



*Shavuot – Day 1*  
**6 Sivan 5778 — May 20, 2018**  
**Torah of Inclusion**  
by Rabbi Ravid Tilles  
Temple Emanuel, Newton, MA

---

Thank you all for inviting me this morning. I actually spoke from this pulpit about 10 years ago, soon after I started Rabbinical school, for a Seminary Shabbat. For those who don't remember, it's fine. Really. It's probably better. I'm sure that you can all think of things you did, early in your career, that when you look back you just say, "what a rookie." But I'm grateful to be asked back, to share my Torah with you.

"My Torah." That's such a funny phrase, actually. "My Torah." I hear that turn of phrase a lot, my Torah, your Torah. We used to use it all the time, in Rabbinical school. There was no greater compliment than if someone looked you in the eyes, held your hands, and said, "I love your Torah." It's funny because, it doesn't mean Torah in the literal sense. It doesn't mean the five books of Moses. It doesn't even mean the greater "Torah," the Bible, it doesn't even mean, broader, Talmud Torah, like anything that comes from Torah like the Mishnah or the Gemara.

It's much more nebulous. It's much more metaphorical. I think, at least I've always thought, that when someone looks you in the eyes and says, "I love your Torah," they mean, I love the insight that you bring into this world. I love the pearls, the jewels of wisdom, that you share that enrich my life. So when I was asked to speak, so graciously by my rabbinic colleagues, about the Torah of inclusion, my first thought was not to ask what the Torah can teach us about inclusion, but what wisdom we can learn by being inclusive.

Since I was here 10 years ago, I have learned a lot. Studied a lot. Experienced a lot. Over the last ten years I have adorned my personal Keter Torah, my crown of Torah, with many jewels of wisdom, but none shine brighter than the two that sit atop my Keter Torah, which are my two

sons, Micah and Avishai. Any of us who have shared in the blessing of raising children, whether that be raising children of our own or helping to raise children in community, any of us who have raised children know that each child can teach us a lot. But I learned about the Torah of Inclusion because of my 5 year old son, Avishai.

Avishai has Fragile X syndrome, a genetic condition that manifests itself differently in different carriers but for him it means profound developmental and cognitive delays. Intellectually, he is behind his peers and he likely always will be. For him it means significantly low muscle tone. Now there are many things that Avishai is good at, and I will speak to that shortly, but he is exceptionally difficult to understand when he speaks. A combination of low tone and delayed cognition makes him significantly less intelligible.

I remember, quite well, when Avishai was a baby we watched as all of his peers far exceeded him in terms of milestones. Sadder was when kids much younger than him would accelerate past him, both literally and figuratively. There were many times when we thought he would never sit up. Then never crawl. Then never walk. And then there was speech. He made noises, that sounded like a baby cooing or babbling until he was 2 years old. Or so we thought.

You see, I used to take Avishai to morning minyan every day when I was a pulpit Rabbi. And one day, he started singing Aleinu. Now the words were not clear, at all, they were really completely unintelligible. But the melody, the pitch, the cadence was all exactly right. He was getting the number of syllables exactly right. And I realized, he is trying to say the words.

I wondered if all this time, when he has been babbling, if he's been trying to say the words. And sure enough, we started doing more songs and we realized he knew all the words to his favorite prayers and his favorite songs, and he could talk! This whole time he was talking! But because we didn't understand him, we figured he couldn't talk. He was saying his words, but we weren't able to hear them, because we weren't listening right.

In a Midrash about the story that we read today, Shavuot, Chag Matan Torateinu, the story of the revelation at Mt. Sinai:

“Rabi Yochanan Said: When God’s voice came forth at Mt. Sinai, it divided itself into 70 human languages, so that the whole world might understand it. All at Mt. Sinai, young and old, women, children, and infants according to their ability to understand. Moses too, understood only according to his capacity.”

The Torah, according to this explanation, is given in 70 human languages, so that it could be understood. Similarly, the Midrash tells us that there are Shiviim Panim La’Torah, 70 faces of the Torah. 70, a Rabbinic euphemism for infinite, so there is an infinite number of faces to the Torah, and it was explained so that everyone can understand. Our tradition has us believe that The Torah, a divine revelation, emanates from a higher plane of existence, but needs to be filtered into human language so that we can discover our own, personal Torah. Each one of us, has our own understanding of what the Torah is, each one of us internalizes the Torah differently, and each one of us, therefore, has our own Torah to share.

When I realized that Avishai could talk, it was a revelation. Just like the Torah existed but needed to be filtered through language, Avishai could talk but for me to hear him, his words had to be filtered through music. All of a sudden I started listening more carefully, believing, understanding that he was present in our world. I finally started to understand his Torah. His Torah that any problem can be fixed with a hug and a kiss. His Torah that the world goes around us so fast that sometimes you need to stop and just watch. His Torah that music is the ultimate equalizer.

One of my favorite teachings from the book of Ruth comes from a Midrash at the very end of the book. The story of Ruth ends with a genealogical discovery. That this woman, a Moabite, a classification normally relegated to a distant “other.” A Moabite, otherwise not to be trusted. This

very Moabite is discovered to be the great grandmother of King David, and therefore, the ancestor of the eventual Mashiach. The chronology is so fascinating, if you think about it, because we already know all about King David and King Solomon. These stories are told in earlier books of the Bible. The book of Ruth is like a prequel, an origins story in the world of Marvel, that explains an amazing truth about the Mashiach. That they descend from a Moabite. And the Midrash likens this to a King who is travelling along the road and one of the jewels of his Keter, his crown, pops off along the way and flies into the mud. The King stops his caravan and says, we must go back for that Jewel. And all of his courtiers say, "Sire, your crown has so many jewels, why would you care about that one. After all it's in the mud, and it's dirty now." And the King gets out his chariot, gets on his hands and knees, in the dirt and mud, until he finally finds it. And he says, this stone will now be the crown jewel of my Keter.

As it says in Psalms, which we read this morning at Hallel, *even ma'asu ha'bonim hayta l'Rosh pina*, the rock that was abandoned by the builders will become the cornerstone. This is understood to be a reference to King David himself. The one who descends from a Moabite, who would have normally been given up on, eventually becomes the King and our symbol of redemption.

There is no doubt that Avishai has proven to be my redemption. I really thought he would never talk, and not just out of normal parent fear but because there are adults with Fragile X who are non verbal, who by the way, also have tremendous Torah to share if you are able to listen correctly. You see, Avishai taught me the Torah of Inclusion. **And the Torah of Inclusion is that we all have the obligation to include everyone's Torah in the crown of our lives.**

Every single person has something to teach us: rabbis, parents, aunts, uncles, friends, children, infants. Everyone who is well articulate and little boys like Avishai who struggle with articulation. We can learn from geniuses and we can learn from people with profound intellectual

disabilities. We can be in awe of the physical accomplishments of the Boston Celtics and we can be in awe of the physical accomplishments of people who are physically differently-abled.

The Torah of Inclusion tells us that we have a choice. We can see those around us who seem to be “other” and either accept them or not. But acceptance isn’t inclusion. A lot of us are good at acceptance, tolerance. But we’re not talking about the Torah of Tolerance. Being “ok with.” “Welcoming” people who are other because we believe it makes us better people.

Inclusion is about truly, deeply, understanding that every single person on this earth has Torah to share, even if they don’t know what the Torah is, and that our lives will be so much richer if we embrace their pearls of wisdom. Inclusion is not just about people who are differently abled or have a diagnosis or a syndrome, inclusion is about believing that every body, houses Godliness inside of them.

When I think about my personal crown of wisdom, which we all have, I have learned so much by being Avishai’s father. When I spoke here ten years ago, I didn’t know what would become the cornerstone of my rabbinate, more the crown jewel of my personhood. But I am not the one who reveals the Torah of Inclusion. It is revealed to me at every moment of being a father. My prayer for all of us, this Shavuot, is that we have the wisdom and the mindfulness, to hear Torah from unexpected places, to see Torah in unexpected places, to discover Torah in hidden places, and not just acknowledge them but include them into the fabric of our lives. Chag Sameach.