

# Jewish education for all children, of all abilities

BY JENN DIRECTOR  
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To Shayna Sigman, distressing statistics aren't just numbers to consider and ignore. Rather, they're figures she'd like to improve.

And she's doing just that regarding inclusion and accessibility for Jewish children with disabilities.

Shayna, CSWA, is the manager of Disability Support Services, one of four Jewish Family & Child Service programs. One of her professional passions is creating accessible Jewish spaces for people of all needs and abilities. In September, she launched the first of three trainings for Jewish educators in both synagogue- and school-based settings. (See box for more details about this and related JFCS offerings.)

Shayna cites disturbing stats from a study conducted less than 10 years ago that explored the experience of disabled children at Jewish summer camps nationwide. The numbers extrapolate to youth with disabilities in classroom settings, as well.

The Foundation for Jewish Camp data show that of 131 survey participants, 16 percent of Jewish campers with a disability were sent home, and 46 percent of that same population had been turned away from other Jewish institutions.

"I want to ensure 100 percent participation by all people, regardless of ability, in Jewish educational programs in local synagogues," Shayna says.

## **Jewish Family & Child Service Inclusion JFCS Disability Support Services offers inclusion and accessibility training for Jewish educators:**

- Congregation Shir Tikvah at the Eastside Jewish Commons, fall 2021
- Portland Area Jewish Educators (PAJE) in partnership with the Jewish Federation of Greater Portland, Nov. 4

**"Re-entry into educational settings for educators,"** a three-part opportunity for educators in partnership with the Federation that features JFCS collaborator and Dinah Gilburd, LCSW, and Shayna Sigman

**"Coming Together,"** a group for parents and guardians whose children have disabilities

**Assistance for parents** whose children in public schools need an IEP or 504 Plan

**For more information** about any of these offerings or to schedule a training for your own school or synagogue, contact Shayna Sigman at [ssigman@jfcs-portland.org](mailto:ssigman@jfcs-portland.org)

Her training presentations – appropriate for both in-person and virtual classroom environments – are based on the philosophy of Universal Design, meaning all people benefit, not solely or especially those with disabilities. Further, educators learn how to integrate accommodations into all parts of their classroom, and they receive concrete tips and tools on how to create an emotionally and physically accessible classroom.

The training aids children with dyslexia, a learning difference, those on the autism spectrum and those with a physical or developmental disability.

"People get scared or nervous when they hear 'disabilities and accommodations and accessibility,' and they think they are

super-complicated, difficult, expensive things to do," Shayna says. "And that's not true."

"A lot of the things we try to teach about that are essential for kids with disabilities also are beneficial to all children," she says.

For instance, in her training sessions, which include individual and group work, Shayna notes different ways to teach a lesson. In addition to verbal instruction, lessons also can include visual and auditory clues as well as working in partnership with a child demonstrating frustration without the ability to express it.

Say a child throws his or her shoe across the classroom in a fit of pique. "The old-fashioned way of dealing with this behavior is separating the child,"

Shayna says. "Whereas, what I'm trying to teach is working with the child to figure out the *why* behind the behavior – irritation, avoidance of a tough skill, maybe it only was an accident – and supporting them to address their needs."

Before JFCS, Shayna worked three summers for B'nai B'rith Camp as its inclusion coordinator, shepherding BB Camp toward its National Inclusion Project certification. In her role, she worked with campers' parents to design individualized plans for campers who'd benefit from them, carried out by cabin counselors and campers' care team, says Aaron Pearlman, BB Camp's chief philanthropy officer.

This fall, Shayna's first training was conducted online for about 40 Congregation Beth Israel Jewish educators, including teen *madrichim*, or teachers' assistants.

"We really appreciated Shayna helping start our year from this student-centered, positive classroom-community perspective, especially as we return to in-person learning this school year for many of our programs and classes," says Ben Sandler, CBI's education director.

Shayna says, "My ultimate goal is to create a religious school system in our city that's inherently inclusive so that any parent seeking support or education for their child can make their decision based on the same thing other parents do – having nothing to do with accessibility."

## **New after-school Hebrew program set to launch in Portland**

The Nagel Jewish Academy after-school Hebrew program launches in Portland in October.

The Hebrew School for ages 5 to 13 will meet 3-5 pm, Monday-Thursday. The program is hosted by, though not affiliated with, Congregation Beit Yosef. Classes will meet in the Sephardic congregation's outdoor heated tent at 4200 SW Vermont St., Portland.

The first Nagel Jewish Academy opened its doors in September 2014 in California, offering after-school classes to Jewish children between the ages of 5 and 13 who do not currently attend a Jewish day school. The tuition is highly subsidized, and all Jewish children are welcome regardless of level of observance or background in order to make Jewish education easily accessible to all.

Hebrew language – speaking, reading and writing – Jewish holidays, texts and traditions will all be offered.

"Through its two hours a day, four-day-a-week curriculum, Nagel Jewish Academy aims to provide students attending public schools a Jewish education on par with that offered at Jewish day schools across the country, while catering to each student's individual needs and abilities," says Beit Yosef Rabbi Eliyahu Weisman. "One of the goals of Nagel Jewish Academy is to make Jewish learning fun. It is imperative that in this day and age children are presented with a positive experience and encouraged to cherish their precious connection to Judaism."

For more details about the program, call 646-256-1694, email [pdx@nageljewishacademy.org](mailto:pdx@nageljewishacademy.org) or visit [nageljewishacademy.org/](http://nageljewishacademy.org/)