

Discussion Guide – THIRTEEN



Background on the Film

THIRTEEN was written and co-directed by Allison Norlian and is inspired by her family's real-life experience. Allison's sister, Becky, and her mother, Mindy, served as the emotional foundation for the story.

Allison's mother is a single parent, and Becky is profoundly developmentally disabled and nonverbal. In the 1990s, Becky became the first person with disabilities to have a Bat Mitzvah at their synagogue in New Jersey.

The film's characters reflect this journey:

"Leah" is inspired by Allison's mother, Mindy, and "Yael" represents Allison's sister, Becky.

Important Note:

In real life, Becky was not denied a Bat Mitzvah. Her rabbi ultimately supported the idea after going through his own transformation in understanding disability. Years earlier, he had denied that people with disabilities existed in his community when a family friend suggested creating a special needs scholarship.

Years later, during a period when Mindy was seeking divorce counseling from him, he revealed that his own grandson had been born with a disability. Mindy walked with him through that difficult reckoning. By the time Becky turned 13, he embraced the idea of her Bat Mitzvah wholeheartedly.

Allison and her family later learned that many other families experienced situations similar to what is depicted in the film — rejection, resistance, and exclusion from religious life. Even today, despite inclusion being a core value in many Jewish communities, disability access is still overlooked in many synagogues, schools, and institutions across the U.S., Canada, and around the world.

Allison on Advocacy

“My sister’s experience, and my mother’s insistence that she have a Bat Mitzvah, was one of my earliest lessons in advocacy. It showed me that we don’t have to accept the status quo — we can speak up and create change. Bar and Bat Mitzvahs weren’t happening for people with disabilities in our synagogue, and with one question — my mother’s question — she helped start a revolution where inclusion is now an essential part of that Jewish community. That lesson is ultimately why I wrote THIRTEEN.”

Discussion Questions:

- Has there been a time when you questioned or challenged the status quo?
- What might prevent people from speaking up when they see something unfair or inaccessible?
- How can your school or synagogue ensure that people with disabilities are included in religious and community life?
- How can your community better publicize the accessible features that already exist?

Overt and Subtle Advocacy

“When I think about advocacy, I think there are two primary forms: overt advocacy and subtle advocacy. While I’m often very direct about disability and Jewish inclusion, I also try to raise awareness in quieter, everyday ways.”

Discussion Questions:

Overt Advocacy:

- What are visible or formal ways your community could promote inclusion?

(Examples: disability-focused Jewish learning, bringing in guest speakers, investing in ramps or assistive technology)

Subtle Advocacy:

- How do we welcome visitors into our buildings?
- What language do we use in our marketing and on our websites?

- Do our materials assume everyone is able-bodied or neurotypical?
- What ideas do you have for increasing awareness of disability inclusion in your community?
- Have you spoken with people who live with disabilities about what they want or need?
- Who in your synagogue or school is responsible for listening to and acting on these ideas?

Allison on Change and Normalization

“Disability inclusion has come a long way, but the world wasn’t always an inclusive place — especially for people who are profoundly disabled. My mom said, ‘This is my daughter, and we are going to include her.’ Growing up with Becky, disability felt normal to me because it was my normal. She was just my sister.”

Discussion Questions:

- What does it mean to be truly welcoming to people with disabilities?
- How can we make sure we don’t accidentally ‘other’ someone?
- Is it okay to ask someone how they want to be supported? Why or why not?
- What is the danger of making assumptions about someone’s needs?

Key Takeaways:

- It is okay to ask how someone wants to be supported.
- We should never assume what kind of help someone needs.
- It’s okay not to know — what matters is being willing to learn.

Allison on Belonging

“Growing up, I often felt unseen — as someone who was Jewish, the child of divorced parents, and the sister of a profoundly disabled person. I wanted to help families like mine feel less alone. I hope THIRTEEN shows that inclusion doesn’t weaken tradition — it strengthens it.”

Discussion Questions:

- In what ways does inclusion improve life for everyone?

(Example: ramps help strollers, delivery workers, and elderly people — not just wheelchair users.)

- Where do you see barriers to inclusion in your community?
- How would you like to see your Jewish community become more inclusive?

Tradition vs. Change

THIRTEEN lives in the tension between honoring tradition and adapting it.

Allison said, “For me, *THIRTEEN* is about what happens when love meets tradition. It asks whether we can hold onto our rituals while also widening the circle of who gets to belong within them.”

Discussion Questions:

- Why do traditions sometimes feel difficult to change?
- When is it important to preserve tradition exactly as it is?
- When is it important to reinterpret tradition?
- Can inclusion itself be a form of honoring tradition? How?
- Who gets to decide when a tradition should evolve?

Language and Representation

How we talk about disability shapes how we think about it.

Allison said, “Language is one of the first places inclusion begins. How we describe disability — in our communities, our institutions, and our stories — directly influences whether people feel seen or erased.”

Discussion Questions:

- What words did you notice being used in the film to describe Yael?
- How can language include or exclude people?
- What does it mean to see a nonverbal character represented on screen?
- How might media influence how we understand disability?

Intersectionality (Multiple Identities)

Allison talks about being Jewish, from a divorced family, and a sibling of someone with disabilities.

Allison said, “I didn’t grow up feeling like I fit neatly into one category. I was Jewish, the child of divorced parents, and the sister of someone with profound disabilities. Those layers shaped how I saw the world and why belonging has always mattered so deeply to me.”

Discussion Questions:

- How do multiple identities shape how someone experiences the world?
- What challenges might arise when someone belongs to more than one marginalized group?
- How can communities be inclusive of people with complex identities?
- Can you think of other groups who might feel similarly “between worlds”?

Emotional Responses to the Film

Discussion Questions:

- What moment in the film affected you the most? Why?
- Did the film challenge any assumptions you had?
- Did you feel uncomfortable at any point? What do you think that discomfort means?
- What emotions did you feel toward Leah? Toward Yael? Toward the rabbi?

Action and Accountability

Discussion Questions:

- What is one concrete change your community could make after seeing this film?
- Who would need to be involved to make that change happen?

- What feels realistic to do now vs. long-term?
- What might resistance look like, and how could it be addressed?

Director's Commentary (Allison Norlian)

In the 1990s, my mother raised my profoundly disabled sister, Becky, and me on her own. Being a single parent to two daughters — one with significant disabilities — meant facing daily inaccessibility and social misunderstanding. My mom became a tireless advocate. Sometimes her advocacy was loud, like wearing T-shirts that read:

“My daughter is autistic — what’s your problem?”

When Becky turned 13, my mother was determined that she have a Bat Mitzvah, even though Becky was nonverbal. To our surprise, the rabbi agreed. Later, we learned how deeply meaningful that decision was: years earlier, he had struggled with disability inclusion until his own grandson was born with disabilities. My mother unknowingly became part of his transformation.

While Becky’s experience was ultimately positive, many families we knew were turned away. Their stories inspired THIRTEEN. The film explores a universal tension:

How do we honor tradition while embracing progress?

My hope is that this film helps both Jewish and disability communities feel seen, valued, and respected. Ultimately, THIRTEEN is about the power of one voice — how one parent’s love and determination can change an entire community.