

## **Inclusion in the Jewish Community**

By Esther Greenspan

Thank you for inviting me to talk to you about inclusion of special needs in the Jewish Community. Thank you my old friend Meir for thinking of me.

I have been involved in the Jewish community ever since I can remember. Right now I'm 29 years old and I live in a group home and I volunteer at Hebrew Senior Life Center in Roslindale through Chai Works, a day program for people with disabilities run by Jewish Family & Children's Service. I sing to the residents and keep them company. I help them in art studio, bingo and other games. We have a Celebrate Shabbat service every Friday afternoon. When we sing a song called "Life is Sweeter," there is a line that says "*I'm going to dance like no one's watching*" and I get up and dance! I'm very grateful to JF&CS and HSL for giving me the chance to volunteer in the Jewish community.

Let me tell you a little about my special needs. I have low muscle tone throughout my body so it's hard for me to move around. I tend to break bones easily. I had scoliosis surgery and now my back is straight. I have trouble with fine motor skills and with understanding my body's signals like if I'm cold or hot, if I'm tired or thirsty. I have trouble walking sometimes and when I'm tired or injured I use a wheelchair. I also have a mental disability, which means I have challenges with learning, reading, and math. There's no name for what I have. I guess I'm just normal Esther.

My involvement in Jewish life started in my family. When I was very little we went to services at B'nai Or. When I was 6 years old, we became members of

Temple Israel in Boston, where I went to Hebrew School and Sunday School. But I didn't stop there. I went on to High School. I was confirmed and graduated. And I worked after graduation as an aide in a Sunday School kindergarten class—and got paid for it!

I was the first special needs person ever to get bat mitzvahed on a Saturday morning like all the other kids at Temple Israel. On June 26, 1999, I read from the Torah in Hebrew, gave a d'var Torah, and read the Haftorah portion. I spoke about the portion where Moses leads the Jewish people through the desert and hits a rock to get water to come out. Moses had special needs too. He was slow of speech. But still he accomplished getting the Jews out of slavery in Egypt and leading them to the Promised Land. That's why this portion is so important to me.

Being bat mitzvahed was an amazing experience. A lot of people came and there wasn't a dry eye in the house! We had a great party at the temple—and Meir was there! I felt really happy and proud of myself that I did it. I had to work really hard every day.

It wasn't always easy having special needs at the Temple. In high school I was the only special needs person there. People helped me ease into it. The Clergy and the Cantor and the other students who were my friends helped me. And the Temple hired an aide to work with me and help me with writing and homework assignments. I am very grateful for that.

To this day, I'm a big part of the Temple and love being a part of it. I go to Saturday morning services with my dad and to holiday services with my dad, mom and sister. I know the Saturday services by heart as well as the whole Rosh

Hashonah and Yom Kippur Service. When I miss services I go to the live streaming on the Temple Israel website and look at the Friday night and Saturday morning bar and bat mitzvah services.

There are a lot of people who respect and love me at the Temple and a lot of people I love there. Every time I go to services everybody is so happy to see me and they always come up to me and say “Hi Esther” and give me a hug. I love seeing my Cantor and my Rabbis and I like reading the Torah portion together and talking about it in Saturday morning Torah study. I am especially thankful to Rabbi Friedman because he always had faith in me and supported me and has become one of my good friends. Thanks to him, I am blessed that I have found a home at the Temple for all these years.

When we study the Torah, I like that God was on the people’s side and Moses helped the Jewish people have faith. I can relate to that. I used to have trouble with faith because I was born with a lot of special needs. I questioned God a lot when I was a teenager. I asked God why I had special needs, *why was I born this way?* God told me “*Because your parents will be good people and you will be loved.*” God answered me and I felt better. God helped me find peace in myself. So I grew to love God and have faith.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you. I hope you learned a lot from me!