

Children with Autism

Drash by Miriam Itzkowitz, 18 August 2018

Shabbat Shalom Everyone. My name is Miriam Itzkowitz and I am a Yr 10 student at Emanuel School and today I will be talking about autism.

Rabbi Nicole approached me about this speech a few months ago, and I was quite excited because for a while, a passion of mine has been advocating for people on the autism spectrum. The reason she actually asked me to say this speech is from a Facebook post of mine she saw, where I was speaking about the struggles of my brother, who has Asperger's, and what he had to face on a daily basis at school.

I was nine when I found out that my brother was on the spectrum. Honestly, at the time, I didn't really care that much because it didn't really change how I felt about my brother. I still found him completely annoying – but I also still loved him, and him having a label wasn't going to change that. My parents did tell me that my brother would sometimes require more attention and that it didn't mean they loved me any less. I can say that I have not once felt less loved by my parents, despite the occasional extra attention my brother receives, and quite frankly, I've been fine with it. I'm not going to lie and say that it hasn't been hard though. Like all siblings, my brother and I fight, and sometimes it's hard to live with him because his mind works differently, but those two things don't compare to his own personal struggles that he has to deal with on a daily basis.

Words are a tool or method in which we use to communicate. It is upsetting to me when words are used incorrectly to describe people in a certain manner. Words like "gay", words like "retarded". While these words may seem harmless, they contain a myriad of tribulation and misery behind each of them when they're used incorrectly, more specifically as an insult.

These words describe real people, and when people like my brother are hit with these words, it can make them feel worthless. And to the people who are actually gay and retarded, it seems like their actual experiences are being enforced as though they are something bad, which can equally affect and upset them.

Firstly, I'd like to clear the air. Autism is not a form of retardation – it's a different mindset. I am especially sensitive to the word "retard" being directed towards my brother, as he is not retarded, and I have a cousin with down syndrome, who by definition is "retarded", but no one would ever refer to him as being "retarded" because it's socially unacceptable. If we wouldn't call someone who is by definition retarded, "retarded", then why do people do it to someone who isn't? The point is, we shouldn't use that word, period.

The word gay is also quite bothersome, as it has so many negative connotations behind it when it's being used. As we can imagine, anyone who is in fact gay, is being told that they're worthless when this word is being used derogatorily, as though being gay is a bad thing. Also, a common trait amongst people on the spectrum is taking things literally, so if they're being called gay, and their not gay, the offence levels would be much higher.

Using words incorrectly towards people on the spectrum creates a sense of seclusion and shame towards them and significantly diminishes and lowers their self-esteem, and I deem it quite unacceptable that people feel like it's OK to pick on others who are different.

Despite the incorrect use of those words, a common thing I've noticed a lot of teenagers do on social media platforms is say things like "this is autism" or "you're autistic". While the idea behind these seemingly harmless phrases is intended to be light-hearted, it's confronting to those on the spectrum, who again, are made to feel bad about themselves due to something which they have no control over. Again, autistic people have a tendency to take things literally.

So what effects do these words actually have besides the mental health of those on the spectrum? I can tell you now, it effects some physically too.

Nowadays, the US is especially known for its chaos and absurdity. Something which I find quite disturbing, is that there are parents trying to cure their autistic children – by injecting bleach enemas. What is especially disconcerting is that these parents are knowingly harming their children and are willing to put them through literal hell in order to impossibly cure a neurological disorder, obviously as a result of ignorance, or a certain president's favourite phrase, "fake news", distributed by public figures, such as himself.

Autism is definitely not a political debate, but as I was talking about the impact words have, I'd like to shed some light on Mr Trump, who in 2014, sent out a series of tweets, as he does, to claim that there is an "epidemic of autism" and that "we shouldn't vaccinate our children".

Although these comments were made out of ignorance, him being in such a high position of power is detrimental in the effect on the rest of society, being an anti-vaxxer as well as anti-autism. People like Donald Trump, who are of high power and use their words to spread false information are harming people. Potentially due to his tweets, children are being hurt with bleach enemas. People are not vaccinating their children in areas that don't necessarily have herd immunity. And it's spreading the message that people on the spectrum are worse than a potentially fatal disease. These are all things that effect the wellbeing of people as a whole, just from the incorrect use of words.

Autism is different for everyone who has it, however there are many common interests and traits between those who have it. For example, science, maths and transport. My brother loves astronomy and when he was younger loved planes, trains and the Titanic. He once even built a model of the Titanic out of Lego! Many people on the spectrum also excel in music due to perfect pitch, and many are able to retain massive amounts of information from a photographic memory. They're pretty cool! The only thing holding them back is how society treats them because of their in or disability to read social cues, which is kind of sad. But being aware of it is how to make the change. And we can use their incredible minds for the greater good of society.

People like Einstein and da Vinci are suspected of being on the spectrum. The IDF has a special unit called Ro'im Rachot for people on the spectrum who analyse aerial and satellite photos. I think it's all pretty amazing.

I started advocating for autism last year, when I realised how my brother was being effected by bullying at school. Then when I found out about the bleach enemas, I was dumbfounded and in complete disbelief in how people could treat their child like that.

I then started advocating on Facebook and organised a fundraiser at school which raised over \$1000 for Autism Spectrum Australia, also known as Aspect. The reason I chose this organisation is because they helped me. Aspect organised a camp for children who have siblings on the spectrum. Unfortunately, a lot of the time, the siblings can feel quite caught in the middle, and I really like how Aspect recognised that and allowed a space for siblings to vent and share their experiences. They also provide counselling and assistance with diagnoses and various other worthy initiatives.

My fundraiser at school, was also an awareness day. I organised various activities, trying to portray what life is like for someone on the spectrum. I also delivered a speech, similar to this one, the week before my fundraiser, and I had such an amazing response, with students coming up to me and telling me that they themselves are on the spectrum, or students saying that they were going to rethink how they treat others. Some people even reached out to my brother.

When I was younger, I used to envy people like those in the suffragette or Martin Luther King, who were able to see issues in the world and make a difference by standing up, and I always wondered if I could ever do that. I'm not sure if I'm quite at that level yet, but spreading awareness is the place to start, and if I'm being completely honest, I also find it quite petrifying to speak in front of lots of people, so it does take a lot of courage, but ultimately, I'd say it's worth it because from doing it, I know that I'm benefitting people, one of them being someone I love dearly.

I'd like to leave you with this: Judaism itself says that man was created in God's image, so if that's the case, we shouldn't try to change anyone for being different. Just remember, people on the spectrum are not disabled – they're abled differently.