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Jewish community draws strength from children with disabilities

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When it was time for Simi Neuman to start kindergarten, the Hebrew Academy of Cleveland did not know whether it had the resources to educate a girl with Down syndrome.

Thirteen years later, at her high school graduation, the girls in her class stood and applauded when Simi received her diploma. Then, the 500 people in attendance stood and cheered. "There wasn't a dry eye in the house," her mother, Zahava, recalled.

What her classmates, school officials, parents and others in the Jewish community discovered about Simi was what her mother sees every day in a gentle, loving human being.

"I think we could learn from her and we could learn from all children like Simi about faith. . . . Being kind, being good, not harming anybody, that really brings you closer to God," Neuman said. "You can't be religious and not treat your fellow man with respect."

As area Jews begin their celebration tonight of Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, there is a greater likelihood women like Simi will be beside them at synagogue services, in Jewish day schools and in other community celebrations.

Helping create a more welcoming environment are local organizations like SEGULA (Special Education Growth Understanding and Learning Association) and the Egtar program of the Jewish Education Center of Cleveland, which provide educational opportunities for Jewish students with special needs.

A new film, "Praying With Lior," a documentary following a youngster with Down syndrome through to his bar mitzvah, has started conversations on inclusion in synagogues and community centers throughout the country. The film had its Cleveland premiere last week at the Siegal College of Judaic Studies in Beachwood.

There has been "a huge change" in the acceptance of children like Lior in Jewish life, Rabbi Mordechai Liebling, Lior's father, said in a telephone interview. He said there were two children with special needs in one Jewish day school in Philadelphia when Lior was starting school. Today, there are 50 or 60 in five day schools in the city.

Social and legal changes opening public educational doors to children with mental disabilities have helped make the issues more visible in religious communities, advocates say. They also have used the emphasis on Jewish education to make the case that all children deserve religious schooling.

But the greatest reason for the change, parents and others say, is experience, knowing that children with disabilities can be part of Jewish life, and discovering the special spiritual gifts they offer.

In the film, one constantly sees Lior hugging others, telling them that he loves them, enthusiastically leading Jewish prayers in class and at home.

Liebling said his son is "definitely an example of loving your neighbor as yourself and loving God with all your heart."

Over the next 10 days, the High Holy Days concluding with Yom Kippur, Simi Neuman will be attending services at Zichron Chaim in Beachwood. Carrie Linden, another woman with Down syndrome, will be at B'nai Jeshurun-Temple on the Heights in Pepper Pike.

"I look forward to the holidays," said Linden, 30. "I do pray the whole time. It makes me feel amazingly good."

She, in turn, will lift up others with her presence.

Sherrie Linden, Carrie's mother, said her daughter moves her spiritually.

"It's sort of like God opens your eyes to the most important things," she said. "How important today is, how important love is. Everything is really about love. That's the gift of God."