

JDAIM Guest Sermon by Michael Loberfeld

As part of an inclusion-themed Shabbat service, February 7, 2020, in honor of Jewish Disability Awareness and Inclusion Month, Temple Shalom Inclusion committee member, Michael Loberfeld, wrote and delivered the following guest sermon:



In this Torah portion, the children of Israel escape to freedom across the Sea of Reeds, while Pharaoh's army gets stuck in the mud. After crossing safely, Moses, and the rest of the Israelites, sing to God, in gratitude.

Think back at your life. What lessons can you learn from your own experiences, of being included ... or not being included?

For me, I have learning disabilities. At a young age, I was often excluded from playing sports at school. Sometimes, the other kids would make up reasons why I couldn't play on either team, such as by saying there were an odd number of people who wanted to play.

In baseball, at summer day camp, the other kids told me I always had to play right field, since that is where the least number of balls were hit. But on the rare occasion that a left handed hitter would come to bat, meaning that the ball might actually be hit to me in right field, well, then the other campers would come over to my area of the field, step in front of me, and tell me to stand out of their way.

I know what it feels like to have no friends, because I had no friends - *at all* - from the time I was 16 years old all the way to when I was 27 years old. I am 41 now. I am forever thankful, that, when I was socially isolated, a few thoughtful peers, went against the grain, and warmly and kindly offered their hearts and attention to me. Even though I was not very interested in talking to anybody during that time, they still reached out to me.

These days, sometimes I experience severe anxiety flair-ups. When I am anxious, it feels like extremely negative, intrusive thoughts from my troubled mind are jumping from my mind to

the minds of other people in the room. This is scary to me. I also worry that my facial expressions might be a hint to others that something is wrong, and I am spooked out by little sounds, reflections, and flashes of light, wondering where they are originating from. Sometimes, I have been very anxious here at Temple.

I still struggle with this today, and it is not always easy.

Yet here I am, giving the sermon - *on inclusion*. That is a testament to just how inclusive this Temple is!

When I first joined Temple Sholom, I felt honored when Rabbi Abraham addressed me by name right from the first time I walked in the door, at the very first service that I attended! I was so honored that the Rabbi and the Cantor were talking to me. Being a part of this Temple community over the past 14 years has showed me what love and friendship are, and helped me break out of my shell. And for any people in the room who might be shy or new, the Rabbi, Cantor, and all the people at Temple Sholom are here for you, too. If you think they do not know you yet, go up to them after the service and introduce yourself. Then they will start calling you by name, too.

So to bring this back to all of us, don't our personal experiences with being included - and not included - make us want to include all people in this world, in our thoughts and actions?

After all I've been through, I feel currently, that I am accepted and loved for who I am. I dream of a world in which everyone can feel like they are accepted and loved. We can bring this about by loving each other, which means truly knowing each other, seeing the good that is already there, deep down.

Find someone who hasn't been complimented in a long time, and give them a compliment - a sincere, honest compliment. Find someone who hasn't been thoroughly listened to in a long time, and sit down and listen to them. Some people have not received a compliment in weeks - or even months, perhaps because they haven't been in many conversations. Right now, there are people, in our midst, who need the compliment, even more than many of us might.

What can inclusion mean? It can mean bringing people who are currently on the fringes of our life, into our hearts, into the center of our life. It can also mean Including people who are not yet really a part of our life, and giving them a place in our journey.

Think, about people who might be struggling: from loss, from illness, from the complications that sometimes come with getting older - people who might be living in poverty, even people halfway across the world. Bring them in to your consciousness. Actively seek them out. Help them. Inclusion isn't only about thoughts, it is also about action. Let strangers become acquaintances, and acquaintances become friends.

Be drawn to people not only who are similar to you; be drawn to people who you think might be different from you. Differences, and diversity, create the strongest bonds!

Even include all beings of the earth in your considerations. I challenge you.

I challenge also, myself.

Like the Israelites crossing the sea to freedom, we indeed can be a part of deliverance and triumph today, and that triumph is not only our own triumph, it is also the role we play in the lives of people who need us. These people in need do not always ask us. They do not always ask in words. We have to be vigilant to needs, and offer ourselves.

God created a world in which, throughout time, billions of people take the time to grow and live out their own journeys. We can all play a role in the crossing of the sea, for each Other - helping each other, so we, meaning *all* people, can reach that freedom, something that is so sought after.

This is how we will all cross over as the Israelites did - together. Intentionally, together.

In a passage in our prayer book, Chaim Stern asks. "When will redemption come?"

"When we grant everyone, what we claim for ourselves", Stern says.

And, finally, from a secular source, Phil Collins writes, in his song, *You'll be in my heart*: "I know we're different, but deep inside us, we're not that different at all."