

COMMUNITY NEWS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

Matan Launches Groundbreaking National Initiative To Revolutionize Inclusion Of People With Disabilities In Jewish Communal Organizations

Matan, a national nonprofit organization promoting disability inclusion and belonging within North American Jewish communities, has launched a groundbreaking fellowship.

The Lieberman Fellowship—made possible by the generosity of Jerry and Eileen Lieberman of Westchester County, NY—for Professionals in Jewish Organizations Serving Young Adults, is a national initiative that aims to create systemic change in the way young adults with disabilities are included within Jewish communal life. It will do so by equipping Jewish communal professionals with the necessary tools and skills to create inclusive Jewish communities for young adults, many of whom developed deep connections to their Jewish communities as children and want to continue their Jewish journey.

Despite the plethora of Jewish communal programming geared towards young adults, people with disabilities often find it difficult to ‘fit in’ or lend their talents—both literally due to physical barriers and figuratively because of attitudinal barriers. Matan believes that young adults with and without disabilities should be able to share meaningful participation in Jewish life.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 20 percent of young adults have a disability they were born with or acquired.

“Matan aims to change the landscape of Jewish communal organizations through ensuring that opportunities in programming, leadership engagement and employment for neurodiverse young adults become the norm,” said Dori Frumin Kirshner, Matan’s Executive Director.

“Many innovative initiatives for Jewish young adults pride themselves on ‘meeting people where they are’ both supportive of various identities and ideologies and in how they connect to Judaism (culturally, spiritually, environmentally, etc.). However, disability inclusion has not been on the radar. As a result, many would-be participants and employees with disabilities do not feel that they belong. Disability is the missing piece of accessibility and equity. We want to lead the Jewish community through this crucial ‘next frontier’ of inclusion.”

Matan empowers Jewish community leaders and educators through training,

coaching, and consultations to provide purposeful, enriching, and inclusive opportunities for people with disabilities and their families. Participants of past Matan training programs have reported in a commissioned evaluative study of the effect of Matan’s methodology and resources that their training with Matan had concrete and immediate impact on the ways they think about disability inclusion both internally (such as hiring practices and understanding the needs of employees and coworkers) and in their external programs and events.

Matan plans to utilize its long-standing and deeply effective Matan Institute cohort model to pilot the Lieberman Fellowship. Each cohort, which will run 7-9 months, will consist of in-person training days at the beginning and end, one-on-one coaching for participating organizations, continuous virtual learning sessions and an Inclusion Impact (capstone) Project from each organization. The fellowship will launch with three cohorts over a three-year period.

Matan will train participants in the fellowship on such topics as:

The role of Jewish values in creating an inclusive culture

Defining disability and inclusion for young adults

Accessibility, adaptations and logistical considerations for programming

Marketing programs through the lens of accessibility

Becoming a disability-inclusion ambassador and learning concrete strategies to boost an organization’s inclusion efforts

Creating opportunities for young adults with disabilities to become lay and professional leaders

Adapting work environments to maximize comfort for neurodivergent individuals

Professional development specifically for managers and leaders around workplace communications with neurodivergent individuals

Flexibility and diversity with communication tools

Understanding how flexible work policies can enhance inclusivity

Adapting workplace conditions (such as temperature and quiet zones)

Adapting social programs in the workplace for neurodivergent individuals to build relationships.

“Jewish institutions are not thinking enough of who is currently being left out. They aren’t aware that they’re not aware, and this is something we would like to change,” Frumin Kirshner said. “We want them to be proactive, adjust, and adopt flexibility to employees with special needs and disabilities. For example, we want them to assign someone

on staff to be responsible for inclusion and belonging. We’re not only expecting them to hire young adults with disabilities, but to make sure that they include board members with disabilities, and that they include young adults with disabilities in their programming and do so in a high-quality manner.”

Matan is proud to partner with The Jewish Federation of Greater Washington (D.C.) for the inaugural cohort of The Lieberman Fellowship for Professionals in Jewish Organizations Serving Young Adults. Applications are currently being accepted. It will run from September 5 through mid-June 2025. ■

Mach Hach BaAretz Teens Embrace Heartbreak And Hope

In a packed theater in Holon, Israel, hundreds of teens and staff attended a concert by Ishay Ribo, the beloved Israeli pop singer. The energy was high—people danced, jumped up and down, and sang along with conviction, many carrying Israeli flags—and the mood was poignant.

The uplifting event was part of Mach Hach BaAretz, Bnei Akiva’s summer tour of Israel for teens completing the tenth grade. The concert kicked off Shabbat Mach Hach, the Shabbat that brings all 11 Mach Hach buses together for an unforgettable weekend. Shabbat

erful with 500+ teens and staff joining together, feeling part of a larger program, a greater movement. This is the time that participants feel the power of this program like no other, but this year was even more special because we heard from staff members who shared their personal experiences from *miluim*-reserves, many fighting in Gaza,” he said. “It was an eye opening experience for campers to hear their stories and truly observe what it means to sacrifice yourself for your nation and land.”

After the horrors of October 7th, and with the ongoing war, Mach Hach took on special significance. Touring the Jewish homeland, the connection and devotion participants felt to Israel was stronger than ever.

One of the highlights of this year’s program was when teens had the opportunity to actively show their support to Israeli soldiers. Each bus went to a different army base where the teens organized barbecues for *chayalim*. They prepared and served food for the soldiers and in some cases, soldiers’ families, and they also sat and spoke with them, made carnivals for the children, and enjoyed other activities together.

Participants also spent time with families directly impacted by terror, with half hearing from Rav Doron Perez about the loss of his son on October 7th and the other half hearing from Rachel



Mach Hach is special every year as the great unifying moment of the program, but this year it was especially powerful—there were soldiers in the crowd, and many of them were Mach Hach staff or alumni. The concert itself was a sneak peak of what’s yet to come this September, as Bnei Akiva brings Ishay Ribo back for round two of his unifying Elul concert at Madison Square Garden [tickets available at bneiakiva.org].

Every year, Mach Hach adds new components to the itinerary to keep the program current. This year there was no shortage of unforgettable opportunities for the teens, says Rabbi Dan Katz, Director of Mach Hach BaAretz.

“Shabbat Mach Hach is always pow-

Goldberg-Polin, who shared her family’s story and about her son, Hersh Goldberg-Polin.

Like any other year, however, the teens were also there to enjoy the land. The opening ceremony got underway in the Old City at the Kotel. In the weeks that followed, campers forged strong bonds and fast friendships. The buses made stops in Jerusalem, Tiveria, and Eilat, taking participants on a summer experience they’ll never forget.

As in other years, campers were able to tailor their experiences to their personal interests by choosing a specialty track to focus on during Adventure

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