

# Equal Access for All: Caring Community and Disabilities

## The Or Ami Talmud

Rabbi Paul J. Kipnes, Congregation Or Ami, Calabasas, CA

[www.arami.org](http://www.arami.org) \* [rabbipaul.blogspot.com](http://rabbipaul.blogspot.com) \* [rabbipaul@arami.org](mailto:rabbipaul@arami.org) \* (818) 880-4880

**Jimmy:** Diagnosed as high functioning autistic in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. **Education:** As parents searched out appropriate secular learning environment, Rabbi taught him how to sound the shofar. **Bar Mitzvah:** 20 people (family only) in circle at Temple. Blow out party for 200 (with rabbi's approval) in the evening.

**Brandon:** Unable to read or speak. Signs some. Sometimes uses "talking machine". **Education:** Mishpacha Family Alternative Learning Program. Parents and children learn together. Coordinator called Brandon's parents each week to review lesson and together determine which "class" he should join that week. Sometimes we changed lesson to accommodate his abilities. **Bar Mitzvah:** Learned to sign prayers and one aliyah. Dad and uncle chanted also. Mother/signer sat in first row. Clapping after each prayer. Held and undressed Torah. Talking machine for speech.

### Congregation Or Ami Policy for Children with Special Needs

*(This was the first new policy I had enacted at Or Ami when I became rabbi)*

- 1. Education:** Any child of a member has the right to a Jewish educational experience at COA.
- 2. Bar/Bat Mitzvah:** Any child of a member, who works to the best of his/her ability, has the right and privilege of becoming a Bar/Bat Mitzvah at COA.

Rabbi Paul Kipnes teaches:

"With special needs children, there are two values being played out, simultaneously. Working with Brandon Kaplan, for instance, we saw that Brandon is a kid like any other kid created in the image of God, worthy of love. But Brandon is also a special kid and there is an honor and joy to the congregation that he participates to the fullness of his abilities. So he's normal and special, but **here's the secret: so is every other kid.**"

**D'var Acher** (*Another thing*): Congregation Or Ami emphasizes that no matter what a child's needs are, it's never a question of *if* a child can become a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, it's *when* the ceremony will take place.

**Experience:** Might be religious school; tutoring with rabbi; Judaica only; IEP (individualized educational plan): museums, holidays, services, youth group, rabbi time); sometimes Hebrew is put off (semester by semester) until child is able to focus and learn, even fast-break Hebrew tutoring pre-Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

**Bar/Bat Mitzvah:** We only do "real" BM's. Every service, including those of kids with special needs, are construed as "real" and "full".



Rabbi Paul Kipnes explains:

"There is a sense that children with special needs, physically, emotionally, mentally, don't have a place in the synagogue, in the Jewish community. That's just not true, particularly here at Or Ami. We have celebrated B'nai Mitzvah services with children with autism, emotional developmental problems, intense dyslexia, Tourette's syndrome... The Torah and Judaism are available for all of us."

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**Access at Congregation Or Ami**  
[www.arami.org/community/specialneeds](http://www.arami.org/community/specialneeds)

**From our Special Needs Webpage:** Access at Or Ami involves such things as individualized bar and bat mitzvah training for children with special needs, support group for parents of children with special needs, large-print prayer books, an Education Intern who acts a liaison for special needs families within the Mishpacha program, and increasing sensitivity to the scope of needs within each community... Congregation Or Ami strives to create and enhance inclusive environments and accessible spaces to ensure that everyone is included. Every congregant has a right to a rich Jewish life in a welcoming environment.

Many families with children who have special needs or challenges struggle to find a home in the Jewish community. We say: you are not alone. Congregation Or Ami, our Rabbi Paul Kipnes and Cantor Doug Cotler and our Reform Jewish movement, welcome you. Congregation Or Ami is already proud to be a home congregation for many individuals and families with special needs, and we welcome you to share in the warmth of our community. We invite you to begin a [conversation with Rabbi Kipnes](#) to share your hopes or questions about being a family with special needs at Or Ami.



### Publicizing the Reality (An Ongoing Challenge)

- Parent with child with special needs spoke at Yom Kippur services about his experience with child with special needs as "God's Gift in an Unexpected Package."
- Rabbi invited congregants to write article for local paper on one such Bar Mitzvah experience.
- Rabbi blogs regularly about special needs issues and includes links national news (America's Top Model with Asperger's) to synagogue special needs activities.
- Family educator calls families before every lesson to evaluate the lesson's appropriateness and to adjust if needed.
- No resting on laurels: Shabbat Celebrating People with Special Needs; Parent Support Group...

## Jewish Values

**B'tzelem Elohim:** We are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). Means we are worthy and valued and valuable just by virtue of being children of God. All people. Torah doesn't specify "able bodied" or "unchallenged" people.

**Kedoshim Tehiyu:** You shall be holy (or "you are holy") (Lev. 19:2). Depending upon how you read the verb "Tehiyu", this is either a command "to be holy" or a statement of our "essence". Again, Torah doesn't specify "able bodied" or "unchallenged" people.

### Special Needs Webpage:

Some adults, fearful of being rejected (again) because of their special needs, want an anonymous way to reach out without making themselves too vulnerable. Our Special Needs webpage includes **email links directly** to Rabbi and to Educational Director.

**Testimonials by congregants:** "Proof is in the pudding." Let the people who have experienced the openness talk about it.

**Resources:** Shows you are serious about being a home for them.