

Removing the Obstacles: Suggestions for Inclusion for Bar/Bat Mitzvah Celebrations at Beth El

*“Do not curse the deaf, and before a blind person do not put an obstacle;
and fear Adonai your God, I am Adonai.” (Lev. 19:14)*

This document was developed to provide parents of b’nai mitzvah students with suggestions for mentoring their children in being inclusive of people with differences and disabilities. The process of becoming a bar and bat mitzvah is a process of learning to take responsibility. As we grow up, we learn that we need to take responsibility for others in our community. This includes making sure that all members of our community are included and feel welcome to participate fully.

You may remember your own experience of being this age, and how difficult it was when you or other teens felt excluded. These suggestions are designed to help you think about how to ensure that all the children in the Torah class are part of the bar and bat mitzvah community.

Whether they are teens with “invisible” differences (autism, dyslexia, or emotional problems) or those whose differences are more physically obvious (deafness, use of a wheelchair, heavier children), teens with differences are often excluded from full participation. Young teens don’t do this purposefully to hurt others... but it does hurt. When kids are left out, they feel invisible. They feel as if they have no place in their community.

To teach your child to be a responsible member of the community, you may need to take affirmative steps to make sure that his or her peers are included and welcomed by the larger group.

Throughout this guide, there are stories that describe situations when kids with differences tend to be left out. We encourage you to think about the choices provided at the end of each vignette and to talk about them with your teen or with other parents.

Emma

Emma is a smart, funny, and very pretty girl who has muscular dystrophy. She uses a wheelchair, but doesn’t let that stop her from being involved in after school activities, and she is on her student council at her middle school. She doesn’t like people to make a big deal about her disability. At the Torah class retreat, her room is on the first floor of the Inn. After the activities have concluded for the evening, she goes into her room to get her phone, and when she comes back, she realizes all the other teens have gone upstairs. She can hear them talking loudly back and forth and laughing. She wheels over the stairs and looks up, not sure of what to do.

You happen to see Emma at the stairs, looking sad and uncertain. What should you do?

- a. Don't do anything; the official part of the evening is over. While you feel bad about Emma's situation, it's not your responsibility to ensure that Emma is included.
- b. Go tell Emma's parents that she is at the bottom of the stairs and all the other kids are upstairs.
- c. Help Emma brainstorm ways to solve this problem on her own, such as calling one of the kids' cell phones to ask them to come downstairs.
- d. Go upstairs to find your child and one of her good friends. Suggest that they all come downstairs to gather in Emma's room so that Emma can be included.

Discussion questions about Emma:

- There were several different options. Was one of them a clear choice from your point of view, or would more than one be appropriate?
- Is it in fact the role of other parents to either help Emma directly, help Emma's parents, or to ask their own child to do something differently? Or is it something that is not your responsibility?

Now read a similar story about a boy named Jonathan. Would your reaction or feelings be any different?

Jonathan

Jonathan is a sweet boy who is very endearing, but is immature in comparison to other children his age; he is not really sure how to approach other children and doesn't understand a lot of their humor. He has a disability that affects his ability to communicate socially with other children. At the Torah class retreat he has a hard time fitting in with the other children, but likes them a lot. Your child thinks Jonathan is strange, and has already told you that Jonathan's not on his list of kids to invite to his party. You heard from your son that none of the other kids wanted to room with Jonathan on the retreat.

At the retreat, after the activities are done for the evening, Jonathan goes to his room to get his phone. When he comes back down, he realizes all the other teens have gone upstairs. He goes upstairs but all the doors are closed, and he can hear all the other kids laughing and giggling.

He comes back downstairs and tells his mom that all the other kids are behind closed doors. You happen to hear him say this to her. What should you do?

- a. Don't do anything; the official part of the evening is over. While you feel bad for Jonathan, it's not your responsibility to ensure that Jonathan is included.
- b. Tell Jonathan's mother that you will help her figure out a way to make sure Jonathan is included.
- c. Brainstorm solutions with Jonathan about how to be included, like knocking on the doors and asking the other kids to let him in.
- d. Go upstairs to find your child and one of the other kids. Suggest that one of them come down and ask Jonathan to join them. Acknowledge that even though Jonathan's differences make it a little difficult to connect with him, it's important to find a way to include him.

The Torah class retreat

You can talk with your child about the following suggestions:

- At mealtime, please make sure all children are invited to eat with the group and feel welcome
- In the evening after dinner, the kids go upstairs to their rooms to hang out while the parents stay downstairs. This is an unstructured social time. Please keep the doors to your room open and make sure all the children of your gender are invited into the room.
- During outdoor game time, please invite kids to join you.

At the service and kiddush

At bar and bat mitzvah services, the teens tend to sit together in one section of the sanctuary. They enjoy being part of a group, feeling empowered as one of many.

Emma: Part 2

Emma rolls into services one morning and sees many of the other teens sitting together near the window. She'd really like to sit with the group, but it is going to be difficult to get through the sanctuary with her wheel chair to the other side. You are ushering at the bar mitzvah; what should you do?

- You and some of the other ushers from the Torah class were of course expecting Emma, and made sure that there would be a path cleared for Emma's wheelchair.
- You can ask your daughter and a few of the other girls to move to the side where Emma is so she doesn't have to sit alone.

At the beginning of the service when everyone is selecting their seats, please look around to make sure that the kids in your Torah class are welcome to sit with the group. If a teen says no, that's fine. It may take a couple of times asking them in order to help them feel welcome. (Please note that the congregation discourages kids from sitting in groups of more than 10 during the service.)

Shoshana

Shoshana is a girl who has some developmental delays and problems regulating her emotional responses. She loves the other girls in the Torah class, but is very unsure how to act toward them; many of them usually just ignore her, as if she is not even there. When she walked in Ben's bar mitzvah service, she saw a large group of girls sitting together near the window. One of the girls, Arianna, got up and asked Shoshana if she wanted to sit with them. Shoshana was very happy about this and walked with Arianna to sit with the large group. During the service, Kayla, one of the other girls in the Torah class, helped Shoshana find her place in the siddur, and made sure she was included in dancing at the start of the service. Shoshana was beaming; later they both made sure to ask Shoshana to sit at the table with them and several other teens during the kiddush lunch.

When Shoshana's mother saw this she was moved to tears. "Your girls are truly daughters of the commandments" she later told Arianna and Kayla's parents. "They really understand what it means to be inclusive."

Parties

Some teens have a party for their bar or bat mitzvah, either directly after the Kiddush, Saturday evening, or even on a different weekend. It's a chance for the bar/bat mitzvah to have fun after all the hard work they have put into preparing. While your child may feel uncomfortable inviting children with differences or disabilities, your responsibility to care for your community does not go away. If you're inviting any boys from your Torah class, please invite all the boys. If you are inviting girls, please invite all the girls. If you are inviting both, then please invite all children from your class.

Parents: because you are the ones making the final list and ensuring invitations are done correctly, it is your responsibility to ensure that this happens. We all remember what it feels like to not receive an invitation.

Shoshana: Part 2

Shoshana was at Sofia's bat mitzvah service, and was sitting with a large group of girls; one of the girls had invited her to sit with them. Several girls were talking about what kind of shoes they were going to wear that night. "Shoshana, what are you going to wear to the party?" asked one of the girls who was trying to be nice about including her. "What party?" asked Shoshana. She loved going to all of these parties. "Shhh," said one Sofia's close friends. "Sofia only had to invite her to the service, not to the party, so she isn't invited. Stop talking about it, it's not polite," she said, bursting into laughter, and trying unsuccessfully to talk softly. Shoshana heard every word. When she got into the car after the service she burst into tears. "Dad," she cried, "Why didn't Sofia invite me to her party?"

Please remember: The kids talk about the party and it's painful to hear that conversation and not have received an invitation. No one at Beth El can force you and your child to invite all of the children in the Torah class to the party. But you would certainly be setting a good example for your child, as well as the other children and parents.

What if a child needs supervision?

If there is concern that a child who has some kind of disability needs supervision, then please speak to their parents about how to make their child feel welcome at your child's party. They will not be offended (and if they are, you can be satisfied that you in fact did the right thing). Also, if you are having the party catered, please do not feel that you need to incur the expense

of providing dinner for the parents. They do not expect an invitation to the dinner. They will be happy to be there and can certainly entertain themselves or sit out in the hallway if needed. However, as the hosts, it is your responsibility to ask them if their attendance would facilitate their child's participation, because nobody wants to ask for an invitation.

Just as children with differences and disabilities feel excluded, their parents tend to feel isolated and uncomfortable when their children are faced with potentially exclusionary situations. By talking directly with parents about how to include their child, you will have made the parents — and by extension their children — feel as though they are a valued member of the community.

Thank you for doing your part to help make Beth El a caring community for all ages and for teaching your children how to make their teen community caring and supportive of all their peers.