

Welcome

Welcome to *Headlights*, the quarterly magazine for JEEP! Jewish Education for Every Person.

Headlights aims to shine a hi-beam light on the service areas that make up JEEP's work and mission.

We strive to bring the warmth and vitality of Jewish celebration and connection to the following populations, throughout the greater Cincinnati area:

- Children with special needs
- Seniors in non-Jewish nursing homes or living in isolation
- Alcoholics and addicts, introducing Judaism as a crucial recovery tool
- Adults with disabilities
- Jewish hospital patients in non-Jewish hospitals

We are especially excited and inspired by the brave folks we work with in our recovery groups, who are literally loosening the death grip of addiction on their lives. The inspiration and focus of Judaism helps them gain new life in their relationships, work, health, hope and future, hence our cover.

We are very grateful for the donations, time, volunteering, encouragement and support of our many dedicated friends. Many volunteer opportunities exist—please call us.

May our combined efforts ensure that every Jew is uplifted and embraced by our community and traditions.

Rabbi Yankel Karp



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JEEP Recovery Meeting Information

JEEP's recovery programs are modeled after, and work in partnership with the Friendship House and a growing network of recovery rabbis. See page 3.

Recovery Meeting for Jewish Alcoholics and Addicts every Wednesday, 6:00-7:00 p.m.

Weekly Class: Insights for Recovery from the Jewish Prayer Book and Torah Portion, Tuesday, 6:00-7:00 p.m.

Independent Meeting for Compulsive Overeaters

Call 733-4400 for location information

Recovery...

Finally Free: *Up from the depths*

by *Miriam Karp*

Sounds like a soap opera. Sarah, thirteen-year-old model student, slips into alcoholism. Cary, talented jazz musician from dysfunctional home becomes hard-core addict, growing marijuana and pursuing petty thievery to support his habit. Two nice Jewish kids from Detroit's suburbs.

Fast forward to winter 2008. Walking into the gracious Daniel B. Sobel Friendship House, a Jewish recovery center in West Bloomfield, Michigan I meet two articulate, hip, attractive and friendly young adults, Cary and Sarah, striving to stay in recovery.

Besides the critical 12 steps worked in all recovery groups, they draw inner strength and insight from Torah, Jewish mystical texts and prayer.

Hey, wait a minute, back up. Addicts? Torah? What could they have to do with each other? Anyways, everyone knows Jews aren't addicts.

The myth that Jews aren't vulnerable to the same addictions as the general population has been clearly disproven, and the need for Jewish recovery programs is well recognized. Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski, director of Pittsburgh's Gateway Rehabilitation Center has been a pioneer in breaking the silence and shame of Jewish addiction.

Do Jewish addicts have special needs that aren't met by traditional 12 step programs? Is there a spiritual component, and can Judaism contribute to recovery?

Yes and yes, according to Rabbi Yisrael Pinson. As the first full time recovery rabbi, the lanky, casually dressed young man has directed the Friendship House since 2002.

"Other wonderful Jewish programs such as JACS (Jewish Alcoholics, Chemically Dependant and Significant Others) have lay leaders. Sympathetic and open-minded congregational rabbis are involved with the recovery community. But this is my full time avocation- I can honestly say, 'I am here for you 24/7, not only when you're in crisis.'"

Is a Jewish recovery community needed? "This underserved and misunderstood population had a stigma and taboo. They needed an adequate spiritual and social sup-

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port structure. Friendship House is really like a clubhouse for Jewish recovering addicts, a family and community."

Rabbi Pinson has been on a learning curve of growth as well. "My first reaction was, 'My G-d, these are people doing drugs.' I grew to realize, 'Hey, these are normal people with a certain disease.' As I got more involved I came to see that, 'These people don't have the luxury of going to a doctor and getting a medicine or cure. They work extremely hard every single day through a spiritual program to fix themselves. They are in many ways better, more alive, focused, spiritual and real than most people out there.'"

Addicts in recovery are amazing people. They live with an intense spirituality, honesty and transcendence of ego most would shy away from. What it takes to do the 12 steps and climb the ladder up out of the muck of addiction is a humble courage that burns away the games and comfortable masks we too often hide behind. They live intimately with the Passover message, constantly going out of their personal slavery and limitations.

Is a Jewish recovery community different than others, besides its members being Jewish?

Working the famous and effective 12 steps requires a vibrant spiritual life. People in recovery literally owe their

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life to a spiritual program- it's not just a nice thing to think about now and then. They hunger for more than the generic spirituality of the 12 steps.

" I find doing Torah and recovery together very awesome and inspiring. I feel so much stronger and clearer."

Crucial questions arise: What is the value and meaning of my struggles, for myself and for humanity? Why does G-d allow evil to exist, and what's the best way to fight it? Am I a bad or tainted person for having succumbed to addiction? Can I make up for the mistakes I've made and damage I've caused?

The inner, mystical aspects of Torah are deep G-dly wisdom regarding spiritual matters such as these. Recovery and Torah study are parallel and complimentary. Rabbi Pinson notes "Jews in recovery thrive on the study and application of Torah. For example, avoda, or character refinement, is central to Jewish life. This emphasis on honesty and accountability is paralleled in recovery. A daily and weekly written self-inventory, alone and with a mentor is a crucial component of the 12 steps.

Sarah explains, "In recovery you have to continue spiritual growth. People with this orientation search their own religion for spirituality in addition to more superficial ritual and tradition. If they can access it, it becomes a fountain of strength. The only way I could relate to Judaism is through the 12 steps; Judaism has deepened my understanding of the 12 steps."

Greg, finishing up a residential recovery program in Kentucky, agrees. He's been studying recovery focused Torah regularly with Rabbi Karp of JEEP.
" I find doing Torah and recovery together very awesome and inspiring. I feel so much stronger and clearer. I have

important tools and feel much more ready to be released and not recycle into the addiction cycle, as I have already several times in the past."

Josh Norber insists that Torah is a crucial part of his recovery, helping his family grow into an enriching Jewish life. "I've improved in many ways besides being sober. My life changed from the moment I walked into Rabbi Pinson's office- it all came together. I need more than other recovery groups offer; I need the focus on mitzvot. I've partaken in moving spiritual activities that I never would have imagined. Being sober with the Torah focus gave me the clarity to take and appreciate spiritual action."

When Sarah was an alcoholic teen, Judaism was part of her cover. "I taught Sunday school and maintained the façade of a nice Jewish girl. When I finally got into recovery, one of my goals was to reconnect on a deeper level with Judaism. I met Yisrael and his wife Devorah Leah through a friend. I liked what I heard, and I now attend shul and study regularly, and work to be a role model of a woman successfully in recovery."

Mincing no words, Cary introduced himself by declaring, "My name is Cary Heller. I am a Friendship House success story."

He handed me a booklet with his story. To my surprise, it was a court document, a sentencing memorandum for the U.S. District Court, Eastern District of Michigan, dated September 24, 2007.

Whoa. Official. Under oath. Addressing a judge. A criminal case, with Cary on trial for conspiring to manufacture marijuana.

I was mesmerized and moved. The rock bottom, the absolute dregs- transformed to the heights. Cary's guts, sweat and determination coupled with the life-saving power of Torah wisdom and continual support extended by Rabbi Pinson and Levi Shemtov, director of Friendship House's parent organization, The Friendship Circle.



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Cary was raised in a chaotic and sometimes violent home. His mother suffered from mental illness, alcoholism and addiction to prescription drugs. His father was first crippled by a stroke and then died from a heart attack when Cary was a teen. Several years later an overdose killed his mother.

Cary turned to drugs to ease his pain, injecting a potentially lethal combination of heroin and cocaine fifteen times a day.

In 2004 he entered a comprehensive substance abuse treatment program, where he met Rabbi Pinson. Cary then began his 180-degree revolution.

Rabbi Shemtov recalls, "When Cary started coming to Friendship House, we realized that this is the person for whom we built this organization. A sweet and kind soul, whose life circumstances and poor judgment made this sparkling diamond look like a discarded rock. We knew that he would sparkle again with attention, love and friendship."

Today Cary is a successful businessman, passionate about Judaism and devoted to community service. Cary is a most beloved volunteer in the Friendship Circle; an organization dedicated to enriching special needs children and their families. He works tirelessly with love and creativity, organizing a Cub Scouts pack, sports program, and shadowing special needs kids in public school. Cary has channeled his unique sensitivity to pain and isolation to reach kid with challenges, albeit different than his.

Cary's remarkable transformation was acknowledged by the judge. He handed down a sentence reduced in duration and severity, of house arrest and community service, unprecedented in such cases.

Edward G. points out that there are addictions other than the most common of alcohol and drugs; including food, gambling, internet, money and power. Friendship House offers counsel and caring for them all. Edward states, "Any addiction stifles our emotional growth and connection to G-d." As this special community shows, the converse is true; when the relationships with G-d, self and others are strengthened, miracles happen.



Anytime, any Jew anywhere reaches out for help, we want the hand of JEEP always to be available... and for that we are responsible!

A Bubba Ma'aseh

Grandmotherly Tradition

The group of seniors were gathered in the conference room for their monthly Torah class with Rabbi Karp. A welcome break in the nursing home routine; an infusion of Jewish warmth.

As Rabbi Karp started explaining the parting of the Red Sea, Frances interrupted.

"Bubba maa'sehs- old wives tales," she exclaimed, as she dismissed the idea with a gesture of her feeble hand. A regular participant to the class, Frances felt comfortable expressing her sometimes contrary opinion.

Accompanied by her 24/7 caregiver, she was not in a position to pound on the table, but she weakly made her feelings known.

"Hmmm, bubba ma'aseh," the rabbi said thoughtfully. "Do you know the literal meaning? It means the action or tradition of a grandmother. The Torah regards these traditions as very precious and important to pass on, as valuable as the actual Torah and mitzvos themselves.

Surprised at the change of course, the group listened with interest.



"Did you ever watch your Bubby light Shabbos candles?" he asked smilingly.

Frances was clearly traveling way way back, down memory lane. Her face softened as she was transported back to her childhood. "Yes, I did, I used to love to stand near her and watch her," she murmured.

"Did she do this with her hands?" asked the rabbi, circling his hands inward.

"Why, yes, she did," Frances replied.

"That is a bubba ma'aseh, an ancient tradition, handed down from mother to daughter for generations, maybe since the time of Sarah," he explained. "The gesture shows the drawing of the holiness and peace of the Shabbos Queen into the home. It's not the actual mitzvah- that's just lighting the candle. But it's an embellishment that women have added that's become a real part of the tradition- a bubba ma'aseh!"

Frances smiled.

There was a palpable feeling of connection in the room, of seniors transported back to the days they stood by Bubba's side, and of connection to an endless chain of generations going back across oceans and time.



Baruch's Bar Mitzvah

Children...

By Sara Rosenfeld

Our son Baruch is not the ordinary kid next door. Baruch is truly a miracle child. He was born with severe disabilities that caused other infections and problems, so much of his first few years of life was touch and go. We lived with the knowledge that at any moment our precious boy could be taken from us. And yet we lived to witness miracle after miracle as he survived and triumphed time and time again. Now, at the age of 13, Baruch is still deaf, has a trachea tube in his throat and eats only through a gastrostomy tube in his stomach. Yet, for a boy whom doctors had predicted would never walk or understand or interact, he has proven them more than wrong.

It is now Saturday evening, and today was Baruch's 13th birthday. It is hard for me to say "Bar Mitzvah" because he is not yet ready for the responsibilities of the Torah's commandments, nor do we really know when he will be. Yet, today was a special day. Emotional, but special.

A few months ago, as his 13th birthday loomed closer, my husband and I began to discuss what we should do. At first we thought nothing should be done at all. How could we "celebrate" a "Bar Mitzvah" that wasn't? But then we realized that there was much that we did need to celebrate. We had reached many milestones. Baruch was still alive. He was learning and progressing. He was sharing his special smiles and hugs with all those who met him. He attended synagogue each week and was part of the "shul family." But what could we do? We felt uncomfortable making a big affair, yet we could not just ignore the day.

Baruch would not let go of his "Haggadah." He sat through the Seder in our home, and for the first time signed the Four Questions.

Soon it was March, and Passover preparations began. We felt it was time to try to get Baruch more involved in what was going on. We decided to make him a Haggadah (the Passover guide and story) with simple sentences and lots of pictures, so that he could follow the Seder and understand what the whole holiday was about.

My eldest daughter, Chaya Mushka, put it together. We put the pages in a display folder with plastic pockets to protect it from saliva. This became our teaching tool and we went through it with Baruch a number of times before Passover. Baruch would not let go of his "Haggadah." He sat through the Seder in our home, and for the first time signed the Four Questions. We were very proud.



13 year old Baruch Rosenfeld is deaf, has a trachea tube in his throat and eats only through a gastrostomy tube in his stomach. Yet, for a boy whom doctors had predicted would never walk or understand or interact, he has proven them more than wrong.

The big test was the second night. We went to our cousins for the second Seder. There were twenty-two people there. Would Baruch sign again or would he be too shy? Baruch sat through the entire Seder. When it was his turn, he signed the Four Questions. You could hear a pin drop. There were many children there, and during their turns, I must admit, not all the adults kept quiet. But Baruch, who said nothing at all, signed in absolute silence!

For us, that was the turning point. We began to think, "If he can accomplish this, why can't he sign the blessings on the Torah in synagogue?" Right after Passover we began planning a "Bar Mitzvah book."

We took pictures of the shul, of the Torah, and the bimah (where the Torah is read) and of Baruch. We began to think of what the notion of responsibility could mean for him, and we came up with a few ideas: keeping his kippa on his head at all times, the ritual washing of his hands in the morning, not mixing up my milk and meat dishes in his attempt to help clean up, keeping his room clean and not switching lights on and off on Shabbat, to name a few.

These became the basis of the Bar Mitzvah book. We started with the order of the Bar Mitzvah day: Baruch will go to shul with his family; the aron kodesh (the Ark) will be opened, the Torah will be taken out and put on the bimah; Baruch will be called up to the Torah, Baruch will sign the blessings. We sent the book to school as well, so his teachers could practice with him.

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We then called the synagogue and explained that we would be sponsoring the Kiddush (meal following Shabbat services) in honor of Baruch's birthday. Our synagogue has an email notification system and we asked that everyone be notified of the occasion since we were not sending out any formal invitations. I also called my cousins who live here in Melbourne to join us in our shul and to stay for the Kiddush. We decided to cater it ourselves. My husband and I made a number of salads, my cousins and friends pitched in too, with gefilte fish, spreads and cakes. We thought it would be a small affair.

Boy were we mistaken! We did not realize the impact Baruch had made on all the people here. Word spread in the general community and people began approaching us to wish us Mazel Tov and the informal "invitation list" grew bigger. Our simcha (joyous occasion) was not only the shul's simcha but a community simcha. The shul was packed. We were nervous.

Baruch can get very silly in a crowd. Would he be able to sign the blessings as he practiced, or would he become silly and shy?

Baruch went up to the bimah along with his father who was going to translate into English what Baruch was signing, and then recite the actual blessings on the Torah. When Baruch got up there, he began shyly, with one hand in his mouth. Signing with one hand is not a very comprehensible language, let me tell you. He slowly gained confidence and he beautifully signed the second blessing after the reading of the Torah. The whole shul erupted in a spontaneous Mazel Tov dance. Baruch was put up on his father's shoulders and all the men began dancing in a circle around the reading table.

What can I say? I cried. I think many people did. A bar mitzvah celebration is supposed to be the day when a young boy becomes a "man," a person responsible for his actions. For us, this is not the case. Baruch is still a young boy (he functions at the level of a six year old) and will probably be so for a number of years to come. But that was not what I was thinking at the time and I don't think that is why I cried. I can't really tell you why I cried. I just

did. Maybe it was the pent up emotion of all the years. Maybe it was the relief that my son who we were told would die twelve years ago, was standing there at the Torah, blessing G-d who had given him life. Maybe it was the outpouring of kindness, support and well wishes from all the people in the shul. Maybe it was because my immediate family was not there to witness this moment. Maybe, and maybe not.



Baruch was very excited; he shook each person's hand and gave spontaneous hugs. The Kiddush continued for a few hours. One by one, family members and friends got up to say a few words. They described how they had been touched by Baruch and by our family. It was very humbling for me, as were the comments many people wrote on the web after my previous article about Baruch.

You see, I do not see myself as a "courageous woman" as some have called me. I struggle, I make mistakes. But as a Jew who has learned Chassidut, I forge ahead. I do not think of what could have been but of what I need to do.

I am not "brave." I have my down times, I have my cries, I am human. But knowing that I have a G-dly soul, that we all do, gives me strength when I need it. Each of us has challenges in our lives. They are all different, but they are challenges that we struggle through.

People who hear my story say that I have inspired them, but let me tell you that they have inspired me too. It is one thing to believe that all G-d does is for the good, and it is quite another thing to see the good in a revealed way. Of course, "good" is a relative term, and there are many levels of good. But when I see how much Baruch has affected the people around him, when I hear your anecdotes, when I hear that you are more patient, more forgiving, more thankful and more tolerant because of Baruch, then you help me to continue doing what I need to do. You have "recharged my batteries," and for that I thank you all.

May the acts of goodness and kindness spread so that the world at large will be ready to greet Moshiach, when all the mysteries of G-d's ways will be revealed to us all.

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Adults...

The Power of Belonging

Welcoming Jews with Disabilities into Jewish Communal Life

By Bayla Sheva Brenner

Can you imagine a world devoid of people in wheelchairs and absent of the blind, deaf, developmentally disabled and hearing impaired? Easy-visit most synagogues, mikvaot and Jewish community centers in North America.

"Growing up, I can tell you there were no synagogues in my area that were accessible [to the handicapped],"

According to the 2000 US Census, 49.7 million people (nearly one in five) have some sort of disability. This statistic applies to the Jewish community as well. It makes one wonder-where are all the Jews with disabilities? Blame it on ignorance and insensitivity, but the fact remains: Too many intellectually and physically challenged Jews live lives behind closed doors, shut away from the joys of Jewish communal life.

If Stairs Could Speak

Ironically, the most visibly disabled population, those in wheelchairs, could very well be the most overlooked. They would tell you that if steps could speak, they would say, "No!"

Twenty-five years ago, long before accessibility entered the American consciousness, the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, in New York, built a new synagogue with a ramp for every incline. A few years later, the shul added another ramp leading to the bimah.

"A young man in the community became a paraplegic,"

relates Rabbi Avi Weiss, rav of the shul. "At my son's Bar Mitzvah, I asked him to come up for an aliyah. He could not come on his own to the bimah and refused to be lifted. He said, 'When I come to the Torah, I will come on my own, with dignity or not at all.'" Rabbi Weiss had the ramp to the bimah installed with funds raised by his congregants. "People will always give to a project that makes sense," he says.

"Growing up, I can tell you there were no synagogues in my area that were accessible [to the handicapped]," says Chava Willig Levy, a writer, editor and lecturer who lives in Long Island, New York. "At my mother's levayah [funeral] fourteen years ago, I remember being carried up in my wheelchair twenty or more steps. A year ago, my father passed away, and the levayah was held in the same shul. I expected the same situation. When I got to the front of the building, a friend informed me that the shul now had a ramp I could use." Levy, who contracted polio at age three, credits the community for the change.

One Good Sign Leads to Another

For many years, the Jewish deaf had no choice but to live as a separate segment of the community, cut off from religious communal life. "Fifteen or twenty years ago there were few, if any, accommodations for the deaf in shuls," says Shalom Lependorf, the principal of a boys' school in Brooklyn and a counselor for the deaf.

Lependorf, who at the time was coordinating Brooklyn's Edward R. Murrow's program for the deaf (the largest public high school program of its kind), wanted to get involved with the Jewish deaf. He began inviting members of the deaf community to sukkah parties, Shabbatonim and to shul, where he prayed alongside them and interpreted

BEECO MONUMENTS

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the rabbi's speeches. "Initially, people in the congregation told me to stop moving my hands," says Lependorf. "Apparently, they weren't familiar with sign language. [Community interest] began to grow as people became accustomed to my signing."

One of the most effective ways of connecting deaf Jews to the synagogue community is through a Shabbaton, an event that brings together deaf and hearing Jews for a warm Shabbat experience. "Since there are so few social and religious opportunities for deaf Jews, these events tend to attract deaf individuals from surrounding states," says Rabbi Eliezer Lederfeind, director of Our Way, the OU's program for the deaf and hearing impaired and the only program that hosts Shabbatonim for the Jewish deaf

Moshe expresses the concern that if an individual can't bring a seeing-eye dog to shul, he won't ever be able to participate in community prayer service or hear the Torah

Established in 1969, Our Way continues to provide the Jewish deaf and hard of hearing with resources and programming that puts them in touch with each other and with the world of Judaism--experiences formerly closed to this most isolated population. Through sign language publications, programs providing signed interpretation for synagogue services, interpreted classes, a Megillat Esther PowerPoint Presentation for Purim (used in numerous shuls across the country) and the Jewish Deaf Singles Registry matchmaking service, among other programs,

Our Way continues to advance the quality of life for Jews who are deaf and hard of hearing.

Who Gives Sight to the Blind

A poignant teshuvah (responsum) of Rav Moshe Feinstein involves a blind man who needed a guide dog to accompany him to shul. Since a dog is not generally permitted in a synagogue, some rabbinic authorities rule that a blind per-

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son is exempt from praying in shul. In his teshuvah, Rav Moshe expresses the concern that if an individual can't bring a seeing-eye dog to shul, he won't ever be able to participate in community prayer service or hear the Torah reading, and would feel completely isolated from the community.

To preserve the person's identity as a member of the Jewish people, Rav Moshe ruled that the man be allowed to attend shul with his guide dog.

When social worker Chaim Biberfeld of Brooklyn introduced his guide dog, Vike, to the members of his minyan, a few of them warily kept their distance. "They've since gotten used to him," says Biberfeld.

Born with retinitis pigmentosa, the most common cause of blindness, Biberfeld did not realize he had a problem until he reached his teenage years. "I saw 20/20," he explains, "but I lacked peripheral vision. It wasn't until I bumped into enough people that I realized I'd better go see an eye doctor." As the years progressed, his eyesight continued to deteriorate.

He eventually took a course in mobility training and got a cane and a seeing-eye dog. "Starting out with a physical disability and becoming disabled later in life are very different experiences," says Biberfeld. "I had to go through a series of stages--denial, due to be productive with what was possible."



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Jewish Braille Institute International (JBI) in Manhattan offers large-print, Braille and audio prayer and Torah books, and has close to 13,000 titles in its library. Unfortunately, very few of these materials are found in shuls. "We should be hearing from synagogues, but very few have made requests," says Pearl Lam, director of Library Services at JBI. "Consequently, the visually impaired in the Orthodox community may not be getting the help they need. Many congregants are too embarrassed to request large-print materials, but if the synagogue provided such material, it would be easier [for the congregants] to avail themselves of it."

While fewer babies are born blind today due to the advances in medicine, many people tend to develop vision problems as they age. Nearly 250,000 Jews in America have severe vision loss, which is usually the result of age-related diseases such as macular degeneration, diabetic retinopathy, glaucoma and inoperable cataracts. Individuals who suffer from vision loss later in life are, for the most part, unable to use Braille and must rely on audio and large-print books. "The challenge is to address this new population [those who lose their sight later in life] while continuing to serve the other one as well," says Ellen Isler, president and CEO of JBI.


Me and My Shadow: Special Programs for Special Kids

About three years ago, a family with a seven-year-old boy with CP moved onto Terry Eisenberg's block in Teaneck. She also had a close friend with a special needs child. "It was heartbreaking how these families couldn't bring their children to shul. The children had so much to give and yet weren't included as part of our community," says Eisenberg.

"That little boy with CP was going to public school and didn't have the opportunity to be with the Jewish children in the community. Here is a child who has the cognitive ability to be a part

of what's happening in the shul but needed someone to help him get from place to place."


Together with her husband, who is head of the local shul's youth department, Eisenberg encouraged the synagogue to employ "shadows," or helpers, to enable children with special needs to participate in Shabbat youth groups.



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Currently, the shul's youth groups include the young boy with CP, two young girls with Down syndrome, and a high-functioning young man with autism, among other children with special needs.

Corey Fuchs, fifteen, acts as a shadow for a developmentally disabled boy his age at Congregation Rinat Yisrael and enjoys his job immensely. "I learned a lot," says Fuchs. "I learned patience and how to deal with life situations. My father tells me I don't realize what a kindness I'm doing for the family. I look at it as something that needs to be done."

As the Teachings of the Fathers states, "Your friend's honor should be as dear to you as your own." Judaism teaches us that every Jew, regardless of physical or intellectual ability, serves as an integral member of the community.

Last year, the congregation celebrated the Bar Mitzvah of a child with physical and intellectual disabilities. "The entire shul was instrumental in helping [the boy] prepare for this significant milestone," says Eisenberg. "When [the Bar Mitzvah boy] got up to say the blessings, you could hear a pin drop. We stood and in unison said, 'Amen!' It was a beautiful day. If not for this program, these children would have missed out on the experience of being part of the synagogue.

While individual shuls have taken steps toward integrating the special needs population, much work remains to be done. As the former executive chairman of the Orthodox Caucus, Rabbi Basil Herring was a founder of Kulanu, a Long-Island-based grassroots organization dedicated to spreading the message of inclusion. The organization met with some initial resistance.

Yachad, which boasts sixteen chapters around the country, was created twenty years ago to bring children and adults with developmental disabilities into the community. Today it services all children and adults with all kinds of disabilities. Aside from family Shabbatonim that attract some 500 people, Yachad's multi-faceted programs include IVDU, a vocational high school for teens with developmental disabilities, a myriad of camp experiences designed to mainstream children with disabilities and Relationship Building Courses that help the adults of this population acquire a wide set of social skills.

Hashem Doesn't Make Mistakes

The mitzvot bein adam lechaveiro (mitzvot of interper-

sonal obligations) emphasize the precious and often precarious state of human dignity. As the Teachings of the Fathers states, "Your friend's honor should be as dear to you as your own." Judaism teaches us that every Jew, regardless of physical or intellectual ability, serves as an integral member of the community.

Even when the ramps have been set in place and doorways have been expanded, less visible yet painfully obvious barriers still remain. "I've visited other communities and someone will say, 'I think you should be placed here,' without thinking to discuss it with me," says Levy. "That placement could be [somewhere] where I would be completely isolated. If there is a question that relates to access or anything at all concerning the person with the disability, he or she should be included in the dialogue, because that person is really the expert."

Levy and Biberfeld often speak before groups of children and adults in their respective communities about appropriate ways to react to a person with disabilities. Viewing a person with disabilities as a tragic figure flies in the face of the primary Jewish tenet that we are all created in the image of God. "We need to realize that people are people, whether they can or cannot see," Biberfeld explains. "I find that people tend to get shy than necessary around me. They shouldn't hesitate approaching a disabled person to ask if he or she needs help. Like anyone else, when we need assistance, we say, 'Yes, please,' and are very grateful."

"I hear terms like *nebbech*, a pitiful person," says Levy. "Is a person a *nebbech*? I'd much rather not have a disability, and I'd rather that no one had a disability, but does that mean I think that [having] a disability is a tragedy? Absolutely not. People with disabilities can and do live happy, fulfilling lives. Hashem doesn't make mistakes."

Bayla Sheva Brenner, an award-winning journalist, is senior writer in the OU Communications and Marketing Department. Excerpted with permission from the fall 2005 issue of Jewish Action, the magazine of the Orthodox Union.



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Heart to Heart

"I read about your volunteer program for visiting seniors and I'd like to do the mitzvah, too," said Leon Cohen. Through JEEP's "5 Minutes a Day for Every Bubby and Zaidy" program, Leon received the names "Sam" and "Helene" living at a local nursing home.

"Helene probably won't say a word to you," warned the receptionist as she showed Leon where to find his new friends.

Leon first visited Sam, who greeted him warmly. When Leon asked if he had a few minutes for a visit, he answered, "At my age- I just turned 100- I have plenty of time!" Each was delighted to find that they were both natives of France, Leon from Nice and Sam from Lyon.

After a wonderfully warm visit, Leon went to try his luck with the silent Helene. He laughs, recalling, "She was thrilled to have a visitor and didn't STOP talking!" Born in Poland and spending many years in Argentina, Helene's rich life made for fascinating listening.

Leon told us, "Thank you for enabling me to do this great mitzvah" but refused our thanks in return. "I did nothing," he insisted. It was they who gave me so much! Their life experiences, abroad and here in Cincinnati are so interesting. Leon visits almost every week. "I split my time between them, and after five or ten minutes, they are already tiring. It's not a big time commitment but we all enjoy it so much."



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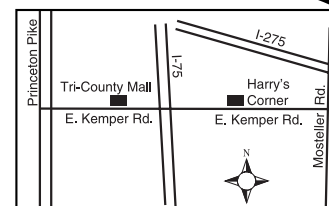
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