



## Interfaith Among People with Developmental Disabilities

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**L'Arche Daybreak: An Example of Interfaith. Pastoral support of a representational Jewish adult with a developmental disability in a predominantly Christian setting, including Bat Mitzvah preparation and celebration, and the resulting growth in self-esteem. The article urges recognition of the gift of people with disabilities to bring together others of varied religious traditions in mutual appreciation and friendship.**

### L'Arche Daybreak:

An Example of Interfaith Ministry

Among People With Developmental Disabilities\*

by Beth Porter

*Describes pastoral support of a representational Jewish adult with a developmental disability in a predominantly Christian setting, including Bat Mitzvah preparation and celebration, and the resulting growth in self-esteem. Outlines how this undertaking initiates a transformation into interfaith awareness and appreciation in the author and in the surrounding Jewish and Christian communities. Urges recognition of the gift of people with disabilities to bring together others of varied religious traditions in mutual appreciation and friendship.*

"I never had one of those... You know, with everyone throwing candies to you and wishing you *Mazel Tov* and everything."

The words were spoken by my friend Ellen during our visit to a local rabbi five years ago, and Ellen was referring to never having had a *Bat Mitzvah* celebration, the Jewish coming of age ceremony that marks a young person's public assumption of responsibility to live her faith life as an adult. Behind those words I knew there was a world of longing to be "normal" and like others, and also, sometime, to be really special.

Ellen and I live at L'Arche Daybreak, a community founded in the spirit of the beatitudes, where people with developmental disabilities and those who give assistance share a life together. Most of the community members belong to mainstream Christian churches. A small number are of other religions. My interfaith awareness was born out of my friendship with Ellen. She is a Jewish woman in her late thirties who came to live at Daybreak soon after finishing school, her parents having chosen L'Arche for its family-like lifestyle. When she feels comfortable in a situation, Ellen is out-

going, forthright, and has a gift for creating rhymes. In The Woodery, the Daybreak woodworking shop where Ellen works, she has endeared herself to her co-workers through her warmth and sense of humor. Like others with disabilities, Ellen has struggled with her limitations. For instance, she comes from a loving and supportive family and would like to have a husband and children herself, but she finds the demands of her own daily self-care challenging.

Ellen attended a special private Roman Catholic boarding school and has had considerable exposure to Christianity; but she has always been very clear that she is Jewish even though, for many years, her participation in Judaism was limited to family celebrations of Hanukkah and Passover, and a Passover week seder led by her parents and held with her Daybreak household. She is a woman of faith who has a strong relationship with God and she often chooses to attend the Daybreak community's Christian worship, where she joins others in extemporaneous prayer for her family and friends. "Jesus was Jewish too, you know," she sometimes reminds us.

It was Ellen's qualities of humor, faith, and frankness that caught my attention when I first came to live at Daybreak sixteen years ago. I had spent most of my life until then in the academic world, and I enjoyed the simple directness of L'Arche relationships. During an Easter season liturgy after we had both been at Daybreak several years, Ellen told me painfully, that although she was a Jew, she hadn't killed Jesus. Ellen's words pierced through my obliviousness to the anti-Jewish polemic in the scripture reading. I *heard* her and I was deeply challenged. In the days that followed I struggled with the dawning realization that certain texts which I and other Christians experienced as hopeful and life-giving caused my friend to feel devalued and condemned. I resolved to do what I could to help Ellen feel affirmed in her own faith tradition. Over the months and years that followed, Ellen's comment became not only a personal challenge to me but also a communal challenge: How was it possible that we were so accustomed to hearing some anti-Jewish passages in our liturgy that we did not recognize them as such? And how was it possible that as a community we had been overlooking the gift of people of other faiths in our midst?

This article is an account of an item of interfaith pastoral work. It is also a sketch of the faith journey of Ellen—a remarkable journey into Jewish adulthood and leadership—and of myself as I accompany Ellen, and of the fruitfulness of our combined journey for the wider community in which we live.

## First Steps:

My initial plan for Ellen was simple: I would take her to a synagogue service. Ellen seemed pleased with the idea. The next question was which synagogue. I knew little about Judaism and nothing about the local Jewish community, so I needed to start at the beginning. I learned from Ellen's parents that her family had roots in the Conservative and Reform movements of Judaism. As a child she had occasionally attended services with her family, but they had no strong preference as to where I took Ellen.

It was very important that Ellen feel welcome. She would need people who would appreciate her friendly and voluble nature. She is a sensitive woman who can feel slights very deeply and who carries her suffering in ways that at times are quite apparent. I was also concerned that Ellen might simply be very bored because the synagogue service would be long and mainly in Hebrew and she would not be able to read the English translation as I could. She would need to have some way to feel a part of the service.

Aware that Ellen tends to find new experiences difficult and would not enjoy "synagogue hopping" to look for a congregation, I visited three synagogues on my own, introducing myself to the rabbi and explaining the purpose of my visit. At one large, quite traditional synagogue, people with developmental disabilities attended regularly but sat in the gallery and seemed far from the center

of activity. I knew such a situation would not suit Ellen. Once over her initial shyness, she likes to make a contribution wherever she is. The Reform synagogue was appealing in that the service was shorter and more of it was in English, but the synagogue was farther away and the congregation quite large and I sensed Ellen would have difficulty finding a meaningful place there also. A Conservative synagogue was nearby and we decided to try it.

The first service Ellen and I attended together strongly confirmed my intuition to take her to a synagogue. It had a strikingly transformative effect on Ellen. As we entered the sanctuary, the congregation was chanting the *Shema*, "Hear, O Israel . . . ." (the Jewish declaration of faith), and Ellen stood still, spellbound. Then, suddenly transformed, she took the lead: all her body language announced that this was her territory; she belonged and I was the visitor. Proudly she walked up the aisle and chose our seats, as near to the front as possible. There were some amusing and (for me) uncomfortable moments when Ellen, thrilled with the Hebrew singing and the grand Torah procession, slipped out of her aisle seat and joined the procession, stopping opposite the rabbi on the *bemah* (the raised Torah-reading platform), eager to help lift the beautiful Torah cover off the scroll. The rabbi was friendly and welcoming of Ellen, but other members celebrating some special occasion had joined the rabbi on the *bemah* and what she was doing was clearly not part of the plan for the morning!

I soon realized that a smaller, more informal service would suit Ellen best. Fortunately, we found a small, participation-oriented Conservative congregation which proved to be just right. The egalitarian nature of this synagogue, the *Kehillah Ahavat Hesed* (literally, the Loving-Kindness Congregation), meant that Ellen would be able to participate as fully as her abilities would permit. From the beginning, Ellen was frequently invited to open the Ark (where the Torah scrolls are kept) or join the Torah procession, and after her *Bat Mitzvah*, to come up for the Torah reading—honors that must be distributed much more widely in a larger congregation. While Ellen doesn't read much in English and not at all in Hebrew, this did not seem to bother her and she soon came to feel very much a part of the service. She began to learn by heart parts of the familiar Hebrew chants and to contribute her thoughts to discussions of the Torah readings.

I found that some services suited Ellen more than others. When a visiting scholar gave a specially prepared talk, Ellen tried to listen attentively and to offer comments, but the speaker was clearly surprised and distracted by these; and when a very large *Bar Mitzvah* was held with many guests and we had to sit at the back, Ellen felt displaced and restless. We therefore decided on the modest initial commitment of once-a-month attendance, consulting friends in the synagogue and choosing services that would be most participatory and interesting to Ellen. During the High Holy Days when services are very long and crowded, we asked for suggestions as to the best times to attend and Ellen was put on the schedule so that she could play an active role while present. Before the High Holy Day services, we read stories that would help us enter into the themes of repentance and God's forgiveness, which are central to these days. Highlights of the High Holy Days for Ellen were a play about Jonah and the blowing of the *shofar*.

## **Personal and Spiritual Growth:**

Little moments continued to be revelatory during our early visits to the synagogue: soon Ellen began walking ahead of me from the parking lot, entering the synagogue on her own, greeting people, and choosing her seat (at the front with friends she was getting to know, or near the Ark, an area she apparently identified as sacred). And as Ellen gradually claimed her place within her Jewish faith community, signs of growth in self-confidence and self-esteem became evident to those who lived and worked with Ellen in her day to day life at Daybreak. She accepted praise more easily, and seemed more secure and contented.

Meanwhile, I was discovering the riches of the synagogue service myself and noting the many

places where Christian liturgy or traditions are rooted in Judaism. I was also impressed by the free and open way this small congregation interacted with the Torah passage during the *D"var Torah* (the reflection on the Torah passage), and I learned a relevance to daily life in passages in the Hebrew scriptures that I had hitherto disregarded or read only from a Christian perspective. As I shared my discoveries with friends at Daybreak and they noted Ellen's growth, some asked to join us on Saturday mornings. They found the experience enriching, and their attendance broadened the base of support for Ellen, who felt further affirmed by their interest.

### **On-Going Learning and *Bat Mitzvah* Preparation:**

Periodically, a *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah* of some young person in the congregation was celebrated, and Ellen began to speak about having such a celebration herself.

Being called up to the Torah is the central event of the *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah* celebration. The individual recites the Hebrew blessings before and after the assigned Torah portion, often reads from the Torah him or herself, and reflects on its meaning. It is possible to have such a public celebration later in life if one has missed it when younger; however, I thought that *Bat Mitzvah* preparation would be too difficult for Ellen. To my surprise, when we met with the rabbi who resourced the *Kehillah*, he encouraged Ellen in this dream. He suggested that while she continue to learn about Jewish traditions by attending *Shabbat* services and participating in the major festivals, she undertake some activity that would reach out to others. This, he explained, is a fundamental value of Judaism. In addition, she could begin to memorize the essential Hebrew blessings for before and after the Torah reading. He explained that the actual reading of the Torah for the *Bat Mitzvah* celebration could quite legitimately be done by another member of the congregation.

As an outreach activity, Ellen wanted to make pastoral visits with me to a Daybreak member hospitalized with Alzheimer's disease. Ellen's deep tenderness was called forth over the several months of these visits and they proved very meaningful for all three of us.

Before long, Ellen had a tape of the Torah blessings made personally for her by one of the members of the congregation. It included words of encouragement, an explanation and translation of the blessings, and the blessings themselves, said slowly so that she could repeat the words, and then sung to a familiar melody which proved helpful in memorizing.

In consultation with Ellen and our Daybreak pastor, the late Father Henri Nouwen, I set up a support circle of a few of Ellen's friends to help her prepare for her *Bat Mitzvah* over the following year. These people were mainly from Daybreak and not Jewish, but they knew Ellen well, were committed to her, and were willing to learn along with her. We made copies of the tape for her family and friends, so that she could practice with each of us and would be learning the same pronunciation and melody at each practice session. One friend made her a large-print, simple syllabic version of the Hebrew which she could partially read. And Ellen herself worked hard at learning the Torah blessings.

A Christian friend who had some knowledge of Judaism began inviting Ellen and other Jewish Daybreak members for *Shabbat* dinner on Friday evenings. From special times with her family, she had some knowledge of the *Shabbat* blessings for candle-lighting and for the bread and wine and practiced them at these dinners. Since the Star of David is a Jewish symbol which Ellen readily recognizes and especially likes, another friend in her circle helped her make a Star of David tin-can candleholder, punching the pattern out carefully with nail and hammer. Ellen was very proud of the final product, which looked quite striking when lit in a darkened room. Ellen and I undertook to learn more about the major Jewish festivals, visiting the local Judaica shop for books and activities that would help us. Sometimes it was difficult to find material that was easy to understand, yet not

intended for children. In this regard, the Reena Foundation, a local Jewish agency serving people with developmental disabilities, was very helpful. Whenever out for a drive, Ellen and I enjoyed singing along to tapes of *Shabbat* and Passover and *Hanukkah* songs, according to the season.

Support for Ellen and interest in learning about Judaism continued to grow at Daybreak. In the fall, Ellen attended portions of the High Holy Day services. At Daybreak, we talked about *Rosh Hashanah*, celebrating God's gift of the creation in a special interfaith liturgy and serving apples dipped in honey to signify our wish for a sweet new year. For *Yom Kippur*, a special arrangement was made with the synagogue so that, out of interest and as a gesture of solidarity, all Ellen's co-workers in the Woodery could attend a portion of the service with Ellen. Their attendance is becoming a yearly custom.

At *Hanukkah*, assistants in Ellen's Daybreak house helped her light the *Hanukkah menorah* each evening. We wanted to be careful not to assimilate *Hanukkah* into Christmas, which usually falls shortly thereafter, so we asked her parents to aid us in preparing a Daybreak community *Hanukkah* liturgy and party. We read the story of the Maccabees and one of the synagogue members came to tell us about various traditions surrounding this festival. We reflected upon the importance of religious freedom, and we passed out *Hanukkah gelt* (foil covered chocolate coins) and *dreidles* and circle-danced to lively Israeli music. This *Hanukkah* celebration has become a delightful tradition at Daybreak.

Meanwhile, Ellen's self-esteem clearly continued to grow. While at first she had been somewhat reticent to speak about her synagogue experiences, she now was more confident and began to tell many of her Daybreak friends about her approaching *Bat Mitzvah* and express the hope that they would come. Her excitement was contagious and soon Ellen and the anticipation of her up-coming celebration were the talk of Daybreak.

A synagogue friend hosted Ellen and other principals at a planning dinner. Together with synagogue leaders, her parents and her support circle, she made decisions about the many aspects of her *Bat Mitzvah*. She was to have as her Torah portion the passage that describes the attributes of God (Ex. 34: 5-7); she chose those who would have the special honors at her service, and she decided for her *D"var Torah* to read the story of The Giving Tree by Shel Silverstein, a beautiful story about unconditional love. With friends in her circle, Ellen planned her clothes and helped choose the prayer shawl and *kippa* which were to be gifts from her Daybreak friends.

Ellen with Torah scroll

Father Henri suggested we use one of the community's regular common worship times to prepare the Daybreak community members to celebrate with Ellen. At this service a synagogue friend explained the meaning of a *Bat Mitzvah* celebration and various aspects of the service, and Ellen herself spoke about what she had been learning. Then she spontaneously asked those present to gather around, lay hands on her, and pray for her, something we occasionally do at Daybreak when sending a person off on a special mission. This again was a milestone in Ellen's journey. She seemed overwhelmed by the love and support expressed in her friends' prayers. And, very importantly, her celebration and her spiritual identity were contained within Daybreak as well as within her synagogue community. This meant that there was no likelihood that Ellen would feel alienated from her Daybreak community in affirming her faith community in Judaism.

### **Ellen's *Bat Mitzvah* Celebration:**

Ellen lived through the normal pre-*Bat Mitzvah* jitters and as the *Bat Mitzvah* approached she

became easily upset and seemed to be ambivalent about even having a *Bat Mitzvah* celebration at all. Three days prior to her *Bat Mitzvah*, when her anxiety was at its peak, I found it important to give her the opportunity to cancel the whole event, if that was her wish. This seemed to allow her the needed control over a situation by which she was beginning to feel swept along.

On the day of her *Bat Mitzvah* a great number of Ellen's Daybreak friends joined with the synagogue congregation in celebration. Ellen rose magnificently to the occasion. She was confident, competent, and radiantly and contagiously happy, welcoming her guests graciously and thanking all for coming. With help from synagogue leaders, I prepared a detailed program, knowing the service would be as unfamiliar to most of Ellen's Daybreak guests as it had been to me two years earlier. For many, it was their first visit to a synagogue and their first experience of the vitality of modern day Judaism; however, those leading the various parts of the service were well attuned to the needs of Ellen's guests. They offered extra explanations, translated much of the Hebrew into English, and invited interested guests to take a closer look at the Torah scroll, which is beautifully hand-inscribed.

Some Daybreak and Kehillah members dancing at Hellen's Bat Mitzwa. The author is on the far side in black and white.

When Ellen was called up to the Torah, Toni, the friend who had most closely accompanied her in memorizing the blessings, stood behind her for support. Silence reigned. Ellen stood proudly in her new prayer shawl and *kippa* and pronounced the first blessing: *Barkhu et Adonai ha-m"vorakh . . . Praise the Lord, Source of blessing. . . .* After the Torah portion was read and Ellen concluded the final blessing with a firm, "Praised are you Lord, who gives the Torah," the synagogue erupted in a crescendo of joyful "*Mazel Tov*"s" and she was showered with candies. Immediately, a huge circle dance sprang up around her as we all sang our congratulations. For a few moments, Ellen stood stock still, too dazed with joy even to notice the candies.

Before the service concluded, Ellen listened as synagogue leaders congratulated her and as Father Henri spoke to her of her importance as a Jewish woman both to the Jewish community and to the Christian community. Ellen's father, commenting that he would not likely ever be able to give Ellen a wedding celebration, had declared that her *Bat Mitzvah* party after the service should be a truly splendid and joyous celebration, and it was! As we sang and danced and ate together, I was very aware that Ellen's *Bat Mitzvah* had become a wonderful gift not only for her but for many others.

## Implications of Ellen's Faith Journey

### **a) for my life and ministry:**

Ellen's pained comment during that Easter season liturgy called me to grow in my relationship with her, in my theological understanding, and in my ministry. I have experienced my journey with Ellen as very rewarding and full of joy; our friendship continues to deepen. And as I accompanied Ellen, I have walked my own enormously enriching path toward interfaith appreciation. I completed a Master of Divinity degree with a special emphasis on Christian-Jewish issues. At times, I was deeply distressed as I became more aware of the long history of persecution and anti-Semitism in Christendom and the difficulties that exist with certain texts and theological formulations. I needed to rethink aspects of my own theology, arriving at a more theocentric Christology. Along the way, I have been both blessed and amazed at how a deeper understanding of Judaism has helped me understand my own tradition. My faith life has been nourished by attending the synagogue, and I

have formed treasured friendships with members there. Also, as I journeyed with Ellen, I recognized the need to give support to others who are not Christian and I began to learn about Islam as well. At Daybreak, I have been called on to provide leadership in interfaith matters and to help the community to continue to grow in its appreciation of and sensitivity toward other faiths, and I do this eagerly and gratefully.

**b) for members of the synagogue:**

It was never my pastoral objective to teach the synagogue that relationships with people with developmental disabilities can be a boon. Indeed, some members clearly knew this before we came. But members of the congregation tell me that the synagogue genuinely benefits from our presence. Not long ago, during the psalm about the stone rejected by the builders becoming the cornerstone, one congregant leaned over and commented to me that it is Ellen and Mel (who were present that day) and others like them who are the cornerstone. Indeed, these individuals with developmental disabilities, by their needs and their presence and forthrightness, call all to attentiveness when they are present at services. Because they are accompanied by Christian friends, they also bring together Christians and Jews in meaningful relationships. A recent synagogue newsletter, in describing Daybreak's large Passover seder, mentions the pride the congregation feels in its association with the Daybreak community.

**c) for the L"Arche Daybreak community:**

Mel (54) with Torah scroll and  
Helen's father Harold, who  
helped with his Bar Mitzvah  
preparation.

Today, Daybreak's interfaith character is one of the aspects we talk about when people visit. It is becoming a well-integrated part of our community life. Ellen's journey was, for the rest of Daybreak, the road to recognition of the gift of the Community's interfaith dimension. Her *Bar Mitzvah* celebration grounded us at Daybreak in our newly developing appreciation of Judaism. Friendship between Daybreak and the synagogue as well as between Daybreak and other Jewish friends continues to grow and thrive. We have had very delightful social evenings of lively dialogue and we have enjoyed learning to sing one another's favourite psalms and *niggunim* (melodies). In our Christian services we speak at times of the Jewish roots of our traditions, and we are learning to address the anti-Jewish polemic when it appears in our scripture readings. A rabbi friend helpfully suggested a way to include and validate Ellen's Jewish identity within our Christian Eucharists: When communion is distributed, Ellen now receives a sticker with a Jewish symbol. Last year, we celebrated Mel's *Bar Mitzvah*; again a very wonderful occasion. Mel's preparation and integration was made much easier as we were able to draw upon and adapt our learning with Ellen. One of Mel's primary supporters was Ellen herself.

At the same time that we have been growing in our relationship with Judaism, we have been learning more about Islam, represented in our midst by Alia, a diminutive woman who neither walks nor talks nor sees, but who smiles with delight when she hears the Arabic of the Qur'an chanted. We are learning to greet Alia and wish her peace in Arabic. We have visited a mosque in small groups and invited speakers to talk to us about Islam's major tenets and feasts. When Muslim friends told us about their experience of *Ramadan*, their sharing deepened our own living of the personal disciplines of the Lenten season, which fell shortly after. Today we hold interfaith liturgies or educational events to be in solidarity with Muslim and Jewish Daybreak members at the times of the major feasts of their religions. In the future, members of faiths other than Christianity, Judaism, and Islam will doubtless join Daybreak, and we look forward to the riches they will bring as we

learn to support them in their faith.

## Conclusion:

I believe Ellen's story is representational. It is often the gift of individuals with a disability to overcome barriers and bring together around them many quite different people. When that gift is lived out in an interfaith context, its richness and fruitfulness is further amplified as people of diverse backgrounds and belief systems join together in a common commitment that nurtures mutual respect, appreciation, and friendship. Anyone doing pastoral work in an interfaith community has the wonderful opportunity (as well as the obligation) to learn about the other faiths represented in the community so as to support creatively the members of these faiths and to help those of the dominant faith to learn about and value the presence of these others. As individuals of other faiths grow in their own religious tradition, they can be encouraged to bring the gift of their tradition to the wider community.

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\* L'Arche Daybreak is a member community of the International Federation of L'Arche communities. In L'Arche, people with developmental disabilities share a life together with those who come to assist and to create home with them. The spirituality of L'Arche is based on the beatitudes. L'Arche communities are ecumenical and welcome people of all faiths. L'Arche was founded by Canadian Jean Vanier in France in 1964. Today there are over 100 communities of L'Arche around the world. For more information about L'Arche and the addresses of communities, you may want to visit the L'Arche Web site at [www.larchecanada.org](http://www.larchecanada.org). The Charter of L'Arche includes these statements:

"In a divided world, L'Arche wants to be a sign of hope. Its communities, founded on covenant relationships between people of differing intellectual capacity, social origin, religion and culture, seek to be a sign of unity, faithfulness and reconciliation."

"Each community member is encouraged to discover and deepen his or her spiritual life and live it according to his or her particular faith tradition."

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The article appeared first in *The Journal of Pastoral Care*, Vol. 52, No. 2, Summer 1998.

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