

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

Frankie's "First Class" Bat Mitzvah

Two weeks ago, in my capacity as director of a small agency which provides programs and services to enable children and adults who have special needs to participate in all aspects of the Jewish community, I was invited to attend the bat mitzvah of a little girl who has multiple physical and cognitive disabilities. Frankie looks at the world through unfocused eyes; she walks awkwardly and needs assistance. She cannot talk, cannot take care of her personal needs, cannot perform any academic tasks. Ah, but Frankie can smile...and when she smiles, the room lights up! Fifteen years ago, in my community of Phoenix, Arizona, Frankie would never have had a chance to celebrate her "coming of age" in the ancient traditions of a bat mitzvah. In fact, Frankie would not have had a chance to attend religious school classes, go on an overnight school retreat in the mountains or join her classmates in holiday celebrations. The religious community would have pitied Frankie's parents, offered words of sympathy over their difficult plight, and if called upon, perhaps would have found a way to protect Frankie if her parents were gone.

But none of those things I just mentioned would have given Frankie the respect and dignity she deserves. Because Frankie, like everyone of us, is a child of G-d, formed in the image of G-d. Her external difficulties in no way reflect the sweetness of the person within. Frankie has brought very special gifts to her family, the teachers and therapists who work with her, and the community at large.

When Frankie stood before the congregation and pushed the button on her assistive communication device to bring forth the prayers and songs, she brought heightened awareness to everyone in attendance. She brought words of praise to her special education teacher, and she brought pride to the religious school which has offered a full spectrum of special education classes for the past 15 years. Frankie brought hope to her parents, as they witnessed her achievements and the progress she has made, and she brought blessing to everyone who witnessed this moment in her life.

Was this a traditional bat mitzvah? Of course not. Modifications were made to enable Frankie to participate. She could not verbalize the English and Hebrew, and she could not produce an analysis of her Torah portion to share with the congregants. She needed an escort to help her carry the tiny Torah as she marched around the sanctuary. When the rabbi cupped her head in his hands to deliver his words of blessing, she wriggled and tried to pull away. Was this, then, a "second class" bat mitzvah? Let me assure you, this was "first class" all the way!

As I sat in the sanctuary, sharing the reflected glory of Frankie's achievements, I contemplated the issue of "accessibility" to religious institutions. Frankie has entered our synagogue on foot, and occasionally, in a wheelchair. Our building is about ten years old, and so it is completely barrier free. However, getting in the door was not what made my congregation "accessible." Being welcomed by a special education teacher prepared to address Frankie's unique learning style and having a patient, compassionate rabbi and cantor fashion a bat mitzvah which respected Frankie's areas of strength and weakness was the measure of accessibility.