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Widening the Circle

SPECIAL EDUCATION BREAKS DOWN BARRIERS TO JEWISH LEARNING

BY DEBORAH SOSIN
 Photos by Arlene Remz

"Boker tov!" sing the children, sitting with their teachers in a weekly opening circle. Some tap a drum, others shake a tambourine. Some say their names aloud, others don't. One child joyfully chants the *Aleph-Bet*, and everyone joins in. It is a scene one would hope to find in any Jewish classroom. The children are engaged, happy, loved and learning.

Not long ago, this scene would never have occurred. All of these children have special needs that, until recently, Jewish educators were not equipped to meet. Programs such as this one—Etgar L'Noar, or "children's challenge"—are still rare, but represent a growing awareness that Jewish children with disabilities must have equal access to spiritually rich and rewarding Jewish learning experiences.

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Families of Jewish children with special needs—visual and hearing impairments, dyslexia, attention deficit disorder, autism, physical challenge or developmental delays—are now coming forward in greater numbers to express their frustration that their children cannot participate fully in synagogue services holiday celebrations and religious education.

Local institutions have begun to respond. In 2000, the Shoolman Graduate School of Jewish Education inaugurated a Certificate in Jewish Special Education, one of the very few training programs in the field. Directed by Dr. Scott Sokol, Adjunct Associate Professor of Jewish Music and Educational Psychology, the 18-credit certificate may be earned independently or as a specialization within the Master of Jewish Education program.

"It's not enough to be Jewish," says Jennifer Bittner. "Our children need to be full participants in the

Jewish community."

Sokol, who holds a PhD in neuropsychology, asserts that the Jewish community as a whole falls woefully short in recognizing and servicing the challenges of special needs children and their families, citing "a cultural situation where these families feel alienated."

That was nearly the case for Jennifer Bittner, mother of a ten year old who attends Etgar L'Noar. "In the middle of our wonderful Boston Jewish community my child was going to be denied access to Jewish education and I couldn't accept that," says Bittner, who turned her frustration into action and helped to found Etgar in 1999.

The risks of ignoring these needs are significant. "If a family comes to a synagogue for the first time and they don't feel welcome, they could get turned off to Judaism altogether," says Sandy Miller-Jacobs, an instructor in the Hebrew College certificate program and Director of the Special Education Department at the Bureau of Jewish Education of Greater Boston. "Training Jewish educators to effectively meet the needs of these children is vital for Jewish continuity."



Sokol believes there is a growing sensitivity within the Boston Jewish community. "We have gotten to a slightly better place—the beginning of something that will result in greater acceptance and better education for Jews with disability," he says.

Students in the College's certificate program learn educational theory, techniques and strategies in classes such as *Special Needs for B'nai Mitzvah* and *Behavior Management in the Inclusive Classroom*, part of their professional training to work with children whose disabilities range from mild to moderate.

The commitment to educating all children according to their needs is rooted in fundamental Jewish values. "The Torah teaches us not to place a stumbling block before the blind," says Dr. Sokol.

Training includes how to develop an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for students of all ages, how to identify learners with special needs within the educational setting and recommend appropriate assessments and interventions, and how to teach these students within tutorial and group settings as well as the inclusive classroom. Applying special education skills to Jewish curricula in subjects such as Bible and Hebrew language, students learn how to create proper adaptations that maintain goals and structures while meeting the unique needs of learners with disabilities.

Equally important as mastering the science of Jewish special education, says Dr. Harvey Shapiro, Dean of the Shoolman Graduate School, is grounding that knowledge in Jewish values. The guiding principle, he says, is summarized in the Hebrew phrase **לפי השגתו**, "according to one's grasp"—to teach each individual in the way that enables him or her to grasp an idea or acquire a skill.

"It's a misconception that in Judaism, learning is an elitist enterprise," says Shapiro. "If you look back several centuries to the classical *yeshivot*, the most learned educators of the period were sensitive to diverse learners' styles. They understood that differences in ability to 'grasp' do not in any way diminish the

sacred character of Torah study."



That principle is a living reality for Maxine Zizmor, who took a course with Sokol related to Hebrew language development. A learning specialist at the Maimonides School, an Orthodox Jewish day school in Brookline, Mass., she works closely with children who have different learning styles, some of whom have been diagnosed with a learning disability. "We are doing everything in our power to help children develop strategies for learning and also maintain positive self-esteem," she

says.

Adapting the rigorous Maimonides curriculum to better suit each child's individual pace is a hallmark of Student Support Services at the school, according to Zizmor. A student with language processing difficulties might be permitted to take tests in English rather than Hebrew, for example. Others benefit from computer-aided instruction used to reinforce specific skills. For a child with attention deficit disorder, behavior modification strategies—such as setting up contracts and using positive reinforcement—are devised to help make the classroom experience more positive for both teacher and student.

Another Hebrew College student, Lindsay Wurtzel, works with the children at Etgar L'Noar, all of whom have more challenging disabilities. Based at the Leventhal-Sidman Jewish Community Center in Newton, the program serves children with autism, hearing and visual impairment, developmental delays, cerebral palsy and genetic disorders. Currently, two weekly Sunday morning classes are offered to a total of 15 children, ages 6 to 12. With two teachers and a music therapist, Etgar provides a Jewish educational experience for those who might otherwise be excluded. Notably, teen volunteers, including some from Hebrew College's Prozdor high school, work one-on-one with the children each week. Next fall, additional Prozdor students will volunteer and participate in weekly trainings as part of their coursework.

"The children in our program had no opportunity for Jewish education," says Etgar's Executive Director, Arlene Remz. "Most Hebrew schools and day schools are not able to accommodate children with more serious disabilities right now—I believe all children should have access to their cultural and religious heritage."

Remz and her staff are working to make that happen. In a special unit on Shabbat, children at Etgar are taught the significance of the blessings, kiddush cup and challah—each in his or her own way. Where a blind child might touch the waxy exterior of a Shabbat candle, a nonverbal child could point to a picture symbol of the candle upon hearing the blessing. Remz tells the following anecdote: "One of our students used to blow out the Shabbat candles at home as soon as they were lit, thinking that's what candles were for. Now that child understands the significance of the ceremony and sings along with the blessings."

Pride in their students' achievements and joy of learning is evident among the Etgar staff. Wurtzel, a second-year MEd student who is also enrolled in the certificate program, is thrilled to be combining her special ed expertise with Jewish education. "It's wonderful to be able to teach the kids about Judaism, give them the experience of singing the *Sh'ma*, having a Passover seder, making hamentashen for Purim," she says.

"These children are being lifted up from obscurity," says founding parent Jennifer Bittner. "It's not enough to be Jewish—our children need to be full participants in the Jewish community." Her son Nathan has moderate physical and developmental delays. "When Nathan goes to synagogue now and puts on

his *kipa*, he sees himself as a member of our congregation," says Bittner. "Learning to say the word 'Shabbat' is a start. I hope that when he becomes bar mitzvah, he will have learned the *bracha* for being called to the Torah."

In the final analysis, Sokol says the commitment to educating all children according to their needs is rooted in fundamental Jewish values. "The Torah teaches us not to place a stumbling block before the blind," he says. "But it also goes much further by providing the ultimate example of God as special educator. When Moses complains that his speech difficulties hinder his ability to lead Israel, God reassures him that, as Creator, God will help him meet the challenge: "Now go and I will be with you as you speak, and I will teach you what to say."

NEW SCHOLARSHIPS FOR SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS AND JEWISH SPECIAL EDUCATORS

Since its inception, the Jewish Special Education program at Hebrew College has been a community effort. A partnership with the Bureau of Jewish Education of Greater Boston, supported by CJP and the Sherman Family Trust, the program gained a new community sponsor in April with a \$150,000 grant from the Nancy Lurie Marks Family Foundation (NLM) of Chestnut Hill, Mass.

The NLM grant will fund programs and scholarships promoting professional training for Jewish special educators. Two \$5,000, two-year graduate student stipends will be created to support study and research, from a Jewish perspective, into the educational needs of handicapped individuals.

In addition, the gift establishes an endowed scholarship fund in honor of former Hebrew College student Peter A. Lurie to enable students with developmental disabilities to attend the College.

To improve community awareness of special education needs in the Jewish community, the gift will also support an educational symposium for community professionals. An outreach effort targeting families with special needs children and adults will provide information about educational and scholarship opportunities at Hebrew College.

The Foundation's mission is to serve the core value of inclusion in Jewish learning for individuals with special needs. Chair and Founder Nancy Lurie Marks is a pioneering advocate and leader in the field of research and treatment for individuals with autism.

"Inclusiveness in Jewish life and Jewish learning is a sacred responsibility," says President David M. Gordis. "We are grateful to the Nancy Lurie Marks Family Foundation for making it possible for Hebrew College to substantially expand its work in this field and to raise the issue of education for special needs children and adults to a high Jewish community priority."

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