

BY STEFFANNIE ALTER

Every year, parents prepare to take their children to services for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, joining other congregants at various synagogues around the city. For parents of children with disabilities, however, this sometimes can cause worry about tolerance and accommodations for their children.

The term "disabilities," also known as "special needs," encompasses individuals with medical, mental or psychological disadvantages. It includes intellectual disabilities, such as autism and Down syndrome, as well as physical challenges,

including blindness or missing limbs. In the United States, as many as 18.5 percent of children have been classified as having disabilities.

### Physical challenges

As do most facilities, synagogues around greater Houston offer handicapped parking and various accommodations for the physically handicapped. For the High Holy Days, Congregation Emanu El, for example, expands its handicapped parking to encompass the first two floors of its parking garage, said Emanu El's Rabbi Scott Hausman-Weiss.

Additionally, Emanu El provides spe-

cial seating, books in larger print, sign language and closed captioning. It also offers a sound loop that allows hearing aids to pick up the frequency of the service and, for people unable to physically attend the service, a live stream is on the temple's website. Emanu El is among several other congregations that have similar "extras." While accommodations can be made for the physically disabled through parking and transcription, it often can be more difficult for parents of children with developmental disabilities to bring their children to High Holy Days services.

"I believe it's always easier to prepare with physical disabilities than cognitive,

because, more often than not, the physical disabilities are more concrete. There's sort of a measurable means by which one can prepare," Rabbi Hausman-Weiss said.

Emanu El has considered measures such as creating a "crying room" to help people for whom sitting extensively among other congregants is difficult; but this has not been put in place. Rabbi Hausman-Weiss said that the congregation has not widely discussed accommodations for cognitive disorders, but it is a matter he hopes to look into further.

### Developmental disabilities

Judy Blake, whose son, Ryan, is on the autism spectrum and has obsessive compulsive disorder, anxiety, Tourette's syndrome and trichotillomania, is well-acquainted with the challenges of bringing a disabled child to High Holy Days services.

In the past, Blake said, she has been concerned about judgment of her son, despite feeling that he has as much of a right to participate in services as other congregants.

Blake expressed the thought that people are empathetic when they see someone with a physical disability, but often intellectual disabilities are viewed simply as misbehavior. Blake recounted one particularly difficult experience a few years ago in which, during Rosh Hashanah services, Ryan began to rock back and forth, flap his arms and tried to touch his head beneath his kippah.

As they stood for a prayer, Blake described how one of the women behind her leaned forward and said, "There're baby sitters for children like yours. He shouldn't be here."

Blake, devastated, explained that her child has disabilities and then left the service with Ryan.

"I'm not embarrassed. I'm not ashamed," she said. "It's that you don't want to disrupt someone else's time as they worship."

She received calls afterward from members of Congregation Beth Israel, where she and Ryan had attended the service, as well as from the synagogue's rabbi and cantor, to apologize and reiterate that she and her son still had a home at the temple.

### Tolerance, inclusion

For Blake, attending services largely is about being part of a community, and many Jewish organizations throughout Houston try to provide a sense of support and inclusion for the disabled. Organizations like the Evelyn Rubenstein Jewish Community Center, Chabad's Friendship



Laura Forbes holds the ram's horn steady while Shelly Heffler sands it to make a smooth and shiny shofar at the 2012 Shofar Factory.

Circle, Jewish Children's Regional Service and Yachad offer programs and services for the disabled in greater Houston. The Alexander Institute for Inclusion is a department of Jewish Family Service that offers services, education and advocacy for those with disabilities. Houston Jewish Special Needs has an interactive Yahoo Group.

Marni Litvack, Quality Assurance and Program Evaluation manager of the Alexander Institute, suggests that parents of those with physical or intellectual disabilities contact the Institute or their own synagogue's clergy if they have concerns about bringing their children to High Holy Days services. She suggests calling synagogues early and informing them of the disabilities, to give them as much time as possible to try to accommodate.

Additionally, Litvack reminds congregants of the importance of education and inclusion.

"I think sometimes as parents ... my natural inclination is to tell my daughter, 'Don't stare; it's not nice - don't look,' and I think what we want to do is encourage. It's OK for our kids to ask questions, and as parents, we should be open to that, because that's how our kids will learn. We

don't want to teach them from a young age to feel afraid to ask questions. If your child sees ... that this person looks different from them, it's OK for them to ask. It's not rude. It's not impolite. It's natural curiosity," Litvack said.

As a parent, Blake said, "I encourage parents to go [to services] for an hour or half-an-hour. And, if you're nervous about going, sit in the back, but at least you're there, and you're at the service. And, slowly but surely, you might inch your way toward the middle of the service where people are sitting, as you feel more comfortable."

To other congregants, Blake encourages them to be welcoming toward those with special needs and their families.

"How nice it would be to say, 'It's OK, we understand' ... or even to say something like, 'We're happy you're here at services with the congregation,'" she added.

Blake is an advocate for inclusion and education about disabilities - not just in synagogues, but everywhere. [See [judysworld.info](http://judysworld.info)]

"It's all about tolerance, understanding and compassion, and our society has a long way to go," she advised. "But, take baby steps ... You can make it happen." ❦