

Washington Jewish Week

Temple Emanuel Embraces Inclusion With Shabbat Shirah

By **Zoe Bell** - February 13, 2025



Jonah Berger, left, on the drums as Rabbi Adam Rosenwasser plays guitar for Shabbat Shirah. Courtesy of Temple Emanuel.

Temple Emanuel hosted percussionist and speaker Jonah Berger, who has lived experience with disability, for its inclusive Shabbat Shirah in honor of Jewish Disability Awareness, Acceptance and Inclusion Month Feb. 7 to 9.

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“He’s a dynamic speaker; he really brings a lot to the conversation [about] all different kinds of disabilities, neurodiversity, physical disabilities,” Hughes said of Berger. “He also has great talent working with kids; he’s a camp counselor ... he is a parent and he has his master’s [in] special [education], so he has a lot of tools and perspectives.”

Berger is the director of [The Rhythm Within](#), an organization he founded to increase community access and employment success for young adults with disabilities. Currently living in Michigan, Berger is a Montgomery County local — his father was the youth director at Washington Hebrew Congregation in D.C.

This year’s Shabbat Shirah began with a Friday night Shabbat service, then attendees heard from Berger, said Laura Naide, Temple Emanuel’s director of congregational learning.

“Jonah gave a short talk about his life as a disabled person in the Jewish community,” Naide said. “We had some lovely music, but unfortunately, our cantor had the flu, so we didn’t have our music specialist. But we did our best and it was a really lovely service.”

“It was so great that we could kick it off with Jonah being there,” Hughes added.

On Feb. 8, about 125 congregants attended Berger’s Torah study discussing the parallels between his lived experience, the weekly Torah portion and Jewish values. Then, Temple Emanuel held its monthly Simchat Shabbat — “joy of Shabbat” — in which students largely run the service. Sixth and seventh graders in the religious school helped lead prayers.

Berger spoke at a Feb. 9 family minyan and met with various groups: a parent inclusion group, teen classroom helpers, and the sixth and seventh graders, incorporating drumming into his program with the latter group.

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Berger discusses disability inclusion with sixth and seventh graders. Courtesy of Temple Emanuel.

She added that Berger helped attendees gain comfortability talking about their disabilities and asking for accommodations if they so choose.

“He actually had us move our bodies in a way that would help us understand what his challenges are,” Naide said.

Berger lives with [Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease](#), an inherited degenerative nerve condition that affects the nerves in one’s feet, legs, arms and hands. One symptom is progressive muscle weakness and atrophy, according to the National Institute of Health.

“He helped us move our hands and feet to experience what his life is like,” Naide said.

Berger also helped attendees realize that the number of people living with disabilities is much larger than we perceive.

“Everyone has something. It could be a learning disability, it could be a physical challenge, it could be mental health, it could be episodic. Maybe you’re struggling because of some external factors, but raise the importance and normalize it,” Naide recalled Berger said. “It’s OK to ask questions, and if you don’t want to answer them, that’s also OK.”

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“There was a moment when Jonah was talking about [how] he wears leg braces and he told the kids, ‘I’ll show them to you after the service,’” Naide said. “One of the little boys at the service said, ‘I have leg braces too!’ and he showed them, and Jonah was like, ‘Oh my gosh, your leg braces are blue. Mine aren’t blue; mine are boring. I want blue ones.’ It was this beautiful connection.”

She said Berger’s message of self-acceptance connects to the Jewish values of b’tzelem Elohim — “we’re all created in the image of God” — shmirat haguf — “taking care of your body” — and tikkun olam, repairing the world.

“Jonah brought the Jewish lens,” Naide said. “He’s been very active in Jewish life and Jewish camping. ... The fact that he brought that along and ... grew up in Montgomery County ... I feel like that helps our congregants connect.”

“He exudes this energy and kindness that my goal was for more people to experience. I knew it would be impactful.”

Hughes said one of Berger’s messages was “be yourself.”

“He lives a life of self-acceptance and I knew he would really be somebody to connect with the kids and adults of the congregation,” Hughes said. “He’s all about connecting.”

The conversations centering disability inclusion prompted attendees to think about their own synagogue environment and how to increase its accessibility in a “simple but profound” realization, Naide said.

“We found out Friday night that we had congregants who struggled to get up from our chairs that we use in our worship spaces because [the chairs] don’t have arms,” she said. “That literally never crossed my mind. Because we were having this conversation, someone said, ‘We’re talking about inclusion and I saw people struggling to get out of the chairs.’”

Naide raised that concern at a staff meeting on Feb. 11 and the team is considering either replacing the chairs or making chairs with armrests or assists available in the worship space.

“I can confidently say that this synagogue values inclusion,” Naide said. “I think it’s part of the conversation and culture.”



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Temple Emanuel's "inclusion cart" provides accessibility aids and sensory toys. Courtesy of Temple Emanuel.



Temple Emanuel has made strides to embrace inclusion outside of JDAIM and featured guest speakers. Hughes had the idea to implement an “inclusion cart” in the back of the sanctuary with [hearing loops](#), reading glasses, noise-canceling headphones, [Social Stories](#) for children with autism, children’s books and sensory toys, all items that are readily available for anyone to use, sponsored by Temple Emanuel’s Brotherhood. The shul also has a designated “Shalom Space” during Sunday school and activities for students to take a brief break.

In programming, Hughes adds a message of inclusion: “We have supports available to you.”

“It’s really given our parents more comfort in sharing their children’s diagnoses and concerns with us,” Naide said. “Because what I used to see is kids might have an education plan like an IEP or a 504 [plan] in their public schools, but it wasn’t shared with the religious school because they’re only [here] for a few hours. We don’t have all the resources, but with [Hughes’] help, we now know how to read those and hopefully provide a supportive learning environment.”

Accessibility is second nature to Naide as she coordinates Temple Emanuel programs or events, whether it’s a certain setup to accommodate disabled congregants or a menu to include attendees with dietary restrictions.

“What we’re seeing happening is that the community is starting to get the picture,” Hughes said. “Everyone of course thinks that inclusion is important, but then [we’ve] start[ed] to bring that into different spaces and different age groups from the kids to the adults.”

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