

The Direction of Special Education in Religious Schools Today

Religious schools like many schools have been challenged by addressing the needs of students with different learning abilities. In the past twenty years there has been an increase in the number of programs offered to students with challenges. The question remains, are religious schools doing everything they can to accommodate students with special needs? In order to further understand this question, we must look at parental involvement, the types of teachers in religious schools, the availability of resources, and the opportunities and challenges of having special needs students in our religious schools.

While there are signs of improvement in Jewish special education, there is still a long way to go. Some parents are not as active in helping their child¹. Sometimes it is because parents have difficulty accepting their child's challenges or are so overwhelmed with the process and need support themselves before they can help their child. For possibly this same reason, some parents do not feel the need to inform the religious school of their child's needs or plans that are being used outside of religious school (i.e. IEP, behavior modification programs). Many parents have increased responsibilities for a child with special needs. Time is a scarce resource for them. Parents may have to transport and be involved in therapy sessions for their child and may have to attend regular meetings for their child's IEP. Financially, raising a child with special needs is more expensive. Depending on the child, parents may need to hire aides, therapists, purchase medications, pay extra for special programming, and because of the personal time investment, parents may have to give up their own livelihood to focus on their

¹URJ Lifelong Jewish Learning/ Special Needs/ Parent Communication

child.

Several Associations of Jewish Special Education formed in the 1970's to early 1980's² many children with special needs had few options for Jewish education. If their disability was mild enough they may have been able to participate in a regular classroom. For most special needs students, Jewish education possibly came through experiences in the home but not formally in the classroom. As people became more knowledgeable about special needs, they realized that these individuals were capable of learning and in many cases, of being a part of a regular class. As learning opportunities were being provided in secular schools, Jewish parents wanted to include their special needs child in Judaic learning too. Some religious school programs have been created specifically for special needs students where separate classes are offered for special needs students . Other programs provided opportunities for these students to be mainstreamed in various ways. Mainstreaming allows special needs students to be placed in typical classrooms. Depending on the type of special need, students may have an aide or be able to function on their own in the class.

Like the variation among students, teachers also have much variation regarding the skills they bring into the classroom. Today's teachers come from a wide array of backgrounds. Like teachers of the past³, many were former Jewish learners at one point themselves. The majority of religious school teachers in both the past and present, are individuals from a variety of professions. Some teachers have had strong Jewish educational backgrounds, some have training in the field of education, while others do not. Religious school teachers have a vast level of experience working with special needs

²http://www.bjeny.org/404.asp?Programs_ID=65
<http://www.jewishmiami.org/ViewOrganizationInfo.cfm?org=128>

³Ashton, Dianne. Rebecca Gratz Women and Judaism in Antebellum America. Detroit, Wayne State University Press:1997.p153.

students.

This diversity among religious school teachers can be challenging in many different situations, especially for teachers who lack experience dealing with students with special needs. Many religious schools do not have teachers with training in special needs education and depending on the city, the central Jewish education agency may or may not have the resources to help a religious school. This can create a problem for the growing number of mainstreamed special needs students. To further understand this issue, I will present two angles that can help religious schools accommodate students with special needs. The two angles include parents providing the school with information about the student and the school expanding its resources to accommodate special needs students.

Parents are one of the key resources involved in meeting the needs of each student. Some are very willing to share and work with the school to accommodate their child. They help brief the religious school regarding the unique and specific needs of their child. This can include involving the child's specialists in conversations about how the child is engaged in the religious school classroom to IEPs (Individualized Education Plans) from the child's secular school which can provide guidance for how religious school staff may best deal with the student. IEP's are usually composed by the schools Special Education coordinator, aides, teachers, therapists, and parents of a child with special needs. They describe the goals that the team has set for the year as well as any supports to help the student achieve his/her goals.

In addition to parents, religious schools are also working to meet the needs of special needs learners. One way is having a specialist on site to help deal with individual students and sometimes teach a class for special needs students. The number of training

opportunities and outside resources also help all teachers deal with students of diverse needs. Some religious schools or parents will also hire an aide to work with a child in a mainstream class. Jewish education organizations and schools are expanding efforts to help accommodate all students into the religious school setting.

Sometimes resources at congregations are scarce and can be an impediment to expanding special needs programming in synagogues. Depending on the congregation, special education may be at a different priority level on the funding scale. Financially it can be an expensive undertaking. Students with special needs require an serious investment of time and energy to accommodate some students. Depending on the length and frequency of the classes, congregations may not want to make this investment. Depending on the background of the educator, seeking out and creating a program for students with special needs may go beyond their budget of both time and energy. Each of these obstacles adds to the challenges religious schools face in accommodating students with special needs.

Thus there are both pro's and con's when it comes to accommodating special needs students in our religious schools. There is an investment of time, money, and energy by parents and institutions. The impact of Jewish education on some special needs students may not be as obvious but religion can play a significant part in their development. The question continues if this is a priority issue among the laundry list of desires and dreams for a congregation. Each of these sides play an important role in creating centers for special needs programs in our religious schools.

There is definitely progress being made to allow our schools to reach more students. As there seems to be a growing number of children with various special needs, I think that our religious schools are going to continue to expand to meet their needs.

New funding and skilled teachers will be needed to meet these changes. Resources and conversations about working with these students are also growing. Even when religious schools are not able to have special needs classes, other groups and organizations are creating programs for them. I think congregations need to think about the communities they are trying to create when deciding whether or not to have special needs programming. If they want to be all inclusive they may start with populations that have to go elsewhere to have their needs met.

Our educators should be provided with a basic understanding of special needs and how to deal with them. Just understanding general symptoms of various disabilities is very helpful in starting to work with these families. In addition, educators should all have resources to turn to when addressing a particular student. This can include a professional at the central Jewish agency who specializes in special needs or colleagues with special education training. Training classroom teachers is also important and should be a part of every religious school staff orientation. Moreover, the skills for dealing with special needs are generally helpful for dealing with all students. Examples include understanding how to modify lessons for different learners needs, and by creating an inclusive environment for everyone because of individual differences. Every effort can help create accommodating environments for students with special needs.

As many congregations plan ahead how to change and evolve to meet the special needs students, dealing with the growing needs of students with disabilities needs to be added to the agenda. Time and money are going to continue to be challenges but providing a Jewish education for students with special needs is worth the effort in affirming these important members of our communities.