

NCSY Torah
— *on* — One Foot Series

ALL YOUR CHILDREN

וְכָל בְּנֵיךְ



INCLUSION

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IN HIS IMAGE “And G-d created man in His image, in the image of G-d He made him; male and female He made them.” (*Genesis 1:27*)

In a well-known expression, the Torah tells us that mankind was created in the “image of G-d.” Clearly, this does not mean in a physical sense, as G-d has no physical form. Rather, it means that, like G-d, man has free will and a sense of morality. This is not the case with fish, birds, animals and other creatures, which are completely creatures of instinct.

The Torah tells us that only “man” (including woman) is in G-d’s image. It does not qualify that by specifying Jew or non-Jew, black or white, sighted or blind, ambulatory or mobility-impaired. All people are in the image of G-d, regardless of any physical, mental, emotional or developmental disabilities they may face. Accordingly, all people deserve the respect due to one created in the image of G-d.



HYPOCRISY? If the Torah is so concerned with inclusion, why does it prohibit a Kohen with any physical defect from performing the Temple service (*Leviticus 21:16-21*)?

Maimonides, in his *Guide for the Perplexed*, says that this is because human beings, sadly, do not usually judge a person by his true worth. Rather, they look at superficialities. The disqualification of the disabled for Temple service is not because they are inherently unqualified, but because they need the people to accept their authority and many people are too superficial to look past the exterior (*Moreh Nevuchim 3:45*). If this sounds like apologetics, keep in mind that Maimonides lived in the 12th century, a good 800 years before anyone even thought about being “politically correct.”

STUMBLING BLOCKS

The Torah tells us (*Leviticus 19:14*), “Do not curse a deaf person and do not put an obstacle in front of a blind person. Rather, you should fear your G-d; I am Hashem.”

There’s quite a lot in this one little verse:

(1) Do not curse a deaf person. Why not? He can’t hear it and he won’t be offended by it, right? Nevertheless, it is forbidden to curse such a person. (Logically, one is also prohibited from cursing those who would hear and be offended.)

(2) Do not put an obstacle in front of a blind person. In addition to the plain meaning, this verse is the source of the prohibition of giving misleading advice to someone who is figuratively “blind” in a particular matter. (While the classical commentators do not discuss this, the verse might also be seen as a support to providing full access to people with special needs.)

(3) You should fear your G-d; I am Hashem. Someone who takes advantage of a person’s disabilities has “plausible deniability.” He could claim that it was an accident or that he didn’t know. But Hashem knows a person’s thoughts and whether an action was done intentionally or not. Furthermore, Hashem is the One who gives us our physical abilities and He can treat a person as that person treats others.



BE FRUITFUL AND MULTIPLY

The first *mitzvah* in the Torah is to procreate and to fill the world. The *mitzvah* is to have both a son and a daughter who are also able to produce children. The Remah (*Even Ha’Ezer 1:6*) tells us that if one’s children have developmental disabilities or congenital deafness (which means that they would be exempted from many *mitzvos*), he has still fulfilled the obligation of procreation.

DIFFERENTLY-ABLED ROLE MODELS

While there are not scores of differently-abled individuals in Tanach, those that do appear are depicted as competent and qualified individuals. Who among our Biblical forebears dealt with disabilities?

YITZCHAK AVINU, our forefather Isaac, spent the last years of his life blind, but he was still revered as the Patriarch of his tribe (*Genesis 27*).

When **SHIMSHON HAGIBBOR** (Samson) destroyed the Philistine temple and the Philistine governors within, he was completely blind (*Judges 16*).

According to the Midrash, **LEMECH** (*Genesis 4*) was also blind, but he still made a living as a hunter.

Also according to the Midrash, **CHUSHIM**, the son of Dan, was deaf and unable to speak. It was he,



however, that took the initiative to kill Esau when he impeded the funeral of Yaakov Avinu (our forefather Jacob) (*Genesis 50*).

King Saul's grandson **MEPHIBOSHET**, was unable to walk. A member of King David's household, David was punished for not believing the word of the righteous Mephiboshet over that of the treacherous servant, Ziba (see *II Samuel 9, 16 and 19*).

MOSHE RABBEINU (Moses) was the greatest leader of the Jewish people in history. He is described by the Torah (*Deut. 34:10*) as being the only person ever to speak to G-d "face-to-face." He was able to accomplish this despite a rather pronounced speech impediment (*Exodus 4:10*). Self-conscious of this, Moshe often used his brother Aharon (Aaron) as an interpreter. If anything, Moshe's impaired speech made him *more* suitable for the job, as it was clear that the power was in G-d's message and not in Moshe's personal charisma.

ISAIAH SAYS...

The Book of Isaiah is replete with imagery pertaining to disabilities and inclusion. Spiritually, we all have disabilities of one kind or another.

- Then, the eyes of blind people will be opened and the ears of deaf people will be unplugged. A disabled person will leap like a deer and the tongues of mute people will sing in joy. (*35:5-6*)

- On that day, the deaf person will hear the words of a book and from the black and darkness, the eyes of blind people will see. (*29:18*)



- You deaf people, listen! You blind people, look and see! ...Who is blind like the perfect person, blind like the servant of Hashem? (*42:18-19*)

- Bring my sons from far-away and my daughters from the ends of the earth, everyone called by My name...free the people who are blind though they have eyes and who are deaf though they have ears. (*43:6-8*)

RESPECT FOR PEOPLE WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

The true value of a person is not in the body or in the mind, but in the soul. It is said that the great scholar, the Chazon Ish (d. 1953), used to stand up out of respect when a person with developmental disabilities would enter the room. He felt that the soul of this person must be very great, coming into this world to fulfill its mission of perfection in this way.

TEACH YOUR CHILDREN WELL

The Torah is very concerned with teaching Torah to the next generation. In the Rambam's great compendium, the *Mishneh Torah*, the very first law of learning Torah is that a person must teach it to his children. Consider the following verses:

"Teach (Torah and *mitzvos*) to your children, speaking about them while sitting at home, while walking on the road, (at night) when you lie down and (in the morning) when you get up."

(Deuteronomy 11:19)

"All of your children will be Hashem's students and your children's peace will be great."

(Isaiah 54:13)

"Educate your child in the manner appropriate to him... ."

(Proverbs 22:6)

We see that we must teach *all* of our children, regardless of their individual capacities, providing appropriate educational methods for each. In the Talmud, Rav Preida regularly reviewed lessons with a particular student four hundred times.

(Eruvin 54b)

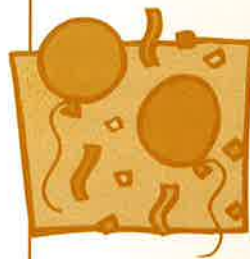
TORAH THOUGHTS...

- Who gives a person his mouth or makes him mute or deaf, sighted or blind? It is I - Hashem.
(Exodus 4:11)
- I was eyes to blind people and legs to disabled people.
(Job 29:15)
- Cursed be the one who makes a blind person go astray on the road... .
(Deut. 27:18)
- Hashem gives sight to blind people; Hashem straightens bent people."
(Psalms 146:8)

RAV YOSEF'S CHALLENGE

The Talmud (*Kiddushin 31a*) tells us that the great scholar Rav Yosef was blind. He used to say that if anyone could prove to him that blind people were

exempt from fulfilling *mitzvos* (Torah commandments), he would throw a party.



Why did he present this challenge? Rav Yosef believed that one who does *mitzvos* because he wants to serve Hashem is more meritorious than those who do so because they are obligated. If blind people are exempt from *mitzvos*, Rav Yosef would celebrate his ability to serve Hashem better.

Later, it was concluded that those who serve Hashem from obligation are more meritorious than those who do so because they feel like it. Accordingly, Rav Yosef reversed his challenge and offered to throw a party if anyone could prove that blind people are *obligated* in *mitzvos*! Whatever his physical abilities, all Rav Yosef wanted was to be able to serve Hashem to the fullest.

