

Hello, I'm Susan Glairon, chair of this event.  
It's really wonderful to see all of you here.

Once when my son was 3, he suddenly began screaming in King Soopers. It was awful; he wouldn't stop. After we arrived home I asked him repeatedly. What happened? I didn't really expect an answer; his sudden tantrums had happened many times before. But I persisted. What happened? Finally he said, "Lights hurt three."

My son had learned to recognize numbers at 17 months, and I guessed what "three" meant. Like a crazy woman I drove five miles back to the store and ran to aisle three. Aisle three's fluorescent light was flickering. I ran past the other aisles. Aisle three was the only aisle with a flickering light.

My son has autism, and people with autism can have extreme sensory sensitivities. Another time, this time in Target, my son started screaming and kicking, again for no apparent reason. As I lowered him to the ground so he wouldn't fling himself out of the cart, a small group gathered. A stranger boldly walked up and said, "What that kid needs is a smack."

There were many more comments like that over the years. And though my synagogue supported my son's bar mitzvah journey--and it was lovely--there were hurtful comments and situations along the way there too, including a parent who refused to carpool with us to Hebrew school because of my son's unusual behaviors.

But even more tragic, I have heard from parents who were asked to leave their church or synagogue's services because of their autistic children's odd behaviors. Some left and joined more accepting churches and synagogues. And some just stopped going.

I hope the next few hours will inspire faith communities to take concrete steps to become more welcoming of families facing these issues.

And here's the first step: Learn about disabilities. Don't judge. Be accepting and open.

According to the US Dept. of Education Web site, almost 13 percent of our nation's K-12 kids had disabilities in 2008-2009 and numbers are rising. Where are they in our Jewish community? Why don't we see kids or adults with Down Syndrome, or in wheelchairs or those who are deaf or blind? Where are all the kids and adults who have severe medical and cognitive problems? I can offer a partial answer. Some of these parents are so exhausted by their child's extensive needs, they don't have energy to find a congregation. Others tried bringing their children to services, only to be discouraged by other congregants.

So what else can faith communities do? Bring casseroles and homemade chicken soup to families who have a child with a disability. Reach out to the mom who left your playgroup because her son wasn't able to play with the other children. Look for families who are too

exhausted to join a church and offer a night of respite so that family can have a night out. Find these families. They're in your communities.

Faith communities could also help these exhausted parents find financial and therapeutic supports. They could also fundraise to build assisted living facilities for the children who are now grown and need a supportive place to live. It's not so far fetched. By the time Glory Community opened this month in Broomfield, its roughly \$1.3 million supported living home was paid off and the project now is a part of the church's mission. Eight young men with developmental disabilities live there today.

Even CSU professor Temple Grandin was taunted as a child, at college and as a young professional. I hope her talk tonight inspires you to spend time with someone who is different from you. My hope is that you don't just tolerate differences, that you instead reach out to these families and embrace them.

Please join me to make inclusion of people with disabilities a priority in your faith communities. Email me, my address is on the back of your program, and together we'll work to make faith communities a place where families feel supported, understood and embraced .