



## 'Let all who are hungry come and eat'

**LIZ TRAGER-MENDEL** knows the challenge of bringing someone with special needs to a Passover seder. "Passover is hard. The seder is long, there's a certain order, and not everyone's home is accessible," she said.

Additionally, when her now 40-year-old daughter with cerebral palsy was a child, the world was not always welcoming. "You could get stares or shushed. People know better these days," she said.

Now, Trager-Mendel and others across the Chicago area are working to make Passover accessible and inclusive for everyone.

As a member of the Inclusion Committee at Temple Jeremiah in Northfield, Trager-Mendel is helping to plan the synagogue's annual Inclusion Passover Seder. "It still feels like the holiday, but it's more active," she said. "We tell the Passover story with people acting as a part of it. We always have music and a craft."

"We provide as many ways of learning and processing the information as we can because we don't know how they're learning, but we know that most of our guests are different learners," explained Caren Brown, Inclusion Committee Co-Chair and a retired occupational therapist.

She and her team of volunteers, including many retired professionals who have worked with people with special needs and disabilities, offer guests a multi-sensory experience. For example, they can

participate by placing stickers on placemats that look like seder plates, viewing pictures on a big screen, or reading from phonetically written text in large print.

"Discomfort often prevents people from attending an event like this. They're not sure how they'll be accepted. I tell people, try it, and see how you feel," Brown said. "Usually they love it because we try to make our programs fit everyone."

Cantor Steven Stoehr of Congregation Beth Shalom in Northbrook developed an understanding of the world of disabilities as he grew up with a mother who had limited mobility. When he recognized a gap in opportunities for people with special needs within his own Jewish community, he launched HUGS (Healthy Understanding Growing Spaces), a collaboration of 13 north suburban synagogues that offer holiday celebrations for children with special needs and adults with disabilities.

For a decade now, HUGS has hosted a Chocolate Seder in the days leading up to Passover. It features the *Midrash of Milton Hershey*, a creative twist on the story of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. Guests taste cocoa in place of bitter herbs and munch on chocolate covered pretzels instead of matzah. "Passover is a wonderful time to engage the special needs community to help them freely express themselves, and that's exactly the purpose of Passover: a celebration of freedom," Stoehr said.

"We are taught in the Torah to be inclusive and kind to everyone, and it tells us to never place a stumbling block in front of the blind or deaf," said Rabbi Charlene Brooks at Congregation Bene Shalom, which caters specifically to people who are deaf or hearing-impaired.

The Skokie synagogue hosts a signed seder, in which participants are invited to read parts of the Passover story however they are able, either through signing or speaking. Those who prefer to sign and not speak will receive assistance from an interpreter.

Creating inclusive and accessible opportunities for children with special needs and adults with disabilities makes a difference. Just ask Trager-Mendel. "The benefit for Sarah is mostly that things are geared toward her needs," she said. "She doesn't have to wait for her turn. She's more engaged. She likes being a part of it, and she's proud of herself." ★

Pictured: Cantor Steven Stoehr, Congregation Beth Shalom, talks with Danny Newmark and his mother, Jodi, at a program for HUGS: Healthy Understanding Growing Spaces, an organization Stoehr started to provide meaningful holiday events for children with special needs and adults with disabilities. (Credit: Congregation Beth Shalom)

**BY JULIE MANGURTEN WEINBERG**

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