



Jewish Perspectives on Theology and the Human Experience of Disability

**Rabbi Judith Z. Abrams, PhD
William C. Gaventa, MDiv
Editors**

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Jewish Perspectives on Theology and the Human Experience of Disability, edited by Rabbi Judith Z. Abrams, PhD, and William C. Gaventa, MDiv (Vol. 10, No. 3/4, 2006). *“Offers an inclusive kaleidoscopic view of Judaism and how Judaism approaches disability. Each sensitive contribution adds depth and perspective to the moral imperatives confronting Jewish law, individuals, families, communities and humanity. Read in parts or as a whole, this work is an instrumental text for study, exploration and great comfort.”* (Rabbi Michal Hyman, MA, Chaplain, UCLA Medical Center)

Disability Advocacy Among Religious Organizations: Histories and Reflections, edited by Albert A. Herzog, Jr., PhD, MDiv, MA (Vol. 10, No. 1/2, 2006). *Insightful exploration of the histories of disability advocacy within numerous religious organizations since 1950.*

End-of-Life Care: Bridging Disability and Aging with Person-Centered Care, edited by Rev. William C. Gaventa, MDiv, and David L. Coulter, MD (Vol. 9, No. 2, 2005). *A probing set of examinations into disability, Alzheimer’s, and end-of-life debates, using a pair of cogent arguments as a starting point, followed by carefully considered responses from other experts.*

Critical Reflections on Stanley Hauerwas’ Theology of Disability: Disabling Society, Enabling Theology, edited by John Swinton, PhD (Vol. 8, No. 3/4, 2004). *“AN EXCELLENT AND LONG-NEEDED RESOURCE. . . . This work will not only continue the ongoing discussion among those specializing in the theology of disability in general and disability related to intellectual development in particular, but will also serve to bring disability into the mainline of contemporary theological discussion.”* (Kerry H. Wynn, PhD, Director, Learning Enrichment Center, Southeast Missouri State University)

Voices in Disability and Spirituality from the Land Down Under: From Outback to Outfront, edited by Rev. Dr. Christopher Newell, PhD, and Rev. Andy Calder (Vol. 8, No. 1/2, 2004). *“In recent years disability theology has emerged alongside Black theology and womens’ theology as a new genre seeking to express the concerns of people whose experience has often been marginalized. This collection is A SIGNIFICANT AUSTRALIAN CONTRIBUTION TO THIS GROWING LITERATURE. The early explorers named Australia ‘the south land of the Holy Spirit.’* (John M. Hull, PhD, Hon DTheol, Professor Emeritus of Religious Education, University of Birmingham, England; Author of *On Sight and Insight* and *In the Beginning There Was Darkness*).

Graduate Theological Education and the Human Experience of Disability, edited by Robert C. Anderson (Vol. 7, No. 3, 2003). *“A comprehensive overview of theological education and disability. . . . Concise and well written. . . . Offers rich theological insights and abundant practical advice. I strongly recommend this volume as a key introduction to this important emerging topic in theological education.”* (Rev. John W. Crossin, PhD, OSFS, Executive Director, Washington Theological Consortium)

The Pastoral Voice of Robert Perske, edited by William C. Gaventa, Jr., MDiv, and David L. Coulter, MD (Vol. 7, No. 1/2, 2003). *“Must reading for seminary students and clinical program directors. Pastors, providers, and parents concerned with persons suffering from cognitive, intellectual, and developmental disabilities will find these vigorous testimonies readable, timely, fresh, and inspiring despite having been written more than 30 years ago.”* (Barbara J. Lampe, JD, Executive Director, National Apostolate for Inclusion Ministry)

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Foreword

This collection of articles and authors represents in many ways the best of what this series of volumes hope to embody. The authors and perspectives come from across the broad dimensions of Judaism, from a number of roles (theologian, rabbis, parents, lawyers, and persons with disabilities), and from across the world: Israel, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. They include theology, scripture, history, ethics, practical theology, religious education, and personal experience; many voices, from many places, struggling within a major faith tradition to understand and apply the lessons, wisdom and revelation of history to the lived experience and questions of the present.

It has been my honor and privilege at a number of times in my interfaith work with people with disabilities, their families, and their faith communities to be part of Jewish services, programs and experiences. This ex-Baptist missionary kid can honestly say that some of the most sacred moments in my own faith journey have come through those experiences. Accompanying a group of adults from a developmental center to their first Rosh Hashanah service in years, seeing them along with a young refugee from Russia gather around the rabbi and the Torah after the service, being given a prayer shawl by a Jewish psychologist in Melbourne in October, 2001 with the mission of bringing it back to the States to find a young boy whose father had been killed in 9/11, sharing in Passover seders, being part of a bar mitzvah service done by local synagogues for adults from a nearby institution who had never had the opportunity, learning to sing some of the songs, working with Ilana Trachtman as she produces *Praying with Lior*. . . the list goes on and on.

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Now I can add to that list the experience of reading these pieces and shaping them into a collection with Rabbi Abrams. I inherited the task from Robert Anderson who first received some of these articles when his call for papers for a volume on theological education (VII. 2) led to a number of Jewish submissions, and a decision to try to focus a volume on that tradition. Bob and I enlisted Rabbi Abrams, for it would have been beyond chutzpah for two Christians to edit a volume of pieces written by, and primarily for, the Jewish community. The demands of Bob Anderson's own graduate program led to my taking over his role, and now, at long last, our completion of this collection with the help of Rabbi Judith Abrams, the author of one of the two primary books about Judaism and disability which have been published in the last decade. We are very grateful for her guidance and assistance.

But if you think this is just a collection for Jewish readers, you would be very wrong. Read the first two articles by Rabbi Artson and Wallace Greene. If you are not hooked, I will be surprised. There is a richness of story, a depth of commitment and scholarship, and a willingness to wrestle with understandings of G-d, tradition, and experience that comes through over and over again. A careful reading will shatter stereotypes of Judaism and common interpretations of scripture. For example, the Leviticus passages have long been cited as evidence of discrimination by religious communities and traditions. But read more deeply and carefully, and re-applied, several authors help us see those texts anew. The story and tradition of Rabbi Pereidah, with his practice of giving a slow child at least 400 chances, simply humbles us in an age when we are tempted to blame slow learning on a child because of his or her disability. In that story, you can almost hear an ancestor of Marc Gold, one of the first champions of supported employment, challenging us. Marc Gold used to say that when we think a person with an intellectual disability cannot learn, it says more about our ability to teach than it does about his or her capacity to learn.

We are indeed grateful to the authors for their work, to organizations that originally published some of these pieces for permission to republish, and for everyone's capacity to demonstrate a time-honored characteristic of faith, i.e., patience, through the time it took to get this collection to print. There are exciting and new forms of telling new Jewish stories that are coming just over the horizon, as Ilana Trachtman finishes her editing of the documentary on Lior, a young man with Down Syndrome and his journey toward his bar mitzvah (www.prayingwithlior.com) and groups like the Council For Jews With Special Needs in Phoenix and the Jewish Community Inclusion Program for People with Disabilities

in Minneapolis St. Paul work hard on communities of inclusion at every level. Our hope is that this collection becomes a valuable tool in those and other initiatives within Jewish traditions while it also serves as a light for others who share some of the same scriptures and others still who share the call to revisit sacred stories, texts, and traditions to find, once again, new ways of using them to understand and inform current experience.

*William C. Gaventa, MDiv
Co-Editor
Journal of Religion, Disability & Health*

Introduction

Rabbi Judith Z. Abrams, PhD

A recognition of disabilities and their role in Jewish life is evident from our earliest to our most recent sources. From the Torah to modern writing, Judaism takes account of persons with disabilities and their role in the community. The broad sweep of the articles in this volume supports this assertion by providing ample evidence of these claims.

We begin and end with the contemplations about disabilities by Bradley Shavit Artson. He notes that, “history won’t remove the problem for most of us” when contemplating ancient texts and their apparent attitudes toward disabilities. Rather, he suggests, it is the immediate experience and acceptance of persons with disabilities that should inform tradition.

The three main movements of Judaism—Orthodox, Conservative and Reform—approach persons with disabilities in their own distinctive ways. Wallace Greene’s piece, “Jewish Theological Approaches to the Human Experience of Disability” reflects an Orthodox stance. In his view, “We need to move beyond seeing people with disabilities as needy and toward a view that all people have needs. This model stresses interdependency as a central characteristic of life and society.”

The Conservative movement’s Committee on Jewish Law and Standards decides that movement’s stance on important issues. Daniel S. Nevin’s article is a record of the Committee’s deliberation regarding

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how a blind person may participate in the Torah service. After an exhaustive examination of the sources which apply to this topic, the conclusion that the blind may participate in the Torah service in limited ways reflects both the decision-making process of that movement as well as its general stance, finding a way to both hold fast to the past while adapting to the present.

The Reform movement's rabbinic decision-making body, the Central Conference of American Rabbis' Responsa Committee, has been asked many questions which deal with disabilities over the years. Walter Jacob, who presided over the Committee for many years, was able to address these issues not only from a scholarly point of view but from a personal one as well. In his decision about a parent's obligation to visit a profoundly retarded child, he writes, "As I view this problem through my personal experience with a severely handicapped daughter . . . it is clear that unless ongoing relationships of some kind are established with such a handicapped child, the parents and other children will always feel guilty." The selection of other responsa presented here deal with handicapped access to a synagogue, divorce of an incapacitated spouse, and the ability of a blind person to serve as a witness (which allows a partial contrast between the Conservative and Reform stances regarding persons with disabilities).

In the next section, we have two articles which address the issue of disabilities from a more theoretical and scholarly framework. My own article seeks to dispel the erroneous notion that the requirements for priestly perfection found in the Torah apply to all Israelites. This misconception has led to the notion that the Torah limits disabled Israelites' participation in Jewish life. Why must the priests be physically perfect? "Because of the danger which was liable to befall those who approached this holy area (i.e., the Tabernacle) improperly." A blemishless body was needed as a sort of protective suit if a person were to come into contact with God's lethal presence.

Bonnie Gracer examines rabbinic attitudes toward persons with disabilities in her exploration of deafness in the *Mishnah*. She finds that, "In contrast to the evidence of infanticide as a response to disability in ancient Greece and Rome, the *Mishnah* records no debates on whether people with disabilities should be allowed to live; infanticide is never even raised as a possibility. Quite the contrary—the rabbis cherish life and see human variety as evidence of God's greatness."

In our final major section, we examine Judaism's theology regarding persons with disabilities and how that disability is put into action. Melinda Jones' article not only outlines a theology of inclusiveness and

empowerment but advocates change when current religious practice differs from this theology: “My hope would be that there would be a re-examination of Jewish law to adjust it to modern times.” Such a theology offers “not only hope but also help to people with disabilities.”

The rest of the articles in this section demonstrate how this theology is being put into action today. The next three articles are descriptions of actual programs that addressed the issue of persons with disabilities in Jewish communal life today. Becca Hornstein’s description of screening for Jewish genetic diseases, Eve Hersov’s thorough and meaningful report on Jewish identity and disabled persons in Britain and the summary of the Minneapolis Jewish Community’s Inclusion Program for People with Disabilities demonstrate that the articles in this volume are far from theoretical: they are becoming reality in Jewish life. Kandel et al. examine the issue of how marriage and parenthood among those with mental disabilities functions in today’s world. Deena R. Zimmerman’s article, “The Participation of Disabled Women in the Rules of *Niddah*” explores how disabled women in Israel can participate in the rite of the ritual bath, noting that “accommodations have to be made for the inclusion of the disabled in this part of religious practice.” Robert Brown, writing from both a textual and a personal point of view, shows how modern technologies are making it possible for more persons with disabilities to participate in Talmud study, one of the core experiences of Jewish life.

While this volume offers a great deal of material it is by no means an exhaustive examination of the topic. In particular, for those wishing to create a course with this as a reader, I suggest including pages 234-237 of John Hockenberry’s *Moving Violations: A Memoir* (Hyperion, 1995). Hockenberry is a paraplegic who lived in Israel and other countries in the Middle East as a reporter. His insights give the reader a bird’s eye view of the day-to-day life of a person with disabilities in modern Israel. More insights about the role of disabilities in Israeli life—particularly disabilities and their role in the Israeli military experience—would have been welcome. This is a fruitful area for further research and documentation.

The study of disabilities, and the study of Judaism and disabilities is swelling with a rising tide of interest as people are becoming aware that very few people will live a life without being touched by this issue, either personally or by having a relative or friend with disabilities. This volume represents the vanguard of scholarship on this topic which will doubtless grow as time passes.

OPENING CONTEMPLATION

‘Im ani kan, hakol kan
If I Am Here, All Is Here:
A Contemplation
on “Defects” and “Wholeness”

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, MA

SUMMARY. The author provides an understanding that the community is incomplete without the presence and participation of people with disabilities. “The Torah was not given to angels. We are all of us blemished; human wholeness does not come from some elusive perfection, but rather from the radical act of taking hold of our imperfections and offering even them.” The Torah reminds us of an insistence on a community that includes

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KEYWORDS. Disability, Leviticus, blemish, wholeness, Torah

How do we measure human worth? What constitutes wholeness or greatness? And, by way of contrast, what constitutes a defect, an imperfection that renders another person less than complete? These questions intrude when we consider the lives of people with disabilities. They intrude as well when we peer into the depths of our own hearts and face our inner selves in the naked light of honesty. Disability disrupts the images of perfection that surround us and cry out: are we really good enough to do the tasks at hand? Are we pure enough? Are we holy enough? Has the Torah gone through our beings to transform us into someone sufficiently decent? Won't our shortcomings become immediately apparent, and immediately visible?

I'd like to create room to rethink the way we conceive our challenges, our imperfections, our embodiment, through the light of Torah. In addressing who is permitted to bring a sacrifice in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, the Torah imposes the following restriction: *Ish mizeracha l'dorotam asher yiheyeh bo mum, lo yikra lehakriv lechem l'elohav; ki chol ish asher bo mum lo yikrav*—"No one of your offspring throughout the ages who has a defect—a *mum*—shall be qualified to offer food to God; no one who has a *mum*—a defect—shall be qualified" (Leviticus 21:17).

I have been schooled in the historical method of religious study. My first defense against troubling verses in the Torah is to quarantine them securely behind a historical context, so let us begin our contemplation using that approach. The Kohen in the Temple is understood to be a symbol of perfection. Because the Temple ritual is physical, the Kohen's perfection must also be physical. And that perfection is understood by the biblical text as *shleimut*—as wholeness. Therefore, the Kohen can't be missing any body part, because he has to literally embody that wholeness in the presence of God. Indeed, as the Torah goes on to state, *ach el ha-parochet lo yavo'u, v'el ha-mizbeach lo yigash, ki*

mum bo—“One who has a defect shall not enter behind the curtain, nor come near the altar” (Leviticus 21:23).

But history won't remove the problem for most of us. Are we then saying that we can't draw near to God, we cannot serve on behalf of the community, if we have a *mum*, a defect? Is there anyone among us who is perfect? Is there anyone—anywhere—who doesn't, in fact, manifest not one *mum* but many? Is it possible that only those who are perfect are capable of serving God and of serving each other? Certainly, on a literal level, this has not been true in Jewish life. Our father Jacob “limped” his way into greatness. Moses spoke what are surely history's greatest orations with a speech impediment. The Talmud is filled with great figures—Nahum ish Gamzo, Rav Sheshet, and others—who, with their physical blemishes, perhaps because of them, went on to attain spiritual greatness. And then, theologically, certain it is that God is the only one who is perfect. Can it be, then, that only God can serve?

The Torah raises a question in the book of *Devarim*. *Shichet lo? Lo! banav mumam*—“Is corruption then God's? No, God's children are the ones who are blemished” (Deuteronomy 32:5). Rabbinic genius turns the verse around: “*Af al pi shehem m'laim mumim, kruim banim*—even though they are full of imperfections, they are still God's children” (*Sifri Devarim*, Parashat Ha'azinu, Piska 3).

We are—all of us—God's children, blemishes, defects, imperfections and all, and we cannot afford to allow human shortcomings or disabilities to prevent us from taking the responsibility that is ours to do what good we can, to glorify Torah and to testify to God's sovereignty as we might. So I'd like to try to offer a different percolation of that initial verse in *Parashat Emor*. A *mum* is that lack which makes us feel incomplete. It is the part of some imaginary whole. I would like to propose, then, that wholeness does not mean physical perfection. Indeed, *shleimut* is not perfection of any kind. *Shleimut* means serving God with all our being, with the entirety of who we are, with leaving no part of ourselves outside of the divine service—*bechol levav'cha, uvechol nafshecha, uvechol meod'cha*, “with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:5). God doesn't demand of us that we apportion ourselves into little pieces, some parts of which are kosher, some parts of which are acceptable, some parts of which may be public, and the rest must be hidden away. It is that hiding which is the *mum*, and a person with such a *mum* cannot serve the Holy One, and cannot stand before an imperfect community pretending to be perfect.

One can serve the Eternal only with the wholeness that comes from imperfection. With one's entire being, both positive traits and negative;

as Rashi says, *bishnei yitzarecha*, “with both your impulses.” We can serve the Lord only if our entire history, our entire life, even our special needs are brought with us into the divine service. Only if our minds and our hearts and our souls are engaged passionately in the works that we do and, as we remind ourselves each *Kol Nidrei*, only if we bring with us our entire community—not just the saints but the sinners too, not just those with special needs, but those not yet with special needs.

Perhaps, then, the wholeness to which the Torah alludes is the willingness to stand in our entirety—warts and all, defects and all, special needs and all—and to offer them to God as a sacred service. Perhaps what the Torah is reminding us, then, is an insistence on a community that includes all of its members—that makes none of them invisible, that asks none of them to step outside. Perhaps only that community is a community fit to offer sacrifice that God will accept.

WE ARE CHARGED, THEN, WITH A SIMPLE BUT AWESOME TASK

Bring our entire being to the service of God and our fellow creatures. Leave no part of ourselves outside. Leave no piece of ourselves invisible. Be passionate in the service we offer. The Talmud reminds us, *Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu liva bei*—“God wants the heart.” Let us live in such a way, building communities that are welcoming and accessible, so that those we live, learn, and work with will know that they, too, are precious, and that each one of them, because of their imperfections, are truly God’s children. Let us show them not to postpone encountering Torah, living mitzvot, and rejoicing in God’s love until the day that they are perfect—such a day will never come. And besides, the Torah was not given to angels. We are all of us blemished; human wholeness does not come from some elusive perfection, but rather from the radical act of taking hold of our imperfections and offering even them. *Be-chol derakhekha da’ehu*—“in all your ways, know God” (Proverbs 3:6).

It is recorded in *Massekhet Sukkah* that Hillel has the audacity to speak on God’s behalf. I am going to take my cue from him and muster the audacity to mistranslate Hillel. God (if not Hillel) would want it that way. “*Im ani kan, hakol kan*: ‘If I am here,’ says God, ‘all is here.’” Who knows, but that for God to be truly present, *our* all—including the all of those with disabilities—must also be truly present.

*ACROSS THE RELIGIOUS SPECTRUM:
ORTHODOX, CONSERVATIVE
AND REFORM*

Jewish Theological Approaches
to the Human Experience of Disability:
A Primer for Rabbis
and Rabbinical Students

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SUMMARY. Jewish theology is firmly committed to enabling all those whom society has disenfranchised. The widow, the orphan, and the way-

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farer are but paradigms for all those who cannot fend for themselves. Rabbis and educators can be the change agents for these populations by internalizing the values that Judaism espouses. The examples chosen relate primarily to learning disabilities, but conceptually their underlying principles apply to all disabilities. doi:10.1300/J095v10n03_03 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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INTRODUCTION

There is the law, which regulates behavior, and there is theology, which seeks to understand how God relates to the world. In Judaism, they are united as one. God reveals His will via the commandments contained in the Five Books of Moses, called the Torah (literally, *instruction*). Every ritual act or moral imperative, even the narratives, reflect deeper meanings beyond the surface text. The practice of Judaism is the outward manifestation of these values. Conversely, these understandings should have an impact on the individual's *persona* as well as on her/his *praxis*.¹

The Torah exists as two parallel forms of revelation—written and oral. The written Torah is read from a parchment scroll twice weekly and on Sabbaths and Holidays. The oral Torah is the commentary and explanations which accompanied the written document from Sinai onward. These clarifications were eventually codified and written down and became known to us as the Talmud. We understand the Torah through the teachings of the rabbis of the Talmud.²

God made His nature, character, and purpose, and what He would have humanity be and do, known through the revelation on Sinai which is manifest in the Torah. The Torah (both written and oral) is more than the vehicle—it is the content of revelation. There are three forms of revelation: Sinai, rabbinic interpretations, and rabbinic enactments/decrees (e.g., the Sanhedrin and its successors). This tradition will take diverse forms, since the minds of people, and consequently their ideas of God, are diverse. But so long as their minds are directed honestly to God, His inspiration will shape their ideas.³ This would seem to be the meaning

of “The words of the wise are like nails, firmly implanted, all given by one shepherd” (Ecclesiastes 12:11). Although rabbis may differ, they all draw their authority from Moses, who derived it from God.⁴

The final introductory concept concerns the immutability of the Torah. The Torah is universal as well as immutable. What is true in nature is true in religion, and what is false in science cannot be true in religion. Truth is one and indivisible. The sun, in going forth on its daily round, is fulfilling Torah as much as is a human being who worships God, as much as is a Jew when she/he performs or observes the commandments. If Torah is immutable, what about the doctrine of progress? God’s Torah is immutable, be it manifested in the movements of the heavens, or in the ethics given to mankind. The standards of love, justice and truth are permanent and unchangeable. It is in the operation of those qualities among human beings, and by human beings, that development and progress are possible.

God gave man reasoning powers capable of expansion, as well as Torah. Without reason, one cannot appreciate Torah. Without Torah, one cannot utilize reason appropriately.⁵ The two ideas are mutually complementary and inseparable. As reason grows, the appreciation of Torah grows—the Torah constantly reveals itself anew. The Torah is a living entity, and like all life it grows.

If there are no standards, or if the standards change, no progress is possible. Mankind cannot improve if the meaning of good and evil eventually changes. Similarly, the value of a remote, abstract idea of goodness, preserved in heaven and unattainable by humans is negligible unless we reach out to attain it, and unless we can, in the end, attain it, and that every effort brings us closer to it. A static idea of goodness, anchored in one generation is likewise limited. Torah contains the germs of expansion.⁶ It is both immutable and progressive. It is ever-developing, it possesses autarky. Torah/Judaism is reality-based. It is not lifeless, conventional uniformity. The Torah expands its influence as needs arise. It develops new phases immanent in its essence.

Operating from the premise that the Torah’s “. . . ways, are ways of pleasantness . . .” (Proverbs 3:17), and that it is “a tree of life” (Proverbs 3:18), and most significantly that “Torah scholars increase peace in the world . . .” (Talmud, *Berachot*, 64a), it is inconceivable that Judaism does not offer specific guidelines, procedures, and sensitivity to the concerns of people with disabilities. Legal aspects that relate to disabil-

ity, and people with disabilities, have been studied.⁷ The objective here is to present material that illustrates Judaism's understandings of disability and people with disabilities. Every legality is based on a theological position and framework. The non-legalistic portions of the Talmud have much to teach us in terms of an approach. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, quoting his father, Rabbi Moshe Soloveitchik, taught that "The Aggadah [i.e., non-legal/narrative portions of the Talmud] is the Halakha [the binding law] of Jewish thought."⁸ A search of the sources will reveal a very modern attitude towards disabilities and people with disabilities. Unfortunately, society as a whole, and to some extent the Jewish community as well, has acknowledged disability but not always put forth a cogent, systematic means to address disability (particularly within a theological framework). The power of what is socially acceptable has for too long determined the place of people with disabilities in Jewish society. Certain "infirmities" (states of embodiment) were considered socially acceptable. If one wore eyeglasses, or a hearing aid, or used a cane, there was no stigma attached to that person. If one were bald, corpulent, freckled, or pale, that, too, was acceptable. Individuals who had learning or physical disabilities, stuttered, or were otherwise labeled as "different" from societal norms were marginalized.⁹ Now there is federal legislation, and many services are available, within the Jewish community.¹⁰ Rabbis, and rabbis in training, need to know and understand the attitude of Judaism towards dealing with all forms of disabilities. They need to be able to recognize how the Torah and the Talmud viewed people with disabilities and what constitutes a disability. This understanding should lead to greater acceptance of people with disabilities, more attention to the concerns that they highlight, more integration into communal life, and more advocacy on their behalf (not just for, but *with*, them).

Synagogues, Jewish community centers, schools, and camps need to become more sensitized not just to the concerns of people with disabilities, but to what the Jewish tradition teaches about including them. This may require a bit of effort and occasional reading into the sources, but that, too, is part of the Jewish tradition. These issues are not only politically correct and in consonance with modern sensibilities, but it is the law—both federal and Jewish.

The range of disabilities referred to in classical Jewish sources is quite broad: physical, emotional, psychological, mental, and communal. Sensitivity to these conditions, awareness of them, and how Judaism views them, is the first step toward addressing them.¹¹

The biblical narrative begins with God's understanding that loneliness is not good. "It is not good for man to be alone . . ." (Genesis 1:18). The making of Eve was more than just for the purpose of procreation. God's recognition of Adam's loneliness is an important lesson for contemporary times. Often individuals are alone not of their own choosing. The elderly and homebound come to mind. Those recently divorced or widowed can also be in this category. Reaching out and addressing *their* concerns may not fall under the rubric of the Disabilities Act, but in terms of being and living as Jewish, this personal and social response certainly resonates as Jewish.

The dysfunctional family life depicted in much of Genesis is also a clarion call for awareness, caring, and even intervention. There is much to learn from the text as well as from the subtext. Not all rabbis are trained clinical social workers, but they should be able to recognize the signs of trouble and be able to refer congregants for help. Jealousy, sibling rivalry, hatred, destructive behavior, malicious speech, and even malevolent actions are depicted in Genesis to teach us that even great individuals have human frailties, but more importantly, to teach us lessons about human behavior and how to avoid strife and conflict. An astute reader of these texts will be able to apply this knowledge in his/her pastoral work.

The biblical matriarchs Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Hannah, mother of the prophet Samuel, as well as the mother of Samson, were all barren. Their stories and the compassion showed them by their husbands and by God are also examples of how to consider persons in these situations. While there are many viable options today for women to have a family and while, unlike the biblical narratives, not all will have their own children, we can learn how to empathize, be supportive and inclusive.

Leah, another biblical matriarch, had "weak eyes," a visual disability (Genesis 29:17), as did Isaac who was blind for part of his life (Genesis 27:1). Despite their disability, they lived productive lives. The Torah is teaching us that individuals have many contributions to make and can transcend their supposed disabilities with the proper support systems. In one community in New Jersey, a major force which drove the efforts to install an *eruv*¹² was not so much for the convenience of mothers with baby carriages, but so that a member of the congregation who became blind could walk to synagogue with his white cane. That rabbi understands the attitude of Judaism toward the people with disabilities.¹³

The patriarch Jacob had multiple disabilities which he overcame. In an overwhelmingly agricultural and farming society, Jacob was the loner, the different one who stayed inside, the one who spent his time in

study and contemplation (Genesis 25:27).¹⁴ In addition to these non-social habits, Jacob also cooked (Genesis 25:29), and ended his life blind, and with a limp (Genesis 32:25-31; 48:8-20). He was able to respond to the challenges he faced not only with his intellect (Genesis 25:31-32; 30:42) but with the manly traits that his society valued (Genesis 29:7-10; 32:24).

One of the greatest symbols of divine advocacy on behalf of people with disabilities is Moses. His early years are quite traumatic. Moses is separated from his family as an infant, reared in an alien culture, and afflicted with a speech impediment. Yet it is he whom God chooses as the leader of the Jewish people. It is Moses whom God chooses to speak to Pharaoh, not his older brother Aaron, the skilled orator (Exodus 4:14). It is Moses alone to whom God speaks directly (Deuteronomy 34:10). This notion of leadership focuses on strength of character, not physical characteristics. It teaches us that people with disabilities are to be included in communal roles.

People who have disabilities may be hesitant to assume such public leadership roles, but no more so than others. Moses declared his reluctance on several occasions (Exodus 2:11; 13; 4:1; 10; 13). There are other cases in the Bible of leadership roles taken by individuals with a variety of disabilities.¹⁵ Judaism teaches against discrimination.

It seems clear that Judaism, from its earliest inception, enunciated the view that the person with a disability was not to be exploited, demeaned, or otherwise discriminated against.¹⁶ Judaism teaches that a disability is not to be equated with a lack of intelligence or understanding. Therefore it is forbidden to curse the deaf (Leviticus 19:14). Obviously a deaf person cannot hear such a curse, however, we are being taught a lesson in sensitivity. The Torah legislates such behavior to teach that deafness does not imply lack of comprehension. A similar idea is put forth in the law prohibiting one from placing a stumbling block before the blind (*ibid.*). Here, too, the Torah goes beyond the obvious and makes what to us may seem common sense into a legal requirement. Apparently, human behavior in the ancient world was not always so predisposed.¹⁷ The need for this legislation is underscored by “. . . and you shall fear your God, I am the Lord” (*ibid.*), since left to their own human reasoning, mankind may not come to this conclusion on their own. The message is clear—we are responsible for the welfare of all members of our community and may not do anything to undermine them.¹⁸

The Torah stipulates that it is the heritage of *all* Jews (Deuteronomy 33:4). Judaism is inclusive and no Jew is to be excluded. An inheritance belongs to heirs to use and dispose of as they wish. A heritage, on the