

Synagogue shares its spirit of inclusion

As seen in the New Jewish Jewish News



Daniel Gottlieb said he drew on his experience as a psychologist to help him cope with the aftermath of his accident.

Three Years ago, a group of special educators at Ohev Shalom of Bucks County started the Inclusion B’Kavod committee, with the goal of making congregants more sensitive to those with disabilities.

“They wanted the synagogue to become as inclusive as it possibly can be, in every possible way,” said Rabbi Elliot Perlstein.

The committee’s achievements include live streaming High Holy Day services, hiring a Hebrew school specialist to work with children who learn differently, a monthly Shabbat and holiday program for families and children whose needs were not being met in a typical Hebrew school setting or regular Shabbat services, sign language interpreters, adapted seating, and a ramp to the bima.

On Sunday, Feb. 9, the committee will host a talk by Dr. Daniel Gottlieb, a family therapist, author, and host of the mental health call-in radio show *Voices in the Family*. Gottlieb was left paralyzed from the chest down in a near-fatal automobile accident in 1979, at age 33.

“Dr. Gottlieb’s coming sends a message that there are many different people in many different ways that deal with their own disabilities and different abilities,” said Perlstein. “We think it would be valuable spending a morning with him, hearing him, having the opportunity to dialogue with him, and being inspired by him.”

Lindsay Miller, a speech pathologist, joined the Inclusion B’Kavod committee after seeing congregation families who had children with challenges in the preschool and who did not come to services when the children got older.

“Inclusion for us is not only about the young children in our synagogue who may have challenges. It is also about folks like Dan Gottlieb, who was absolutely typical and lived his life until tragedy happened,” said Miller. “Ohev Shalom recognizes that everybody is unique and welcomes diversity within our sacred community.”

Gottlieb shared with *NJJN* by phone some thoughts on his own disability and how to behave toward those with special needs. As a young psychologist, Gottlieb specialized in addictions and directed a treatment program in Philadelphia.

“After the accident I was, of course, traumatized, and there is much I don’t remember, thank God,” he said. But he does remember, while in acute care “the anguish, physical and emotional. I do remember the trauma of having my parents, my wife, look at me in a way they’d never looked at me before. At that moment I knew I was on a path all by myself.

“Then I got into the hospital, and all of my friends and loved ones had that same look. They were saying, most of them, loving and not helpful things, promising the future: ‘It’ll be better. You won’t always feel this way. You’ll get back to work. You’re still lovable.’ It was crap and made me feel worse, because nobody, nobody, had the courage to sit with me and say, ‘What is this like for you?’ That is an act of love for all humans to all humans: What is it like to be you? Then be quiet and don’t try to fix everything.

“The greatest pain for me was the alienation; it was terrifying and lonely and hopeless.”

Gottlieb said he drew on his 10 years of experience as a psychologist.

“I was able to express these feelings, and a lot of my friends were mental health professionals and knew how to listen — something I had that most do not,” he said. “This is why I pushed away thoughts that I’m so resilient, so special — I’m not; I’m no different from any other human being.

“I’ve had some very fortunate external events,” said Gottlieb, “like a support network, the ability to express my feelings, the understanding that after this shock I was in acute mourning.”

He described the next five years as a “shiva period” during which he was treated with psychotherapy and medication.

“There was a point early on, in the first couple of weeks, when all I wanted to do was close my eyes and never wake up again,” he said. “I didn’t have the wherewithal to commit suicide — I could barely move my arms.”

One night in the ICU, however, a nurse sought *his* help. “She asked me to help her, so I listened,” Gottlieb recalled. “She too was feeling great despair, and she too knew she didn’t want to go on.”

In helping her, he came to a realization.

“I need a lot of people to do a lot of things for me, but that doesn’t teach me I’m worthwhile, and telling me I’m worthwhile doesn’t teach me that,” he said. “You can’t convince me that way. That nurse convinced me.”