

Autism Society of America Religion and Special Needs

The Jewish Perspective

By Joshua Weinstein

Before Passover, my other children enthusiastically presented me with the projects they had made in Yeshiva (Hebrew school). My heart sank when my son who has autism and attends a public school brought me his book bag, which I opened only to find the Easter egg he had painted in class. My son knows how to say the "Shema" prayer, but can also tell me stories about Santa and the Reindeer.

We have accepted that God has chosen for us to have a child with autism. When he became of school age and we sought to provide him with Jewish education, we were extremely disheartened to learn that not a single school program existed that would serve the needs of Jewish children with autism. Doesn't each and every Jewish child deserve the opportunity to receive a Jewish education to the best of their individual abilities?

-- Excerpt of a letter from a parent to the Shema Kolainu School

This was my first introduction to the pain and feelings of a Jewish parent on her inability to send her child to a school of her choice that would help keep the family identity. There were no Jewish schools using ABA (Applied Behavior Analysis, an intensive behavioral intervention technique) for children with autism anywhere in the United States.

Since I founded Shema Kolainu, the first Jewish school using ABA on a one-to-one basis for children with autism in the US in 1988, we have been flooded with phone calls from heartsick parents on a daily basis. Although not a religious school, Shema Kolainu fulfills the need to learn about Jewish culture and heritage as well as focus on the bilingual needs of its students. Our programs and services are designed to accommodate a broad range of functional levels and varying degrees of disabilities. Students are taught about Jewish holidays through music and arts and crafts, to give tzedakah (charity) at circle time, to say and read the Aleph Beth (alphabet), and are taken to a matzo bakery to bake matzo's before Passover, to name a few.

The official name of our school is Shema Kolainu, which means Hear Our Voices. Hearing the voice of the child and the family means assisting the child to reach his or her potential both in an academic setting as well as a community setting. It is not enough for a child to achieve in the classroom and then not have the skills needed to be successfully integrated into their community and partake of his or her own culture and heritage. This is extremely important and beneficial for the individual with autism, the family, and the community at large.

Rituals and Individuals with Autism

Children who have autism spectrum disorders benefit greatly from consistency. The Jewish religion has practices such as daily prayer and weekly ceremonies in a synagogue. One mother told me of how her 16-year-old daughter who has autism attends synagogue each week, uses a prayer book, and even answers "AMEN" along with the congregation. A local synagogue gives a young person with autism the honor of collecting the prayer books after services.

Below are other examples of activities on which children with autism maybe encouraged to participate:

- Opening and closing the ark before the Torah (Jewish scripture) is read,
- Helping the reader turn page numbers
- Assisting in preparing and setting up the kiddush (Sabbath reception)
- Helping to put away the prayer shawls after services

Familiarity with these practices from an early age promotes greater inclusion into the community as adults and helps some children to better understand their cultural and religious practices.

Special Ceremonies

Ceremonies can be a wonderful and meaningful experience for both the Child and his or her family. When a Jewish child turns 12 or 13 years old, he or she undergoes a ceremony called a Bar Mitzvah (boys) or Bat Mitzvah (girls), which symbolizes entrance into the realm of adulthood and the observance of mitzvahs (positive deeds).

A child with autism, depending on his or her functioning level, can participate in a variety of ways:

- Some may be called to read from the Torah,
- Others may recite a passage from a prayer book
- Still others may recite a Bar Mitzvah speech

One family chose to make a Bar Mitzvah for their son with autism. They invited family and people who had made a difference in their son's life over the years. The mother says emphatically that this was the best decision she has ever made. Her son enjoyed the ceremony and reception, and the family felt comforted knowing that they were surrounded by people who love and support them. Their son's favorite activity is to look through his Bar Mitzvah album and watch himself on the video.

Holidays

The holidays can be a stressful time for a person with autism because it is a breach in their daily routine. If a child is educated about the holidays before they arrive, he or she will be more comfortable and feel at ease. This, in turn, will alleviate much stress from the family.

It is important, therefore, to remember to apply the techniques used to involve the individual with autism in daily activities to these special activities. The individual with autism may be asked to participate at some level in many rituals or ceremonies, such as:

- The weekly Sabbath festivities in the home,
- The Sabbath festivities at the synagogue,
- The Passover Seder,
- Chanukah candle lighting

All of these activities create a bonding between parent and child and the community at large.

Judaism and Special Children

Judaism has strong traditions regarding special children. It is said that the Chazzan

Ish, a great Rabbi, always stood up when a special child entered the room because he said that their souls are lofty and pure.

Even so, a local synagogue may need some guidance and sensitization to the needs of its special congregants. If there are issues that arise concerning a person with autism or other special needs, it is a good idea to set up a private appointment with the rabbi.

Issues that can arise may include a child's disruptiveness during services, inclusion into youth group activities, and fostering greater understanding and sensitivities from members of the congregation toward the population with autism. Inclusion of people with autism and other disabilities into our community and places of worship is beneficial to us all. We can all learn a tremendous amount from them about patience, perseverance, dedication and sincerity.

When we introduce an individual with autism into a religious community and help them relate to the holidays, customs and celebrations become more meaningful to everyone. This, in turn, helps those in the community understand the child better as he or she performs certain rituals together. This brings parents and siblings closer to their child with autism and benefits both the family and everyone close to them.

It may sound cliché, but the following statement is both apt and true: "Families that pray together, stay together."

Joshua Weinstein, M.Ed., MBA, is the President and founder of Shema Kolainu - Hear Our Voices, the first Jewish school for children with autism in the US.