



Jewish Text Resources

Texts for study, sermons or articles



The Jewish tradition is rich in texts that shine a light on how individuals and communities can and should care for, appreciate and be welcoming for people with disabilities. Modern rabbis have added to this treasure chest, as has modern research, and non-Jewish thinkers.

Making community accessible to all

- You shall not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling-block before the blind; you shall be in awe of thy God: I am the LORD. [JPS] (Lev. 19:14)

- This [mitzvah not to curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind] is also part of the concept of maintaining harmony and the dignity of human beings one to another...and it is written in the beraita... “This is the book of the generations of mankind” (Bereishit 5:1)-Ben Azai states: This a major principle of the Torah” and the Raavad explains that he is referring to the end of the verse “[mankind] who was made in the image of God”- whom are you degrading? [when you shame another human being], whom are you cursing? [when you curse another human being]? The image of the Holy One Blessed be He” And someone who does not think this way is labeled as if the divine image is not resting upon him!”

R. Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, *Meshiv Davar, Leviticus 19:14*

- We do not do things FOR people with disabilities. We do things WITH people with disabilities.

Shelly Christensen, *Jewish Community Guide to Inclusion of People with Disabilities (JCGIPD)*, p. 16

- Every member of the People of Israel is obligated to study Torah—whether one is rich or poor, physically able or with physical disability.

Maimonides, *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Talmud Torah, Ch. 10

Understanding Disability

- I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand. (Confucius)

- We don't see things as they are, we see things as we are.

Anais Nin (French-born, American writer, 20th century)

- Living with a disability is difficult. Acknowledging this difficulty is not a defeat, but a hard-won accomplishment in learning to live a life that is not disabled. The difficulty for people with

disabilities has two parts—living our ordinary, but difficult lives, and changing structures, beliefs, and attitudes that prevent us from living ordinarily.

Nancy Lynn Eiesland, author of *The Disabled God*, professor at Emory University
Cited in *Barriers to Bridges*, National Organization on Disability

- Having a disability is not what defines a person. A person with a disability is not known as “the woman in the wheelchair.” She should be known as Sarah, who is an artist, a teacher, a student or a congregant. She is also a person with a disability. [This is known as “People-First Language.”]

Shelly Christensen, *JCGIPD*, p. 16

- Inclusion is not a “one size fits all” proposition. When in doubt—ASK!

Shelly Christensen, *JCGIPD*, p. 21.

Welcoming community, holy community

- Jews are commanded to open their homes to visitors, particularly the poor and learned. Jews are not to convert their homes into fortresses, protecting the nuclear family from invasion, but to sensitize their children to other people by inviting visitors regularly into their homes. The house is not to be a refuge, but a bridge—if the analogy can be imagined, a kind of spiritually self-aware hotel.

Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf, *Unfinished Rabbi* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1998), p. 60

- For my house shall be a house of prayer for all people. (Is. 56:5)

- Shammai used to say, “Make Torah your main occupation; say little and do much; and greet every person with a friendly face.” (Pirkei Avot 1:15)

- The house of worship represents one place where the barriers fall and we all stand equal before God.

Rabbi Harold Kushner

- A welcoming congregation or organization offers:

 - empowerment, not pity

 - advocacy, not avoidance

 - support, not stigma (from *Barriers to Bridges*, National Organization on Disability)

- Because when I imagine one of our great forefathers, one of the *avot* that graces so many of our blessings, was damaged, my appreciation for our spiritual tradition goes enormously. . . .

Isaac is a whole different kind of role model. Isaac is the one almost disposed of, sacrificed, and yet he perseveres. With all of his limitations, his woundedness, he marries and raises two children—he *affirms life* from his place of woundedness. Maybe this is why he loves Esau so much. Maybe he knows that Jacob is to inherit the mantle, but deeply feels Esau’s pain and rejection, and does all that he can to soothe and comfort him. Maybe we are meant to return to this story every year on Rosh Hashanah not because of Abraham’s last-minute decision *not* to sacrifice Isaac, but because we learn that Isaac, who was disadvantaged to begin with, was able to overcome this horrific decision and make a life.

Rabbi Dan Goldblatt, of Beth Chaim Congregation in Danville, CA

Valuing difference

- A gem in the mouths of the Rabbis of Yavneh: I am God's creature and my fellow is God's creature. My work is in the city and their work is in the field. I rise early for my work and they rise early for their work. Just as they do not presume to do my work, so I do not presume to do their work. Will you say, I do (learn) much and they do (learn) little? We have a tradition: One may do much or one may do little; it is all the same, provided one directs one's heart to heaven.

Babylonian Talmud, *Brachot* 17a

Soncino translation, edited by Iris Koller for accessibility and gender neutrality

- It is better if the Prayer-Reader is deformed. God is not like a king of flesh and blood who uses whole vessels and throws away those that are broken. God prefers broken vessels, as the Psalmist declares, “A broken heart and a contrite heart, O God, Thou will not despise.” (Ps. 51:19) [JPS]

Rabbi Meir of Rotherberg, *Teshuvot Pesakim u-Minhagim* 1, 53

- Blessing upon seeing a differently-formed person: “Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, Creator of a variety of creations!” (Based on Babylonian Talmud, *Brachot* 58b)
- Blessing upon seeing a crowd of Jews: “Blessed is God who discerns secrets, for the mind of one does not alike another, nor is the face of one like another.” (Babylonian Talmud, *Brachot* 58a)
- Many have learned that . . . A person who hears less may see more. One who sees less may perceive more. One who speaks slowly may have more to say. A person who moves with difficulty may have a clearer sense of direction.

G. Thornburgh, *That All May Worship: an Interfaith Welcome to People with Disabilities*, National Organization on Disability, Washington, D.C. (2000).

- Why was only one person created by God on the sixth day of creation? It is to indicate the greatness of the Holy One, Blessed be God. A human beings mints many coins from the same mold, and they are all identical. But the Holy One, Blessed by God, strikes us all from the mold of the first human and each one of us is unique. Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

- The Torah reminds us that we are made "b'tzelem Elohim," in the image of God. If God is infinite, then every creature made in God's image will reflect a different finite aspect of that infinite Source of life. Rabbi Brad Artson, *Walking in a Crowd, Standing Alone: Shabbat Parashat Pinchas*

- Finally, I can see in my son, a beautiful soul, and a zisen neshomeh trying to express itself, and I see his sickness trying to shut him in. I see Jacob beating against the limits of his autism, struggling to emerge. I know my Jacob from the inside out, and I know that my Jacob is not his illness. But I also see people shying away from Jacob — confusing his illness for him and not seeing the beautiful boy but seeing instead a label, autism. Jacob isn't autism and Jacob isn't autistic. Jacob is Jacob. And he is like every other child, precious, and sweet, and beautiful if you can learn to address him in a way that he can respond to. It takes effort. It takes starting with Jacob's illness and working toward Jacob's soul, so that his label is a tool, not an obstruction. We live in a world of labels; we live in a world of division. We live in a world that sees only the label and dismisses the person beyond the label. We don't take time to see the person who that label is hiding, who that label is distorting and covering. I have learned that everybody is somebody's Jacob. And every Jacob has parents who, like me, pray that someone out there will be able to see their "Jacob" with love and with compassion. That some kind soul will look beyond the label and will care for their child with kindness and warmth.

We all need to see other people as worthy of our love, not just the ones who are easy to love or to respect, but most particularly those who are not: the nudnik who won't leave you alone, that's somebody's Jacob. The person at work who keeps saying those annoying things, that's somebody's Jacob. The fellow congregant everyone avoids after services, she is somebody's Jacob.

Rabbi Brad Artson, "Everyone is Someone's Jacob: What I've Learned from My Autistic Son," <http://judaism.ajula.edu/Content/ContentUnit.asp?CID=1527&u=5159&t=0>

Human Dignity

- A Tanna retold this before Rabbi Nachman son of Yitzchak: One who embarrasses another in public, it is as if he shed his blood. (Babylonian Talmud, *Baba Mezia* 58b, American Jewish World Service translation)

- Come and learn: Human dignity is so important that it supersedes even a biblical prohibition.
Babylonian Talmud, *Brachot* 19b, Soncino translation

- This [mitzvah not to curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind] is also part of the concept of maintaining harmony and the dignity of human beings one to another...and it is written in the beraita... “This is the book of the generations of mankind” (Bereishit 5:1)-Ben Azai states: This a major principle of the Torah” and the Raavad explains that he is referring to the end of the verse “[mankind] who was made in the image of God”- whom are you degrading? [when you shame another human being], whom are you cursing? [when you curse another human being]? The image of the Holy One Blessed be He” And someone who does not think this way is labeled as if the divine image is not resting upon them!”

R. Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, *HaEmek HaDavar* on Leviticus 19:14

- A procession of angels pass before each person, and the heralds go before them, saying, “Make way for the image of God!” (Deut. Rabbah, 4:4)
- Ben Azzai taught, “Do not disdain any person. Do not underrate the importance of anything—for there is no person who does not have his hour, and there is no thing without its place in the sun.”

Pirkei Avot 4:3

- God saw everything that God had made, and behold, it was very good. (Gen. 1:31)
- It is with the heart that one sees rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.

Antoine de Saint Exupery, *The Little Prince*

Responsibility to care for others

- If there be among you a needy person, you shall not harden your heart, but you shall surely open your hand. (Deut. 15:7)
- Our worth is not what we do; it is that we are. What is precious is simply that being ourselves, we bring something precious into the world. We don’t have to earn God’s love, and we don’t have to earn each other’s. Each of us is infinitely precious being ourselves and we need to acknowledge that — a gift from my son. The Talmud teaches us “rachmana leiba’i,” God wants only the heart. And if we have heart, we have everything and if we don’t have heart, no degree, no income, no wealth and fame can compensate for its lack.

Rabbi Brad Artson, "Everyone is Someone's Jacob: What I've Learned from My Autistic Son,"
<http://judaism.ajula.edu/Content/ContentUnit.asp?CID=1527&u=5159&t=0>

- All of Israel is responsible for one another. (Shavuot 39a)

- Hillel said: Be like the disciples of Aaron: love peace and pursue peace; love people and bring them close to the Torah. (Pirkei Avot 1:12)

- Do not walk behind me; I may not lead. Do not walk in front of me; I may not follow. Just walk beside me and be my friend. (Attributed to Albert Camus)

- What does Adonai require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

Quotes 1-3, 10, 16 & 24 taken from <http://www.on1foot.org/sourcesheet/teaching-and-reaching-all-classroom-students>, quote 8 from <http://www.on1foot.org/text/r-naftali-zvi-yehuda-berlin-meshiv-davarleviticus-1914>, quote 17 from <http://www.on1foot.org/text/psalms-51-19>.