

Shabbat Shalom. My name is Ezra Rifkin. I am autistic and I'm proud of it. I'm unique and never boring.

When Rabbi Ariann asked my Mom and I if I would like to speak to you this year during Jewish Disability Awareness Month, at first I did not want to because in the past, when I have spoken to crowds, I felt scared about failing. But my parents think I'm good at public speaking and my Mom **strongly encouraged** me to do this and helped me write this d'var.

When I was very little, I could not speak well. I began speech therapy when I was two and a half years old and I still have speech therapy on Friday's. My brain is wired differently and it takes me longer to process language. But it's hard to get better at communicating if people don't take the time to talk to you. In elementary school I struggled a lot to use my words instead of gestures in order to communicate. I knew how to say things but I had so much fear I felt the need to stay quiet. My peers talked so fast and now, some of my Professors at Montclair State University do, too.

I want to tell you about my family history, this week's Torah portion and how they both relate to activism and disability. My great-grandfather, Harry H. Schaffer, was the National Commander-in-Chief of the Jewish War Veterans during World War II. He met with Franklin Delano Roosevelt to tell him about the growing threat of Nazi rule and anti-Semitism in Germany. He planned boycotts and organized demonstrations against the German-American Bund at Madison Square Garden. My uncle said that during the famous **Joe Louis and Max Schmeling** boxing match, my great-grandfather arranged for all the Jewish policemen in New York City to work Madison Square Garden in case the German fans started trouble.

In World War II Nazi Germany, 70,000 people were sterilized and almost 300,000 disabled people were murdered. The Nazi's said they were unworthy of life and "useless eaters" and that they had no place in the "master race". Here in the United States we have a shameful history of sterilizing individuals, too: poor people, immigrants, prisoners, Native Americans and people with disabilities.

I am an activist just like my great-grandfather, Harry Schaffer. I have spoken out and marched against gun violence, and in 3 days I will travel to Washington, DC, just like my great-grandfather did, for **Jewish Disability Adocacy Day**. I will lobby our Senators and legislators to co-sponsor Bills to help individuals with disabilities get fair and equal rights. The **ABLE Age Adjustment Act** will help people if they become disabled **later** in life with, for example, multiple sclerosis, Lou Gehrig's disease or a spinal cord injury. I will fight for this.

Hospital stays can be traumatic for people with disabilities, confusing, and frightening; it can be difficult to communicate with medical staff and for some people to feed themselves. When people with disabilities leave the hospital to go home, sometimes their regular support professionals are gone because they had to take another job in order to make a living. The **Bi-partisan Isaiah Baker and Margie Harris-Austin Act** allows people with disabilities to continue

to use their own support professionals during hospital stays. I will practice my speeches on the train down to DC and I will fight for this. One of my favorite slogans is "**Nothing about us without us!**" Like the famous Hillel quote: "*If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?*" Hillel also said to follow *The Golden Rule* and "treat others as you wish to be treated".

This Shabbat's parsha is "Bo". In Hebrew "Bo" means "go"...and it also means "come". Moses—not Moses Rifkin, my older brother, but the original one who stars in today's Torah portion, had a disability, too. In Exodus, God asks Moses to go to Pharaoh and fight for the Jew's freedom.

Moses says, "God, I am not eloquent, I am slow of speech and of a slow tongue. Who am **I** to go to Pharaoh to bring the people out of Egypt?"

God tells Moses, "*I will be with you all the way, until the end.*"

When God commands Moses to "Go to Pharaoh", God is saying "Come with me to Pharaoh. I'll be with you." In the Torah, God tells Moses to speak over 70 times, and when Moses gets into trouble it's because he **didn't** speak up!

When Moses went to Pharaoh and said "Let my People go!", he was not alone. When my great-grandfather went to FDR and said "Let my People go!" he was not alone, and I will not be alone in DC, either.

Before each terrible plague, God sends Moses and Aaron to Pharaoh to try to get the peaceful release of the Israelites. Pharaoh offers to let **some** of the Israelites leave, but Moses does not accept this, saying "**We will all go**, young and old, regardless of social station, we will go with our sons and with our daughters." In other words: **no one goes unless we all go**.

The reason we have a Disability Awareness Month, or any awareness month, is because we are not aware.

Maybe you are uncomfortable engaging with people who have disabilities. We all have a Pharaoh inside of us, a place that is negative and afraid. Like Pharaoh we harden our hearts to people who make us feel uncomfortable. Rabbi Shefa Gold says that "in order to be transformed we have to move through our discomfort" and that "Disability is an opportunity to experience life's hidden blessings, different viewpoints and perspectives and that is liberating." Rabbi Gold says "In parsha Bo we take the journey together through the wilderness toward the Promised Land, a place that is flowing with milk and honey".

Moses would not leave Egypt without **EVERYONE**. Like the great rhythm and blues song says: “None of us are free, **one of us is chained, none of us are free!**” One meaning of **Mitzrayim**, the Hebrew word for Egypt, is “narrow place”.

I am asking you to leave your narrow place and widen your perspectives on disabilities. I am asking you to celebrate diversity and open up your imagination. I am asking you to soften your hearts and be curious. I am asking you to engage with people who have disabilities, to hire them for jobs, and to work for their equal rights.

When we are all equal, free and liberated, I will see you in the Promised Land.

My questions for you are: *Why do you think you treat people with disabilities differently than people that don't have them?* *Can you step outside of your comfort zone and get to know disability culture better?*