

A Living Lesson in Inclusion



Meet Eli Gorelik, the eighteen-year-old *gabbai* whom Tifereth Israel's 200-member congregation has come to respect and rely upon. He's likely one of the youngest *gabbaim* in the world.

He's also probably the only one with autism.

On Shabbat, Eli clears the bimah for *Keriat haTorah*; he also presents the *yad* to the *ba'al keriah* and assists with *hagbahah* and *gelilah*. Later in the day, at *seudah shelishit*, he hands out the *bentchers*. He prepares the candle and *besamim* for Havdalah and sometimes, on weekdays, serves as the *gabbai* who stands next to the *ba'al korei*. "The shul has become Eli's home," says his mother, Jacki.

"He has his routines," says Yosef Avrahami, another *gabbai* (there are five in total) at the Passaic, New Jersey shul and a member there for close to four decades.

Eli developed normally for the first two years of his life; at fourteen months, he was walking and talking and freely interacting with those around him. Then things began to change.

"He wasn't interested in other people," Jacki says. "He was in his own world." His preschool teacher reported that during circle time Eli would turn



Eli Gorelik, an autistic eighteen year old, serves as gabbai at Tifereth Israel in Passaic, New Jersey. Shul is the center of Eli's world, says his father.

Courtesy of the Gorelik family

to face outside the circle. Eventually, he was diagnosed with autism.

Autism is the most common condition in a group of developmental disorders known as the autism spectrum disorders, and is characterized by varying degrees of impairment in sensory processing, speech and language development, social interaction and communication skills. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that one out of 160 children in the country currently has autism.

Typical of children with autism, Eli

demonstrated markedly rigid behavior. "If I didn't have a bagel and cheese ready for him when he came home from preschool, he'd 'lose it,'" says Jacki. "I couldn't take him anywhere; he would fixate on the movement of the escalator or run back repeatedly to push the elevator buttons so he could watch the doors open and close." The Goreliks' other children noticed their brother was different. "It was tough [for them]; he was doing inappropriate things, like talking to himself, and he had problems communicating with others," says Rabbi David Gorelik, Eli's father, a rabbinic coordinator at the Orthodox Union (OU). "Once my older son asked why Hashem made Eli the way He did," says Rabbi Gorelik. "I told him: 'Hashem wanted us to do *chesed* for Eli.'"

The Goreliks enrolled Eli in a special program for children with developmental disabilities, where his responsiveness improved. "His world capacity is limited," says Rabbi Gorelik. "Whereas you and I can talk about things outside of our experience, his interest lies solely in his own world."

There's No Place Like . . . Shul

When Eli was five, his father began taking him to Tifereth Israel, and shul quickly became the center of his world. "He loved it," says Rabbi Gorelik. "He would sit through the rabbi's sermon without making a sound." Eli chose to

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occupy the chair on the pulpit, next to the rabbi. "Every time the rabbi finished his sermon, he'd run to shake his hand and say, *'yasher koach!'*" says



Members of Tifereth Israel in Passaic, New Jersey, have been welcoming to Eli Gorelik since he started attending the shul at age five. Courtesy of Tifereth Israel

Rabbi Gorelik. A shul member expressed his chagrin that "a child with autism [gives] the rabbi a *yasher koach*, when none of the others at the dais do," relates Rabbi Gorelik. "From then on, [everyone] began offering the rabbi *yasher koach*."

As a young child, Eli would sit in his seat without participating in the

service, his eyes following the rabbi's every move. Over time, he became more involved. "Suddenly, I heard him saying Shema along with me,"

says Rabbi Solomon Weinberger, who served as rabbi of the shul for more than four decades and is currently the rabbi emeritus. "And when I stood up for She-moneh Esrei, he got up and stood next to me and bowed every time I bowed and *shuckled* [swayed] with me."

Eli promptly picked up every word of the Shabbat *davening*. He even recited Kaddish Derabbanan with Rabbi Weinberger. "I had the only kid in town who was saying Kaddish for his parents while they were still alive," jokes Eli's mom. "It never fazed the rabbi; he has such love for every individual, and Eli grabbed onto it."

"He seemed to gravitate to me and I enjoyed his friendship," says Rabbi Weinberger. "The very fact that he was

able to [come to] the pulpit and to stand next to the rabbi gave him a sense of importance, a feeling that he is wanted and cherished."

When Eli turned eight, his parents informed him that it was time for him to sit with the rest of the congregation. Along with maturity came a sense of responsibility; he slowly began taking on the duties of a *gabbai*. One Shabbat around ten years ago, Avrahami says, when he approached the bimah, Eli started following him and participating in the preparation for the Torah reading. He's been doing so ever since.

Eli's mother attributes his high level of comfort with *davening* to Rabbi Weinberger's magnanimity and the openness of congregants who followed the rabbi's lead. Harry Fruhman, a former member of Tifereth Israel, made an immediate and meaningful connection with his young shul mate. It didn't hurt that he was the congregation's "candy man." As Eli started coming to him for some goodies, Fruhman urged him to sit beside him; that ultimately became Eli's official seat. "I would take his hand and use his finger to point to the places in the *siddur* to *daven*," he says. Eli kept returning, and not always for the candy. "I'd offer him a lollipop,"

How to Make Your Shul More Inclusive: Welcoming the Developmentally Disabled

By Jeffrey Lichtman

Create a "buddy system" in which volunteers help a special needs child follow along in the *siddur* during *davening* and in the Chumash during the Torah reading.

Organize a "Special Needs *Shabbaton*" where a scholar-in-residence is invited to your shul to educate and enlighten congregants about the special needs population.

Approach a shul member who has a child with special needs and say: "Although my family and I don't know your child and are unfamiliar with special needs, we would love to have him participate in shul with us. What can you tell me about him to help us get him more involved?"

Follow the rabbi's lead: The rabbi is key to the success of any important synagogue endeavor. By personally approaching and welcoming individuals with special needs and their families, he is modeling how to act.

Encourage participation: Individuals with developmental disabilities enjoy doing concrete tasks.

In shul, assign regular jobs for them ranging from collecting and shelving *siddurim* to setting up for a *kiddush*.

Read "What Do You Say After You Say Hello?," a pamphlet published by Yachad/National Jewish Council for Disabilities that describes how to interact with children and adults with disabilities and illustrates how much we have in common once we get to know one another.

Contact Yachad/NJCD for help or with any questions. Call 212.613.8229 or e-mail njcd@ou.org.

Dr. Jeffrey Lichtman is national director of Yachad/NJCD.



says Fruhman. “He’d say ‘no’ and stick his finger out for me to show him where to *daven*. At *Keriat haTorah*, no matter where he was [in the sanctuary], he’d come running to me [so I could move] his finger to the place in the *parashah*.”

Over the years, Eli’s role in the shul has expanded—he is now also the official proofreader of the shul calendar. “He’s always been intrigued by calendars and has the eye to notice inconsistencies,” says his father. “On [last year’s] Rosh Hashanah schedule, he found a number of mistakes. He pointed out to me that Minchah should have been listed as 7:00 rather than 7:20. He also noticed that the *hashkamah* minyan wasn’t mentioned.” Now, each month, the shul sends Eli a draft of the calendar to proofread.

When Eli’s not in Passaic for Shabbat, he’s at a Yachad/National Council for Disabilities (NCJD) *Shabbaton* offering his inimitable help. Yachad/NJCD is the OU’s program dedicated to enhancing life for individuals with disabilities. “A lot of details, planning and strategizing go into a Yachad *Shabbaton*; it is possible to forget something,” says Naftali Herrmann, former program director of Junior Yachad, which provides programming for individuals with disabilities ages eight to fifteen. “The staff is comforted by the thought that if we forgot anything . . . Eli’ll be the first to realize it and let us know?”

“[At the *Shabbatonim*,] he was al-

ways the first one at Shacharit every morning,” says Herrmann. “If I came to shul late, he would point to his watch to let me know.”

Fruhman also notes the importance attending services holds for Eli. “One should never underestimate how



Eli with Naftali Herrmann, former program director of Junior Yachad. Photo courtesy of the Gorelik family

meaningful *davening* is to children with special needs,” he says. “You might not think they are internalizing—unequivocally, they are.”

Rabbi Aaron Cohen, the current rabbi of Tifereth Israel, concurs. “When Eli gets an *aliyah* it gives him an [obvious] sense of pride,” he says. “His very strong connection to Torah and *mitzvot* makes an impact on the congregants.” And he makes sure Eli is cognizant of it. “It’s important that the *rav* has a personal relationship with children with special needs to demonstrate to them that they really matter

and that they are an integral part of the shul,” he says. “When Eli is away for Shabbos, we’ll let him know we missed him.”

“[Eli] does the maximum to participate and has developed friendships with many congregants,” says Rabbi Cohen. “This sets the tone in the shul, showing that we care about each person.”

The community has also benefited from actively reaching out and embracing Eli. “He has taught us all humility, empathy, patience and [about having] a sense of humor,” says Jacki. “A child with special needs shows you what’s important, and what is not; he shows you how to extend yourself in order to understand and appreciate the value and blessing of every human being.”

When it comes to integrating individuals with special needs, Tifereth Israel’s congregation is a true model. “They’ve known Eli now for [more than] thirteen years,” says Jacki. “It’s rewarding to see how he’s developed and to watch him running out of the house and down the street to get to shul.”

Eli makes a point to leave home extra early, eager to take his rightful place in the congregation. For that, his family feels immeasurable *hakarat hatov*. “I thank my fellow congregants and both rabbis for having been so good to him; they’ve accepted him and treat him like anybody else. They look at him as another shul member.” ■

NAIM

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For more information contact:
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Why Not *Your* Shul?

NJCD/Yachad's Inclusion Inroads

By Bayla Sheva Brenner



“It began with a colleague’s invitation to a Bible class,”

says Dr. Jeffrey Lichtman, referring to a chilling *Newsweek* article about Tim, a young Jewish man with developmental disabilities who happily attends church every Sunday. “No one had ever invited him to a synagogue study class,” says Dr. Lichtman. “If the Jewish community won’t welcome individuals with disabilities into their places of worship, someone else will.”

Dr. Lichtman, national director of Yachad/National Jewish Council for Disabilities (NJCD), an agency of the Orthodox Union, frequently stuns audiences with this story as he visits communities across the country promoting the message of inclusion. Many communities are taking his message to heart: Last winter, 300 members of the Denver Jewish community attended Jewish Disabilities Awareness Day, an event sponsored by Yachad/NJCD and Denver’s Jewish Disabilities Network. The event featured speakers, including Dr. Lichtman, who highlighted the many benefits inclusion brings to communities.

Knowing that greater exposure and education are key to opening more communal doors for people who have disabilities, Yachad/NJCD created NAIM, North American Inclusion Month. Every February, NAIM offers Jewish institutions across North America programming designed to sensitize community members to the importance of welcoming their physically, developmentally and emotionally challenged peers as integral and valued members of the *kehillah*. These programs include *Shabbatons*, lectures and seminars, scholars-in-residence, informational handouts and special PowerPoint presentations of the *Megillah* on Purim for deaf members of the Jewish community. This year, NJCD hopes more than 100 shuls, schools and other Jewish institutions throughout North America will be involved in NAIM.

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Dr. Lichtman asserts that, once tried, the concept of inclusion sells itself. High school students, for example, who join Yachad members on Yad B’Yad, a five-week bus tour around Israel and the United States, often come back “convinced they got far more out of the program than the Yachad members,” he says. The experience enriches the Yachad members’ lives as well. “So much of life is about social skills,” says Dr. Lichtman. “The degree that we equip [Yachad members] with these essentials is the degree to which they will be successful in life. These skills can’t be taught in a vacuum; they require a living laboratory—the shul *Shabbatonim*, peer modeling, that’s the best way to learn. We’ve seen over and over again that it works.”

“Including Jews with disabilities in our communal activities is Yachad/NJCD’s core message,” says Dr. Lichtman. “It sets us apart from other special needs agencies.” The Yachad *Shabbaton* program connects its members with congregants who never enjoyed close contact with individuals with disabilities. “Yachad members don’t just visit; they become part of the shul,” says Dr. Lichtman. “They give *divrei* Torah and receive *kibbudim* [honors]. I’ve heard people on both sides of the *mechitzah* say: ‘I didn’t know they could talk. I didn’t know they could read.’”

To make Yachad *Shabbatonim* a truly integrating experience, Yachad/NJCD places Yachad members (accompanied by a staff person) with families from the local community to experience an intimate Shabbat meal together. “We are educating the community not just about their disabilities, but also about their abilities,” says Dr. Lichtman.

“The strength of a community is ultimately going to be measured by how we treat the most vulnerable,” says Dr. Lichtman. “When we are not receptive to inclusion, then Tim and all the others like him are going to find a church to go to—when they could be very happy in shul.”

For more information on inclusion and on making your shul more welcoming of the developmentally disabled, call Yachad/NJCD at 212.613.8229 or e-mail njcd@ou.org.