



# The Jewish Special Needs/Disability Inclusion Consortium of Greater Philadelphia

Presents

## Jewish Disability Awareness & Inclusion Month (JDAIM) Lesson Plans



**Jewish Learning Venture innovates programs that help people live connected Jewish lives.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Jewish Disability Awareness & Inclusion Month (JDAIM) is a unified national initiative during the month of February that aims to raise disability awareness and foster inclusion in Jewish communities worldwide.

In the Philadelphia area, the Jewish Special Needs/Disability Inclusion Consortium works to expand opportunities for families of students with disabilities. The Consortium is excited to share these comprehensive lesson plans with schools, youth groups, and early childhood centers in our area.

We appreciate you making time for teachers to use these lessons during February—or whenever it's convenient for you.

For additional resources, please email me at [gkaplan-mayer@jewishlearningventure.org](mailto:gkaplan-mayer@jewishlearningventure.org) or call me at 215-320-0376.

Sincerely,

Gabrielle Kaplan-Mayer,

Chief Program Officer



JDAIM Lesson Plan: 6-7<sup>th</sup> grades, also works well for teen groups

Created by Gabrielle Kaplan-Mayer, Director, Whole Community Inclusion

**Objectives:**

- Students will become familiar with the Jewish value of *Kol Yisrael Araveem Zeh Le Zeh*.
- Students will describe their preconceived ideas about peers with disabilities.
- Students will identify ways that they can reach out to people in their schools, synagogues, and communities who have disabilities.

**Jewish Value:** *Kol yisrael araveem zeh b'zeh*: All of Israel is responsible for one another. This Jewish teaching makes us consider the way that each Jewish person can support one another—and know that we can receive support from community members.

**Materials:**

- Copies of the text study (attached)
- Copies of the [Jacob Artson article](#): *Opening the Gates of Torah* (attached)
- Video: *I'm Tyler* (hyperlink below)
- Laptop and projector to show video
- Art Gallery Sheet: One Way That I Can Be Inclusive (attached)
- Markers and other art materials

**Introduction (5 minutes)**

**SAY:** February is Jewish Disability Awareness & Inclusion Month (JDAIM for short). During February, the Jewish community works to raise awareness about disabilities and to foster inclusion for people with special needs.

**ASK:** Does everyone know what I mean when I say “inclusion”?

**DEFINE:** Inclusion - Involvement and empowerment of all people. Their worth and dignity are recognized. An inclusive community promotes and sustains a sense of belonging; it values and respects the talents, beliefs, backgrounds, and ways of living of its members.

**SAY:** During February, teens all over Philly will be doing today’s lesson. We are trying to raise your awareness about how you all feel about people with disabilities. We want to identify our preconceived ideas about disability and think of ways that we can feel better equipped to reach out to and befriend peers with disabilities.

**Text Study: Jacob Artson “Opening The Gates of Torah”**

- Introduce the article. **SAY:** this text was written by a teenager named Jacob Artson, who has autism. Jacob communicates through typing—he is non-verbal.
- Hand out the article to read in pairs or out loud as a group.
- Invite the teens to turn to the person sitting next to them and discuss:
  - What are your reactions to Jacob’s writing?

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- What is Jacob's experience in the Jewish community? Does he feel included or excluded?
- Have you ever been in a situation when you weren't sure how to interact with a person who has a disability?
- If you were to meet Jacob at a teen event, what could you do to welcome him?
- After teens have had a chance to talk to their partner, share back as a whole group. Write down on the board the ideas that the teens share about how they might welcome Jacob.

### **VIDEO: I'm Tyler**

- **EXPLAIN:** "You're going to watch a video that was created by a teen who has Cerebral Palsy. Cerebral Palsy (CP) is a disorder that affects muscle tone, movement, and motor skills. Often, people with CP use a walker or a wheelchair to get around." Ask the teens if they know anyone with CP and what they know about it.
- Show them [the video](#).
- Ask the teens:
  - What is your reaction to seeing the actor playing Tyler vs. the real Tyler?
  - Which teen would you be more likely to greet or want to hang out with? Why?
  - How does watching the video and reading Jacob's article change your perception about teens with disabilities like autism and cerebral palsy?

### **WRAP-UP**

Hand out the *Kol Araveem* text and read it out loud. Ask the teens how this text can guide our attitude towards people with disabilities in our communities.

**ASK:** teens to think about a way that each of us can welcome, include, and support people with disabilities.

Hand out the Art gallery sheet and invite teens to create their response with art and/or writing. If time allows, share their work. Please take photos of the students' art and email to [gkaplan-mayer@jewishlearningventure.org](mailto:gkaplan-mayer@jewishlearningventure.org). The art will be part of an online gallery about disability awareness!

Text Study: Talmud Shavuot 39a

*Kol yisrael arevim zeh b'zeh* שכל ישראל ערבים זה בזה

“All of Israel is responsible for one another.”

Q: How does this text from the Talmud guide our attitude towards people who have special needs in our community?



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## Art Gallery Sheet

One way that I can be inclusive towards people with disabilities is...

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## Opening The Gates of Torah

*by Jacob Artson*

You have probably never met anyone like me before who cannot speak but who can communicate by typing. I am a perfect example of how someone can be very impaired in one area but have great strength in other areas. Actually, I think that is true of all people, but it is especially true about people with autism. When I was diagnosed with autism at age 3, I could not speak or move my body properly, and 12 years later that remains true. However, if success and worth are measured by being a *mentsch* and giving back to others, then I would classify my life as a success. You can be the judge.

When I moved to Los Angeles at the age of 6, I was a classic case of severe autism. My behavior was so awful I hated myself. Almost everyone I met gave up on me almost immediately and believed I would never amount to anything. But there was one doctor who saw the gem locked inside my prison of autism. She smiled at me in a way that reflected her belief that I was a worthy person with the ability and desire to engage, and she waited the very long time it took for me to smile back. That was the beginning of my long and wonderful relationship with Dr. Ricki Robinson, who has been my guide as I struggle to reach my goals of becoming a productive member of society and a person worthy of respect.

Many purported experts claim that individuals with autism are not interested in socializing. This is totally ridiculous. I love people, but my movement disorder constantly interferes with my efforts to interact. I cannot start and stop and switch my thinking or emotions or actions at the right time. As a result, I am often very lonely and this is the worst thing about autism. I get very sad when I watch my wonderful twin sister going off to do fun things that I cannot do. At moments like that, I passionately hate autism. So next time you see someone like me at your synagogue or at your event, remember that



they probably feel really lonely and you could be the person to make their day by smiling at them and letting them know that they exist.

Although I have often felt invisible because I can't speak, I have also learned that autism is not entirely negative. For example, I get a VIP pass at Disneyland, and I also get to kiss all the beautiful counselors at camp and pretend I don't know any better. On a serious note, not being able to speak means that you spend lots of time listening. In fact, most of what I know I've learned from listening to conversations that other people didn't think I could hear. I've also observed that people with autism support each other in ways that typically developing people do not. My friends and I have all known the horrible embarrassment of having an autistic episode, so we really understand and support each other through triumphs as well as tribulations. Finally, because I have had to struggle every day of my life to do things that other kids take for granted, I think that I have experienced God's love in a way that most kids have not. I used to get very offended at the notion of being someone's community service project. But then I realized that while my buddies were teaching me how to be like other kids, I was teaching them how to appreciate the beauty of God's world in a new way. All in all, who gets the greater benefit?

All of you here made a commitment to come today and spend an afternoon and evening understanding what it is like to live with a disability. To be honest, it is hard. It is an enormous effort for me to do the simplest tasks like writing my name or tying my shoe. In my daily struggle, Judaism has been a constant source of hope, comfort and guidance. From my earliest experiences in our synagogue preschool to my more recent experiences at Jewish summer camps and youth groups, I have had wonderful peers who have seen me as a person made in God's image, with the same dreams and concerns as other kids. And while everyone else may be sleeping during the rabbi's sermon, I am always listening because I need all the help I can get in finding the strength to make it through each day.

I want to thank all of you for inviting me to participate today and for being pioneers because I have never been a keynote speaker before. It has often been my experience that people with disabilities, especially those of us who are nonverbal, don't





get an opportunity to speak for ourselves. Our parents or our therapists or self-proclaimed experts speak for us. By including me as a presenter today, you are already light years ahead of many other communities. So thank you for believing in me and all the other kids like me.

For the past two years, I have been part of a musical theater program for kids with special needs called the Miracle Project. It was very aptly named because many miracles happened there that make the parting of the Red Sea pale in comparison. For one, I met my wonderful girlfriend Lexi, who also has autism and has the most beautiful voice and smile in the whole world. For another, I wrote a song that we used in the show and Lexi sang it. Most miraculously of all, we all accomplished far more than we ever expected because we were a team - autistic kids, siblings, volunteers and acting coaches. People with special needs don't need to be spoken to like dogs with good job and good listening and similar phrases used to train animals to do tricks. All we need is someone patient who believes that we can fly and notices our hard-earned little accomplishments. When all those little accomplishments accumulate over days and weeks and months and years, the results can be truly miraculous!