

# About Us.

**ELI Talks** is a nonprofit organization that cultivates, raises up, and transmits inspired Jewish ideas. Through ELI's digital media, and conversations on and offline, ELI curates a canon of new Jewish thought. This living Gemara, deeply rooted in text and tradition, serves to mirror, to energize, and to enrich the entire spectrum of Jewish observance while acting as a beacon of discourse and civility in today's world.

You can find out more about ELI Talks at [www.elitalks.org](http://www.elitalks.org).

## WHAT IS JDAIM?

Jewish Disability Awareness and Inclusion Month (JDAIM) is held in February and is a worldwide unified initiative for Jewish organizations to raise awareness and foster inclusion of people with disabilities and mental health conditions. JDAIM is a call to action as we act in accordance with our Jewish values, honoring the gifts and strengths that each one of us possesses.

## HOW TO USE THESE STUDY SHEETS

ELI Talks has a number of talks that are great conversation-starters for your community. ELI Talks have been shared in adult education programs, for inclusion committees and also with high school programs. They can serve as a limmud for your board meeting or other committee meeting—during JDAIM or at any time during the year. This document should be used as an accompanying resource for the videos.

## BRING THE RESOURCES OF ELI TALKS TO YOUR COMMUNITY

Our dynamic ELI Talks speakers all leader programs, workshops, and give talks to communities just like yours—email Mary Rubenstein ([mary@elitalks.org](mailto:mary@elitalks.org)) if you'd like to connect with one of the following speakers. How we work.

# We Were All At Sinai: The Transformative Power of Inclusive Torah

**Lauren Tuchman**

Link: <https://elitalks.org/we-were-all-sinai-transformative-power-inclusive-torah>

So often "inclusion" is framed as a mechanism for bringing people to the table who haven't been at the table. Rabbinical student Lauren Tuchman explores whether this is the most accurate and useful framing. Does Judaism perhaps offer us other more radical ways to think about inclusion and disability?

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Lauren uses the midrash about every Jewish soul—past, present and future—being there at Sinai to receive Torah. Why do you think that she chose this midrash for her talk? What is most important in this story? How do you imagine it looked to be present at Sinai?
2. In her talk, Lauren describes that sometimes when people approach her at synagogue and ask about her braille siddur it feels “othering.” What does she mean by that? How could you imagine that people approach her that feels respectful?
3. Lauren also talks about the importance of humility—that it takes some humility to understand people who are different from us in some way. What is your experience in getting to know/coming to understand people in your family, school or community who are different from you because of disability?

**Lauren Tuchman** is completing rabbinical school at the Jewish Theological Seminary and serves as a chaplain at the New Jewish Home. Previously, she served as the rabbinic intern at T’ruah: the Rabbinic Call for Human Rights. She has taught widely on the intersection between Judaism and Disability, and has been published widely including in *Jewschool* and *RitualWell*. She has taught at synagogues and organizations throughout North America, including the National Havurah Committee, Jewish Theological Seminary, Join for Justice, The Summer Institute on Theology and Disability, the Ruderman Foundation’s Synagogue Inclusion Initiative and Adas Israel Congregation. She was named to the Jewish Week’s 36 under 36 in 2017.

# Faith, Companionship and Disability

## STANDING WITH FAMILIES WHO HAVE A CHILD WITH A DISABILITY

### Gabrielle Kaplan-Mayer

Link: <https://elitalks.org/faith-companionship-and-vulnerability-standing-families-who-have-child-disability>

Mother and disability advocate, Gabrielle Kaplan-Mayer, gets real about the experience of parenting. What does Judaism's practice of Bikur Cholim (Attending to the Sick) have to teach us about shame, empathy, and supporting the families of kids with disabilities?

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Describe the feeling she portrays about receiving her son's autism diagnosis. Have you—or do you know someone who has gone through a similar experience? If it was you, what made you feel supported? If it was someone close to you, how did you offer support?
2. Gabrielle shares the way that the tradition of “bikkur holim” came to life when she went through breast cancer treatment. How does she imagine that we could expand that important mitzvah to support families who have a child with a disability?
3. Gabrielle urges us to push through our own fear and discomfort to be there for people in our community who are raising a child with a disability. What are some of the examples she offers? What else would you add to her suggestions?

**Gabrielle Kaplan-Mayer** is an experienced Jewish educator, author and speaker. At Jewish Learning Venture, she works as Director of Whole Community Inclusion and leads disability awareness programs for the Philadelphia Jewish community. Gabby also co-leads an award-winning family education program called Celebrations! at Congregation Mishkan Shalom for children with special needs and their families. Her most recent book The Little Gate-Crasher, a memoir of her Great-Uncle, who overcame society's prejudices about dwarfism to lead a remarkable life, was one of the national book selections for 2017 Jewish Disability Awareness & Inclusion Month. Gabby writes for and edits The New York Jewish Week's The New Normal: Blogging Disability and is also a featured Philly parenting blogger for WHYY's newsworks. Gabby holds a B.F.A. in theatre and creative writing from Emerson College and an M.A. in Jewish Studies from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.

# We Will Hear and We Will Profit: The Mitzvah of Inclusion

**Howard Blas**

Link: <https://elitalks.org/we-will-hear-and-we-will-profit-mitzvah-inclusion>

What can “na’aseh v’nishma” (we will do and we will hear) teach us about inclusion? Reflecting on his work, first as a counselor, and then director of the Tikvah Program for kids with disability at Camp Ramah, Howard Blas argues that inclusion is not just a mitzvah, it’s good business sense. By first “doing” through inclusion, Blas asserts, we better understand the unexpected ways people with disabilities enrich our lives and businesses in unexpected ways.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Howard describes how the Camp Ramah Tikvah program was started. What was revolutionary about the idea? How did camp directors react to the idea of Tikvah?
2. Howard describes the way that the Tikvah program has also focused on teaching vocational skills. Why is vocational training important? Do you know of any businesses in your community that train, hire and support people with disabilities?
3. Can you explain why Howard believes that hiring people with disabilities isn’t simply something we should do to be nice? What values can disability employment bring to a company, store or other business?

**Howard Blas** is Director of the National Ramah Tikvah Network. In this capacity, Blas provides consultation services to nine Ramah Tikvah Programs in the United States and Canada, coordinates training, shares best practices, leads camper and family Israel trips, and works with funders in support of inclusive camping. He has worked with the Tikvah Program as a counselor, division head, and acting director. He holds a dual MA in Social Work and Special Education. In addition to his work with Ramah, Blas has worked as a psychiatric social worker on the child psychiatry unit of a Manhattan hospital and in a day care center, and has taught at a school for children with learning disabilities.

# I am Here; Hear me Bark: Comedy, Disability and the Inclusive Synagogue

**Pamela Schuller**

Link: <https://elitalks.org/i-am-here-hear-me-bark-comedy-disability-and-inclusive-synagogue>

Does inclusion come at the cost of limiting ourselves for the sake of accommodating the needs of only a few individuals? Pamela Schuller challenges this assumption by presenting a new framework for inclusion as the beginning of a humorous and holy improvisational process—a process innate to our very tradition. Reflecting on her experiences growing up with Tourette's Syndrome, Schuller examines the pitfalls and successes she's encountered in the Jewish community's attempts at inclusion, while also outlining what the future of inclusion could look like for the Jewish community.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Pam describes the Jewish community not knowing how to support her when she was growing up. What do you think her congregation could have done differently? How is your congregation supporting kids—and adults—with disabilities?
2. Pam also describe the awesome Jewish camp that supported her and what an impact that camp experience made on her. What did the camp do to support Pam? Can you think of an example from a camp, school or synagogue experience when you saw inclusion work really well?
3. How does Pam describe Moses and God's relationship? Why do you think that Moses is an important figure for Pam to include in her talk?
4. What is the role of humor in Pam's talk? What made you laugh? How can humor be an effective tool when we are talking about sensitive or uncomfortable subjects?

**Pamela Schuller** is a nationally known inclusion advocate. Her extraordinary personal story of growing up with the most severe case of Tourette Syndrome in the country, and turning that challenge into professional and personal success, is engaging, funny, a little bit heart-wrenching, and deeply meaningful. She is a stand-up comedian and founder of [www.StandUpInclusion.com](http://www.StandUpInclusion.com). She holds a BA in Psychology and Youth Outreach Through the Arts from Knox College, and an MA in Child Advocacy and Policy from Montclair State University, where she focused her studies on creating improvisational theater programs as a tool for youth with disabilities to improve self-advocacy skills.