

B'SHALOM COLUMN
American Association on Mental Retardation
Religion and Spirituality Division

It's Never Too Late...

Until the past 15 years or so, the opportunity to participate in Jewish religious schools was not often available to children who had developmental or cognitive disabilities, vision or hearing impairments or emotional problems. Teachers felt unqualified and unprepared to adapt the typical, bilingual religious school curriculum to the special needs of those students. As a result of this, many men and women in their mid-twenties and older never had the chance to study for or have a bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah.

My agency has offered a social club for adults for over a decade. The participants have enjoyed a wide variety of shared experiences in Jewish settings. They seemed shy and uncertain about attempting prayers and songs in Hebrew. I can't tell you what was the impetus, but suddenly last summer, members of the adult social group expressed interest in having a bar or bat mitzvah*! I am delighted to report that this fall, we began our first class to prepare adults with special needs for a group b'nai mitzvah* ceremony.

I found two wonderful special education teachers who are also Jewish educators. One of them is a deaf educator, which was quite fortunate since one of our young men is deaf and communicates only in sign language. Nine students registered for the class; two of the young men have already had their bar mitzvahs but want to be their buddies' "helpers." At the first class, the teachers tested their reading skills, which ranged from none to fully competent adult reading levels. The students discussed their own Hebrew names and played some games to become familiar with the Hebrew names of familiar Jewish objects. Their curriculum will include the study of Shabbat and the morning services, prayers in Hebrew and English, explorations of the holidays and life cycle events, study of Torah and the significance of having a bar/bat mitzvah. Everyone in the class will learn what they can, in whatever learning style that suits them. Some may be able to read in Hebrew, and some in phonetic transliteration of Hebrew. Others will memorize by listening to audio tapes. On the day of their b'nai mitzvah, we expect all of them to participate (singly or as a group) in the prayers and rituals of this very special event. After all, it's never too late ... to affirm your spiritual identity!

(Watch for occasional updates on the adults class in this column.)

* bar mitzvah = son of the commandments / bat mitzvah = daughter of the commandments / b'nai mitzvah = sons and daughters of the commandments