal leaders would be as follows: always maintain an open mind.

After college graduation, one of the career options that I'm considering are working in Jewish education and making a contribution in the area of inclusion and am looking forward to continue along this path.