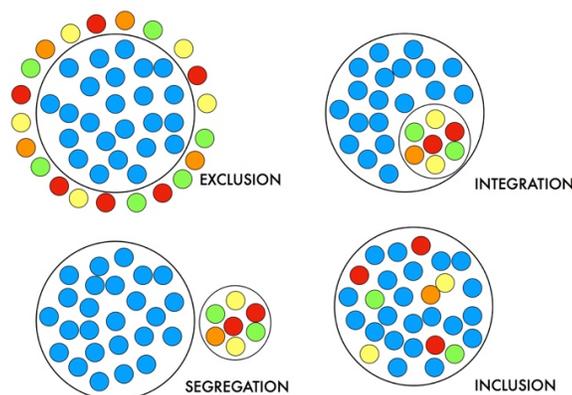


Making Our *Kehillot* a Place to Belong



This image is often shown to help explain the continuum of inclusiveness of individuals with disabilities. I don't know who created the image, but I often use it when I facilitate workshops.

I believe the image somewhat effectively communicates various populations and groups, but perhaps the picture needs an update.

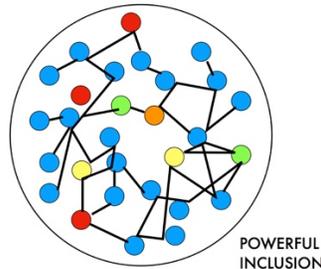
As humans, we need to belong. This need is fundamental to our sense of self and our place in the world. As babies we smile at our caretakers to make a connection, as middle schoolers we search for the lunch table where our friends are eating, and as college students we seek out sororities and fraternities to join.

Special Educator, Dr. Erik Carter of Vanderbilt University's Faith and Flourishing Project conducted research on inclusion in church communities. Young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families were surveyed and interviewed about their experience in their faith communities.

His findings show that people want to be more than just integrated or included: They want to belong. Clearly, another paradigm needs to be created concerning community – and another circle should be added to the above image.

How can we use this research to improve inclusion of individuals with disabilities in our schools, camps and synagogues? The inclusion circle in the current image shows multicolored dots within the circle. Each dot is alone, randomly found throughout the circle. We should try to make this picture more complete by connecting those dots to make the circle truly represent how inclusion should be practiced and illustrated. True and effective inclusion is more than an individual dot on a page. The power of true inclusion is defined and illustrated by interrelatedness: the connections between

individuals in the group, facilitated by a warm and welcoming attitude and the desire to know and be known.



Often, I have had community leaders tell me, “We don’t have any people with disabilities, but we would welcome them if we did.” My experience has shown intentional efforts are necessary to create an inclusionary culture.

Posting disability policy, positive messages and pictures about inclusion on social media are a good start, but are not enough to foster such a culture. Most outreach efforts are universal and will help everyone in your community feel they belong, but specifically reaching out to individuals with disabilities and their families is what will help you achieve a truly positive inclusive environment.

Create structures to assist with transportation, staff training and recruitment. An effective strategy utilized in some settings is to provide opportunities where one or two current community members commit to getting to know individuals with disabilities and their families.

Communication from the top is also important when it comes to encouraging acceptance. Leaders have the unique opportunity to be role models and create cultural change. It is extremely powerful when leaders support inclusion and communicate the message that every person is important and contributes to the vitality of the group.

...

As I tried to think outside the box to imagine an illustration which might best represent inclusion, another image sprang to mind. What I came up with was literally from inside the box – a box of cereal that is! – where orange, lemon, cherry and lime O’s touch and overlap: An image where all are unique and yet all belong.



So, think about this image and starting at breakfast today decide how you can create new structures that will encourage connections and a sense of belonging. You will realize how much richer your life can be when you utilize the gifts and of people with disabilities.

Go ahead: Invite someone with a disability to join you for a cup of coffee....and maybe enjoy a bowl of cereal to go with it.

New York Jewish Week
Kveller
EJewishphilanthropy
MyJewishLearning
Chicago Jewish News
JUF News Chicago
Jewishjournal
Rudermanfoundation
The Jerusalem Post
Jewish Telegraphic Agency