

## Becoming an Inclusive Learning Community



...וְכָל-בְּנֵיךָ לְמוֹדֵי י"ה וְרַב שְׁלוֹם בְּנֵיךָ: בְּצַדִּיקָה תִּכּוֹנְנֵנִי...  
...and all Thy children shall be taught of G-d, and great will be the *shalom* of Thy children. In *tzedakah* shall you be established. (Isaiah 54:14)

The Torah teaches us often about the imperative to include all G-d's children – regardless of their physical, educational, emotional or psychological needs -- in the life of the Jewish people. Despite the Torah's teaching, though, we often do not give issues of inclusion our fullest attention. There are many reasons for this: fear of difference, political realities, and limited finances, to name but a few. I am proud, therefore, to be part of an effort here at Ohev Shalom that is giving renewed attention to inclusion in our own community.

The Education Committee, under the leadership of Joanne Adar and Nancy Swerdlow, has chosen to take on the difficult work of discerning how our school community might become more inclusive. Toward this end, the committee hosted last month "Becoming an Inclusive Learning Community," a special dialogue with Debbie Gettes, Special Needs Consultant for ACAJE/JOP. A sizable group of religious school and pre-school teachers, religious school parents, and others gathered to share their own, sometimes painful experiences around inclusion in the school program and to learn from Ms. Gettes how we might earnestly address issues of inclusion. Thus begins a process of surveying the particular needs of our students and their families, examining our current efforts at inclusion, and discussing how we might overcome obstacles to fuller inclusion.

All of us at Ohev surely want to heed the words of the prophet Isaiah above and do our best to give each child a quality Jewish education. This teaching of Isaiah (54:13-14) reminds us that including all people in Jewish learning and living leads to peace and righteousness. There is more to Isaiah's teaching than first meets the eye, though. The word *shalom*, peace, shares a root with the word *shelaymut* – wholeness. Perhaps, Isaiah is telling us that the world can only enjoy true peace when all people have a place and are connected to one another, thus making the world whole. Likewise, at the heart of the word *tzedakah* is the word *tzedek* – justice. Is Isaiah suggesting that a truly just society is one in which all members are included in the fullness of their beings? I believe so. That is why I applaud our Education Committee's commitment to creating a more inclusive learning community. I share the committee's vision of a community that is whole and at peace and that upholds the values of justice and righteousness.

While we can't know for sure where the committee's work will take us, I am confident that we will become a better, stronger community because of it, and I invite you to be part of this exciting effort. If you or someone you know would like to devote time, energy and possibly expertise in service of inclusion in our school, please contact me at [daronson@ohev.org](mailto:daronson@ohev.org) or (215) 322-9597.

Wishing you a healthy and safe summer,  
Rabbi Daniel Aronson  
Director of Congregational Learning