

Educating Aleph to Tav for All
Anshai Torah Expands Special Needs Education Programming

by Deb Silverthorn

From the Shir Hashirim Rabbah we learn "Our children are our guarantors. For their sake I give the Torah to you." Congregation Anshai Torah teaches that Torah to its children, to all of its children, making sure that truly no child is left behind. Community families are invited to a Religious School Meet-the-Teacher and Back-to-School event on Sunday, August 20, at Pinstack Bowl in Plano beginning at 10am, and to a Membership and Religious School Open House at Anshai Torah on Sunday, August 27, at 10am, Come learn about preparing for that future.

"It is important for every child to receive a Jewish education and as Jews we are commanded to "not put a stumbling block before the blind. Jewish education is the key to unlocking the future for all children and without it, we place a stumbling block in front of them," said Anshai Torah's Rabbi Michael Kushnick. "Regardless of learning differences, we must ensure that we provide a quality Jewish education for all children, and that is why we are working so hard to create individualized learning programs so all of our children can discover their love and connection to the richness of Judaism. "

Congregation Anshai Torah's (CAT) Religious School programming, which offers learning for children in grades kindergarten thru 12, began enriching its programming for those with learning differences and special needs a few years ago and the process continues.

During the 2016-17 school year, CAT established a special Hebrew class for students with special needs, many of who are significantly challenged when learning to decode the language. Learning from students' secular learning experiences, and having parents share their success stories, and trials, will allow CAT to further reach out and support these students. CAT's religious school faculty has been through numerous training sessions on differentiated instruction—a philosophy for effective teaching that provides students different ways of learning in the classroom.

"For my own family, and for the children of many I've spoken to, there was a need for more," said Corrie Shores, mother of three students, and Chair of CAT's Special Needs Education Committee. "There are students with auditory processing, ADD/ADHD, dyslexia, those on the autism spectrum, and those living with other issues that we fight to be addressed in their regular academic courses – it's as important for these children to have their issues addressed in religious school. It's not fair to the students, or their teachers, to expect them to manage through, and their Jewish education is so important. We don't want families pulling out and the children missing the important learning of our traditions, Hebrew, and our history."

"When I met with Rabbi (Stefan) Weinberg to discuss the concerns for my own son, he reacted immediately and our Special Needs Education Committee was born," said Shores whose committee is working on both short-term and long-term assistance for those requiring it. "From introducing fidget boxes and other items to help children focus and register in the classroom to much more, it is for the good of all of our students and we have had tremendous response. I love our open arms community and hope that anyone who has ideas are able to share them with me or if they want to be part of our committee."

CAT's Special Needs Education Committee is working with the organization Matan, which educates Jewish leaders, educators and communities, empowering them to create learning environments supportive of children with special needs through training institutes and consultations across North America.

Founded in 2000 by Meredith Englander Polsky, Dr. Stacy Berrin and Lori Strouch Kolinsky, who, aware of children turned away from Jewish education experiences, joined forces to help ensure that children with special needs could access – and be successful in – high quality Jewish education experiences. Matan spent the first 10 years focused on direct service with schools and families primarily in the New York metropolitan area working school by school, child by child, in order to help congregational schools be more inclusive of students with special needs. Having expanded to support congregations around the country and now with partners, including the JCC Association of North America, Jewish Education Project, Jewish Theological Seminary, Jewish Educators Assembly, PJ Library, and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, many Federation and Jewish camp programs and others from throughout the States, representatives of Matan have visited CAT and made recommendations and will continue to support the faculty and clergy to help bring the best Jewish education to its students.

"We continue to hear from parents and families that their child or children may need special accommodations to thrive in our religious school," said Jason Cathcart, readying to begin his second year as Anshai Torah's Director of Education. "Our ultimate goal is to make Anshai Torah a place where all students feel welcome to learn and walk away with a positive Jewish experience. They are the future, and we want to build that future beginning today."

For more information about CAT's Religious School, contact Jason Cathcart at 972-473-7718, email directorofeducation@anshaitorah.org, or visit www.anshaitorah.org.