

AUTISM AND THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

Autism is a condition which is more common than most of us realise, affecting over one in a hundred, but it is understood by few. This is why the World Health Organisation has denoted 30th March to 5th April as World Autism Awareness Week.

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how people perceive the world and interact with others. The term covers a range of different symptoms including communication difficulties, poor social interaction, and a tendency to interpret words very literally. Autistic sufferers can be distressed by change and may exhibit involuntary movements. Some find many normal environments overwhelming, resulting in considerable anxiety.

Crucially, these traits prevent autistic children learning in the same way as other children and they are often slow to develop language skills. They therefore need to be taught in different ways. Without early recognition of their problems and the right special educational and care assistance, their development quickly falls behind and they fail to learn crucial life skills.

Failing to get the right early diagnosis and special support can permanently blight their whole lives – a tragic waste of their potential both for themselves and for the wider community, and a challenge to their families.

Particular cases suffer to greater or lesser degree from some or all of the above traits so every individual needs to be diagnosed separately and to receive individually tailored education and care support.

The Jewish community is no different to any other with respect to autism (although there is a small minority who are unwilling to acknowledge that their children might have special needs). But we do have important mitzvot to educate our children, to look after Jews who are less fortunate than ourselves, and to include all Jews without exception within the Children of Israel.

In less than two weeks, we shall all sit down at the seder and listen to our children ask the Four Questions which we shall then go on to answer. We shall remind ourselves that we have to get our message across to Four very different Sons, a recognition of all the different types who can be found within our community, and of our obligation to address the education of **all** our children in the ways which work best for them.

In fact, autism is just one of many conditions which can lead to educational disabilities. Some others include Attention Deficit Disorder, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia and Down's Syndrome. Research has shown that, remarkably, over 10% of Jewish children in Manchester have some degree of learning difficulty.

The really positive message is that, with the right special help and support at the right time, every child with special educational needs and disabilities can have their prospects improved or indeed transformed. They can live more worthwhile lives, acquire the skills to hold down jobs and achieve their own potential - something the rest of us take for granted. We must remember that even the most severe cases still have a precious Jewish neshamah and deserve our help.

We are fortunate in the Greater Manchester Jewish community to have several dedicated charities who are working actively to help those with special needs – Delamere Charitable Trust, Langdon, The Friendship Circle, JSENSE and others. Their invaluable work is of a high calibre but they are only too well aware that there are too many gaps in specialist provision which they are unable to address. Not only do they have insufficient funds, but they also lack volunteers to help run and deliver their invaluable charitable services.

It's a mitzvah to support these charities, whether by volunteering or giving Tsedakah. At the very least, let's all show more understanding of those with autism and other special needs. They too have the right to learn, and to be included as part of our whole kehillah, despite sometimes seeming a little different or socially awkward. They are still all special in their own way.

Incidentally, Delamere celebrates the centenary of the former Delamere Forest School this year and is keen to make contact with Manchester based past pupils and families who might be interested in a planned Reunion. If that applies to you, your family members or friends, why not contact Delamere to register one's possible interest in being invited to this Reunion?

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