

Goldsmith Award Remarks

Cantor Faryn Kates Rudnick

September 17th, 2015

Boker tov, good morning. It is with profound gratitude that I accept this award today. Thank you to the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago for this incredible honor and recognition, and mazal tov to Rachel Shtern, with whom I am proud to share this honor. It is a privilege to be added to the list of outstanding past recipients who are making a difference in the Jewish community. Mazal tov to Amy Kirsch and Michael Teplitsky for their achievement today as well.

People often ask me how I became interested in working with people with disabilities. In truth, it was a natural progression. My grandfather was deaf and wheelchair bound and my mother is a special education teacher. In our house, people with disabilities were simply people. In high school, I was a one on one classroom aide for a young man with Autism. In college, studying music education at Miami University in Ohio, we had to take courses and do field work in special education. After college, working as a public school music teacher, I had the privilege of working with many students with an array of ability levels, including students with Down's Syndrome, Autism, and ADHD, to name a few.

When I decided to leave the classroom to pursue my dream of becoming a cantor, I did not know that I would have the opportunity to nourish a passion that I was not yet aware that I had: my passion for working with people with disabilities. While studying at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute for Religion, my passion for working with people with disabilities grew until it became the focus of much of my work and studies at HUC, summer internships, and at my student pulpit. When it came time to select the topic for my senior thesis and recital, it was not a surprise that I chose a topic based on inclusion and advocacy for those with disabilities, and when I wrote my personal narrative for my resume, much of it focused on the value of helping each person, specifically those with disabilities, find a place within the Jewish community. Since moving to Chicago in 2013, I have had the opportunity to help make positive change, working with amazingly talented people in the field, here in Chicago and across the country.

Historically, people with disabilities have sat on the periphery of the Jewish community. Jewish laws were written in an effort to protect those with disabilities, but in reality, these laws separated them from the community. According to Jewish law, there are three categories of people who are not required to participate fully in Jewish ritual life: the heresh (the deaf), the minor, and the mentally disabled. They were grouped together because at that time, they shared one important quality: an inability to communicate articulately. It was assumed that if they could not

communicate fully, they also could not understand fully, and therefore needed more protection. By limiting their ritual responsibilities, our ancestors believed they were also limiting possible embarrassment and preventing this group from being taken advantage of. What our ancestors could never imagine was the long lasting impact these limitations would have the community. As we have evolved and have become more advanced as a society, we have come to understand that having a disability is anything but limiting and that people with disabilities can and should fully participate in all aspects of Jewish communal life.

No community is whole without the participation of every member; each person has value and something to share within a community. Ask yourselves: Is what we are doing inclusive? If you can't answer that question, then what can you do to become inclusive? While there is no right formula, there are many steps we can take to ensure that our synagogues and communities have open doors for all people. Becoming an inclusive community is not simply about saying we're inclusive, but it's about changing culture, changing language, providing support, educating the community, and providing social and employment opportunities. How do you brand yourselves? Does your publicity truly market your community as inclusive? When someone with a disability comes into your community, do treat that person as you would anyone else? Have you considered the language of our liturgy and found other, inclusive ways to express the same thing, such as changing

the wording of our Daily Blessings so that rather than saying “opens the eyes of the blind,” we thank God for awareness, or rather than asking the community to rise during prayer, we ask them to prepare for those moments so that those who may be unable to physically rise still have a moment to consider the significance of the prayer, as my rabbi has begun doing at Temple Beth-El? When you walk around your building, are there physical pieces that can become more accessible, such as lowering mezzuzot so they are accessible to those at a lower level? Do you ask Bar and Bat Mitzvah families if their guests will need any accommodations, or speak directly to those with disabilities, as opposed to over them or about them, or invite people with disabilities for Shabbat and other social gatherings? Have you walked around your building to see if there is work that can be done for a few hours each week that could be done by someone with a disability? Are you doing whatever you can to ensure that every child receives a Jewish education?

Pirkei Avot teaches us to “look not at the vessel, but at what it contains.” I love this teaching because it challenges us to look beyond the surface to see the value and potential of each person, and challenges us to see something as truth and build upon it. When Moses pleads with God to pick someone, anyone else, to talk to Pharaoh because of his speech impediment, God is quick to remind Moses that God created all people with all abilities and that his disability should not prevent him from achieving greatness. All people are created in God’s image, and all

people have something valuable to add to our communities. Our task now is to welcome this marginalized group back into our midst so that our houses are truly houses for all people.

I'd like to take just a moment to thank some special people in my life who are here with me today. Thank you to my parents for flying here from New Jersey. My parents have encouraged me in countless ways and have always been in my corner, and, in truth, there is little that I could have accomplished without their support and love. Thank you to my dear friends, Eric and Jill Schwager, who are my family here in Chicago. Eric and I have known one another since birth, and I am amazed at the remarkable work he and his team are doing at the Holocaust Museum, work that I am thankful for, as it is preserving our collective story. Thank you to Rabbis Sidney and Debbie Helbraun, who have become part of my extended family and I am grateful for the opportunity to work with and learn from them every day. I am especially thankful to Rabbi Sid, who has become my partner in working to make the Temple Beth-El community an inclusive community. Thank you to the Temple Beth-El community, some of whom are sitting around this room, for truly embracing me and my passion for making the community fully inclusive. Temple Beth-El is a beautiful and warm spiritual home, and I am proud to be a part of it. Last, but certainly not least, thank you to my husband, Jack, who supports my every move with an open mind and an open heart. Jack never once

balked at picking up his life to move with me to Chicago, and he never complains or argues when I say that I am going to be a part of some committee or start something new at the synagogue. Jack's support is unwavering, and for this I am grateful.

I want to wish everyone a sweet and healthy new year. May 5776 be a year of joy and blessings for you all. G'mar chatima tovah.