

“When it Comes to Jewish Education We All Have Special Needs”

Rabbi Jay M. Stein

January 26, 2008

Yitro 5768

Over the past few weeks our staff has undergone a bit of training and a part of that training was to create personality profiles. It is thought that by more clearly defining ourselves, we will learn how to communicate better with each other. By understanding who we are, how we operate, how we function best and how we interact best, we can collaborate more easily and streamline our work environment even further. The age old type “A” personality has been replaced with a type “D,” while type “B” has been replaced with type “C” personalities. Type “D” are now “type S” and, as if that is not enough, type “C” has been replaced with type “I.” Now, if you followed that you are probably like me, a “type D” personality, who was originally a “type A.” If you don’t care, you might be a “type S” formally known as type “D” and if you are still not following, let me just say this. I was previously a “type A” now I am a “type D.” For “type A” people, we are self-described as goal oriented as opposed to the people around us who just call us tightly strung. The truth is, I am not so tightly strung and I am driven by results. Which, I might parenthetically remark, is a terrible type of person to be working in an environment where so much of our success is not measured in quantifiable dimensions. What I mean is, the effect we have on people’s lives is often impossible to compute. The pain we ease, the joy we add can never be calculated - but we persist none-the-less.

I hope I haven’t completely lost you yet, but if I have, don’t worry; I will sum this up at the end. If you are a bit confused, don’t fret because it is how I felt all through school. I can’t tell you the number of times the teacher would ask a question, look right at me, and I would have no idea what she was asking. I can’t even count the number of times I would complete an exam, feeling confident I did well, only to see a return grade that was failing. When I would go over the test, I would invariably review the questions, then my answer, and then I would calculate how many points I would get once the teacher realized she was wrong and I, in fact, had written the correct response. Confidently, almost defiantly, I would go over to the teacher and say the same thing. “I think there must be some mistake, you see I wrote the correct answer.” Then the discussion would follow – it would turn out that I did have the right answer but it was just the wrong question. The problem is, for normative grading, the correct answer has to follow the correct question, if they didn’t line up in some linear way – then it is still marked wrong. I never understood why the teacher didn’t simply ask the questions in such a way as to elicit the right answer. I always felt like they were trying to confuse us. Every question seemed like a trick question, until I looked over at Carol Schiller’s grade – a perfect score most times. Turns out she was never confused by the questions. But I was. I just wish my teachers could have asked the questions the way I needed them asked once in a while.

Learning is extremely personal. We know there are kinesthetic learners, auditory learners, and visual learners. Then there are the rest of us who don’t fit into a neat box with a pithy title. Some of us mature later, able to grasp complicated ideas later in life, while some of us really never get it. For some the light bulb goes off immediately, while for others it takes more time to warm up and for some it seems like perpetual darkness. In Mel Levine’s transformative book *A Mind at a Time* he cites Edward O. Wilson,

“The mosquito is an automaton. It can afford to be nothing else. There are only about one hundred thousand nerve cells in its tiny head, and each one has to pull its weight. The only way to run accurately through the life cycle in a matter of days is by instinct, a series of rigid behaviors programmed by the genes... The channels of human mental development, in contrast are circuitous and variable.”

The bottom line is that we have no real idea of how the brain works or a full understanding of what is comprehended, or to what purpose that information is catalogued. To judge a priority would be to place our selves in a position not of teachers, but of prophet and judge.

In this week’s torah reading we are given the Ten Commandments and, for many, the very essence of the revelation at Sinai. This is the moment we re-enact every week as we raise the Torah up and sing, “This is the Torah God gave to Moses, who then gave it to us.” It’s just like at Mount Sinai, when we stand and are in awe of the words in front of us, words that were given thousands of years ago, and, as the midrash reminds us, we were standing right there. All were there. The entire Jewish people were there, no one was left out and no one was deemed unqualified.

Moses came down holding two tablets of stone. Written on these stones were the words of God. For the auditory learner – Moses read the text, for the person who chose rather the written form, there they were. The Rabbis said Moses came down with two versions, the written word, Torah *sh’bichtav* – and Torah she *ba’al pe*, the oral companion. It came down in two mediums for the varied learners among us. For the kinesthetic learner, there was an accompanying light and sound show, the thunder and lighting and the booming voice. For the frontal learner Moses made a presentation.

Each person got something and, I imagine, that is where the story really began. As soon as the text of the Torah was given, I think the Jewish people turned to each other and said, “Wasn’t that unbelievable, did you get it all?” “There was so much going on I missed some of it,” to which another Jew said, “Yes, I missed some of it too.” Then they started putting the pieces back together, each bringing what they understood to the table – each Jew trying to reconstruct the content of revelation – and we are still having this conversation today.

This is why the insight of the rabbis is extraordinarily progressive. Already, hundreds of years ago, the rabbis of the midrash knew this. In *Pesikta D’rav Kahane*, the midrash explains the first of the ten commandments reading carefully the words “I am the Lord **YOUR** God.” Explaining in the words of Rabbi Yossi B’reb Hanina, “*lifi kochan shel kol echad v’echad haya h’dibur midaber imo.*” That in that moment of revelation, the moment when humanity came into contact with the Divine through a written document, the words were offered according to each person’s capacity to understand. Literally, the words of the midrash say, “According to the ability of each and every person, did the one who spoke, share them with each person. Just like the manna that was given and tasted like whatever the one eating it wanted, needed it to taste like, so are the words of Torah. They are offered according to each person’s own ability to comprehend.

We are able to more fully comprehend the entire message when each person's ability to understand is brought together in a communal conversation. We can't do it by ourselves. No one can be left out, or part of the communication is lost, and the moment we believe there are people who don't have a place at the table or a role in the conversation, this is the moment revelation begins to die.

Our sages have preserved so many locations, in the Talmud Bavli, the Talmud Yerushalmi, the Midrash, and the Commentaries. They all talk about the incredible obligation we have to provide a Jewish education for all. They never discriminate against people with special needs. In fact, people with special needs are often the most powerful instructors of our tradition.

I am a guy who likes goals, and I appreciate accomplishment that is measured. I became involved in the martial arts because there are defined markers for success. I could ascend the ladder, recognize the steps forward I was making, not by acquiring knowledge but by the color of the belts I had achieved. However, this is just not the way real significant, life changing, meaningful learning occurs. I am not sure exactly how it does happen, but I am confident it is not always measurable.

One of the comparisons for most people's success is how many emails they receive a day. The more successful seem to be constantly answering, forwarding and composing emails. It has become the signature of accomplishment. Unfortunately, emails, text messaging, and instant messaging, is a world of communication done through the written document and if that isn't your strength, then you are left out. Judaism says we must find a way to talk to each other so that we can all be part of the conversation. We often celebrate B'nai Mitzvah of children with special needs and because of our extraordinary Madregot program; we bring these pure souls into our building to learn. For some of these students, there is a Bar or bat Mitzvah that is a part of that experience. About a year ago we held one such bar mitzvah and the child taught the following lesson,

“My Torah portion is Trumah. Trumah stands for the commandment to give gifts and tzedakah is to help others. In Trumah, God told Moses to build a special Mishkan to hold the Ten Commandments. God also wanted the Mishkan to be a place where his spirit could rest. God told Moses that each Jew must bring an item to help build the Mishkan. Some people brought gold and some brought silver. God did not want the people to donate money to build the mishkan. Instead, God wanted each person to donate an **item** to build the mishkan.” This was God's way of teaching us that each person has something special to give to the world.

All you have to do is be present at just one of these events to recognize, not only how much that child has achieved, but also how much we have gained along the way. If you ever have a chance to participate in such a program with one of these unbelievably gifted children, you will be touched and transformed in immeasurable ways - and you will learn to learn. When it comes to Jewish education – we all have special needs. Thank God we have the expertise at this shul, no matter where you are on the continuum, to meet those needs.

One final story. When I was in high school I was having trouble keeping up, particularly in Math and English. So my parents made an appointment with the school psychologist to get some analysis. After a half-day of tests and evaluation, the school psychologist scheduled a meeting with my parents and myself to suggest a plan going forward. During that conversation he pulled out a piece of paper on which he had asked me to copy over another page. I thought the test was to determine something about my memory. So I concentrated hard on the objects, and then from memory, put them back on the page. I felt really good about this exercise because I remembered almost every item. I have always had a good memory. However, he brought this paper out to illustrate exactly what my learning problem was. I thought he was going to say, "See how bright Jay is. You see, he just doesn't have a strong enough background, but through some resource room time we can catch him up. However, as was the case with most tests I'd taken, I got the question wrong. He brought out the two pages, both the original and mine. Then he went on to show how chaotic my version was. The items I'd remembered were not in their original place. I did get all of the pictures right but there was no organization. I just thought they looked better the way I had placed them - and yes the order wasn't the same. His conclusion was that I just needed help getting organized and that was the crux of my problem. Just a new loose-leaf binder and day organizer and we would be set. Oh how wrong he was. I needed more help, but now it wasn't going to come.

We all have special needs – because we are all special people - and we all need our Judaism to survive. Thankfully you have come to the right place.