

► Biblical and Rabbinic Inspiration for Fostering Sensitivity Towards Individuals with Disabilities



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Throughout the Biblical and Rabbinic literature, one can find lessons on the proper approach towards interacting with individuals with special needs or disabilities. In each case, the lesson to be learned is that, regardless of a person's weaknesses, everyone is created in the image of God. The fact that the expression "image of God" is attributed to the first human being means that the image of God is not a Jewish trait, but rather a human trait, regardless of skin color, religion, nationality, gender or ability. Moreover, professionals who interact with children with disabilities

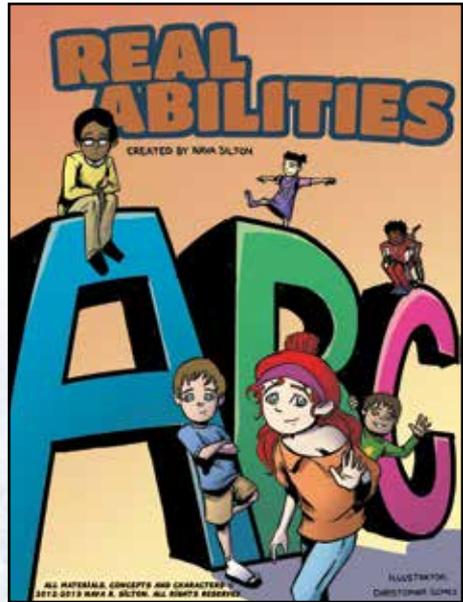
need to recognize the image of God in those children; they should encourage them to succeed with what they are given rather than focus on what they do not possess. Additionally, we learn through the principle of *imitatio dei* that not only should we be treated as though we were created in the image of God, but we should show compassion to others in an effort to emulate God's compassion and goodness.

The idea that one's future goals need not be limited solely because of a physical weakness is demonstrated in the Bible by Moses ascending to the leadership of the Jewish people. Moses was extremely sensitive about his speech disability, and even declined an offer to lead the Jews out of Egypt because of his speech impediment (*Kvad Peh U'Kvad Lashon, Exodus 4:10*). God's response to Moses, however, can serve as a lesson to professionals who interact with children who are sensitive about their disabilities. God says to Moses, in effect, that the responsibility for his speech defect is not his own, and that he may overcome it with the proper motivation and support. Professionals should likewise work with children to recognize, support and foster the hidden talents of those with disabilities, as well as teach other children to do the same.

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Realabilities

The values from the literature of the Jewish tradition upon which my research is focused in relation to interacting with children who have disabilities are (1) treating everyone with respect (since they are created in the image of God) and (2) recognizing that a personal weakness in one area does not negate the possibility of a hidden talent in another. In an experiment that I conducted, I examined the impact of three episodes of a TV show intervention entitled *Realabilities* in order to see if those values can be implemented in an educational environment. The show teaches typical children about disabilities while shedding a positive light on the unique abilities that children with special needs may possess. Very few other shows overtly discuss disabilities and highlight the strengths that these characters may possess (in addition to their limitations). The show also shares strong pro-social messages against bullying, which promotes empathy, sharing, cooperation, and helping other behaviors. In each episode, the *Realabilities* team must cleverly traverse various bullying obstacles by creatively harnessing their unusual abilities, which are associated with their disabilities. Each episode begins with a bullying scene in which one of the Realabilities team members intervenes

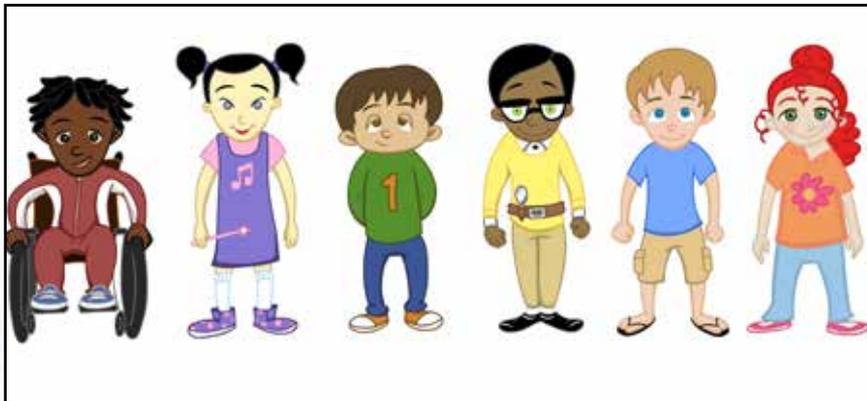


and motivates his or her other team members to defuse the situation in a creative, fun and remarkable way.

The theory behind the show is the notion that expectations influence the way an individual will approach a situation or interaction and the amount of effort he or she will invest in it. Therefore, when a child harbors a negative expectation of a social interaction partner, he or she will be less involved, will interact less, and will be less friendly, even if the person with whom he or she interacts does not possess significant emotional or behavioral issues. Unfortunately, once children become aware of differences and the negative stigma regarding children with disabilities, they may be

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less motivated to interact with them since they may have low expectations of how these special children may behave or interact. Moreover, the research suggests that children with disabilities are likely to develop negative attitudes towards disabilities due to the way that individuals with disabilities are portrayed on television; they are usually depicted as sick, pitiful, aggressive or as dangerous people. Showcasing the special strengths of individuals with disabilities serves at least two purposes; it helps children with disabilities perceive themselves in a more positive light and inspires typical children to be more sensitive and to take more of a social interest in their peers with special needs.

The Experiment

One hundred and sixty-six children in second and third grade participated in the experiment by viewing the

television show, *Realabilities*. All of the students were either from a Jewish Day School in Manhattan, New York or Jewish Day Schools in Baltimore, Maryland.

When asked to identify their favorite character in the show, 37.3% selected Melody, a female character who is blind. Almost 21% selected Ezra, who has no disabilities, 14.6% selected Seemore, who is hearing impaired, 13.3% selected Rolly, who has a physical disability, and 5.1% chose Uno, who has autism.

With respect to which character was the students' favorite, many responded favorably to Melody (who is visually blind) "because she has a wand," "she sings beautifully," and "is really nice." Rolly (who is wheelchair-bound) was also deemed to be a favorite due to the fact that "he's so fast" and "he really believes in himself." Ezra (who has no disability) was well liked "because he

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helps everyone,” Uno (who has autism) “because he likes math and is really smart” and Seemore (who is hearing impaired) “because he can see into the future.” It was noteworthy that the students identified the strengths of these characters and the characters’ pro-social interests in helping others as the primary reasons for their appeal.

In analyzing the data, the experiment revealed that children reported significantly more positive attitudes and behavioral intentions towards children with disabilities after viewing three episodes of the television show intervention. In particular, children reported more positive attitudes towards children with blindness, deafness, physical disability, and towards children with autism.

Conclusion

Fortunately, the *Realabilities* television show demonstrated that it is possible to promote positive attitudes and to foster sensitivity through viewing a show that sheds a positive light on children with disabilities. Following the three episode intervention, participants showed significantly more favorable attitudes and behavioral intentions towards children presenting with four different

disabilities: autism, blindness, deafness and physical disability. These findings are especially illuminating, since while some interventions have shown a minimal improvement in behavioral intentions following a sensitivity intervention, very few have shown such significant change from pre- to post-test on behavioral intentions and even fewer have been successful at substantially improving typical children’s cognitive attitudes towards children with disabilities.

This type of educational format, which can recognize the challenges of children with disabilities but also allow students to recognize that their peers with disabilities may have talents that are yet to be revealed, is a potential avenue towards changing how we perceive diversity in our communities. Since theory bolsters the findings of the *Realabilities* experiment, the findings will also seek to inform theory, by elucidating the details on how attitudes are influenced by interactions. In this way, the promising findings from these types of experiments will not only help to close the sensitivity gap in the Jewish world, but worldwide.