

Can we afford to let down one in five of our children?

Jay Ruderman

Hannah's mom never thought her daughter could find a Hebrew school that was right for her, much less have a bat mitzvah. But last June, after two years in an innovative bar/bat mitzvah class, Hannah, an honors student with Asperger's syndrome, proudly chanted her Torah portion before 100 friends and family.

Binny flashed a grin as he accepted his siddur at the ceremony with the other second graders in his day school. But this moment could never have happened a decade ago for a little boy with Down syndrome.

Third-grader Justin was either exploding in anger during Sunday school or crying in embarrassment, and his teacher was at her wit's end. Two years later, not only did Justin enthusiastically perform an original song in front of the entire school, he also insisted on going to a Jewish camp last summer. And he had a wonderful time.



These three Boston-area children – and their Gateways: Access to Jewish Education journeys – have much to teach us about Jewish continuity. What's more, whether our generation engages – or fails to engage – the nearly 20 percent of Jewish children and their families who live with a disability will determine how inclusive a community we will become.

We know Jewish education holds the key to our people's survival and always has. Making sure every one of our children receives that birthright is a driving force behind my family foundation's partnership with Gateways, which makes Jewish education a reality for hundreds of children with special needs.

But, as we kick off Jewish Disabilities Awareness Month across the country, we're still up against a powerful enemy: ourselves. Although our tradition commands us, in the words of "Ethics of the Fathers," to "teach a child according to his way," we've developed another tradition: closing our eyes and looking the other way when someone doesn't measure up. The cost, we argue, is simply too high to include them.

For parents, learning to accept our children with special needs for who they are, and our own frustrations and disappointments is hard enough. But when our Jewish community turns its back on us, when our schools and shuls aren't welcoming, it's doubly painful and risks alienating all of us.

The uphill battle for recognition is getting a boost this month as 14 national funders announce the birth of the Jewish Special Needs Funders Network. This new team grew out of last October's ADVANCE: The Ruderman Jewish Special Needs Funding Conference, serving as a clarion call to funders large and small to face these difficult realities and to step up to do something about them.

Locally, Boston is already a laboratory for much of what this new network is aiming to accomplish.

We have services for people with special needs – not enough, but it’s a beginning – for housing, job training and placement and social and athletic opportunities. From the unaffiliated to the Orthodox, Gateways and our other agencies transcend our differences by uniting us in a single holy purpose: reaching all of our children with the blessings of Jewish learning and life.

Our community demonstrates what a committed federation, foundations and other funders can do when we partner with direct service agencies to challenge the status quo for Jewish education for children with special needs in a broad range of educational settings.

Now Gateways, already Boston’s central address for special needs Jewish education, is broadening and deepening its reach into the world of congregational and community Hebrew schools and Jewish pre-schools. This expands on the hundreds already served in its Sunday school, 10 area day schools, bar/bat mitzvah program and teen youth group. All of which means an even bigger impact on the vibrant Jewish future G-d promised Abraham so long ago. Just as exciting, Gateways is beginning to share its innovative model with other Jewish communities across North America.

Anyone who contributes even small sums is a funder, and the best way we can invest our resources is in high-impact organizations delivering long-lasting, transformative change for our people. When we begin to respect, accept and educate children with special needs, it reminds us of what we stand for and we become the people our ancient tradition commands us to be.

“I felt sort of like a celebrity,” Hannah said of her special day. “All the encouragement I got at Gateways helped me know I could do it. My whole family was there and my grandmother gave me money for my college fund. I felt so proud and a little more grown-up than before.”

As we all look harder for the best ways to leverage our limited personal, institutional and community resources in ways destined to impact continuity, making sure our Jewish future includes Hannah and Binny and Justin too will make it – and all of us – that much stronger.

Jay Ruderman is president of the Boston- and- Israel- based Ruderman Family Foundation.