

Recognizing strengths and embracing differences

Fair Lawn's Shomrei Torah will host panel on parenting the 'out-of-the-box' child

LEAH ADLER

Navigating challenges can be, well, challenging. Navigating challenges that are not run-of-the-mill, that don't seem to arise for most people around you, can be isolating as well. And navigating challenges that stem from a difference can be especially isolating, particularly when there may be some stigma attached to the difference.

"Inspired by Ilona" is a series of panel discussions designed to make people feel less alone in difficult situations. The series is coordinated and sponsored by Larry and Nancy Fish Bravman of Fair Lawn. The series is in memory of their daughter Ilona Bravman, who lived with disabling spinal muscular atrophy and died in 2021, when she was 28 years old.

Ms. Bravman described Ilona as vibrant and very bright; she was someone who did everything with joy and determination and inspired those around her.

The series explores different types of challenges.



Rebecca Eliason



Michelle Goodman



Shulamit Roth

Earlier panels have focused on differences as disparate as physical disabilities and having a family member who chooses a different religious path or one who identifies as LGBTQ. The next panel in the series is called "The Out-of-the-Box Child: Strategies for Successful

Parenting" and will focus on ways of parenting children who have ADHD, anxiety, sensory motor issues, and learning or behavioral challenges. Dr. Rebecca Eliason, Shulamit Roth, and Michelle Goodman are the featured speakers; Congregation Shomrei Torah in Fair Lawn

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will host the panel on May 15. (See box.)

"'Inspired by Ilona' is about embracing differences and about learning to focus on people's strengths," Ms. Bravman said. "This program will give parents practical guidance on navigating in different settings and on recognizing and cultivating their child's strengths."

Dr. Eliason is a licensed clinical psychologist in Bergenfield and consults with schools and families to support optimal student growth. She was head of school at Barnstable Academy in Oakland from 2017 to 2022; before that, she was the school's director of psychological services.

The goal of the program is to provide parents with practical tools and guidance on how to ensure that their out-of-the-box child gets the support needed to succeed, she said. ("Out of the box" is the term the panelists use to describe children the program will address.) Each of the panelists will bring a different perspective to the discussion, Dr. Eliason said. "We all work with the same types of children, and often overlap, but Shulamit's focus is on the academic piece, Michelle's is behavioral, and I tend to deal more with the social-emotional."

The three will talk about tools that parents can use at home and strategies they can develop to help their child navigate social settings as well as academic demands that might seem overwhelming to them. They'll also discuss how to assess whether a mainstream school is the best fit for a particular child. "That's probably the

most common question I get from parents," Dr. Eliason said. "And the answer is very child-specific. Sometimes a seemingly minor intervention can make a big difference - something like putting a piece of Velcro under the child's desk and letting them fidget with the Velcro. But if we've tried the right interventions for the child and we aren't finding success, it might be the right move to switch to a more specialized program."

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Dr. Eliason's work involves designing creative, child-specific academic plans. They may include seemingly minor interventions or ways to focus on exactly where a child's skill deficit is, along with methods to target that specific skill deficit. This may occur within a mainstream classroom or by removing the child for help

in that specific area so they can be happy and functional in a regular classroom the rest of the time. "My general approach is that it's best to try to keep a child in a regular classroom," she said. "But that may not always be the best environment for a particular child. If the gap between where the child is and where the rest of the class is continues to grow, or if we aren't closing that gap fast enough, then we may have to look at other placements, in which case I walk the family through the different options."

Dr. Eliason also stressed the importance of maintaining a positive focus and will talk about ways to celebrate a child's successes and capture the great things about each child. "It's very common to just focus on weaknesses," she explained. "Often, there's a focus on why is this child struggling academically or socially, but this child might be really great at all these other things. That's not to say that we should overlook the fact that the child is struggling, but we should also take a positive approach and recognize the child's strengths."

She also has found that parents of these children can feel isolated. "I think often parents don't want to talk about what those components are that make their child out-of-the-box," she explained. "Sometimes those things are stigmatized - if your child has anxiety that may not be something you want to share with all your neighbors. If your child has a specific learning disability and the school is managing it, and it's going OK, homework every single night might still be a real struggle. Parents often don't want to share that, but it might

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consume hours of their life every single day.

"The result could be that the most major thing they're going through in life, they're going through alone."

But she hopes this program will help parents feel less isolated. "I think that even this conversation with professionals, with community support, will make it apparent how many people have an out-of-the-box child," she said. And some of the strategies she plans to discuss are tools parents can use to connect with others. "We'll talk about ways to start the conversation with friends, about how parents can talk about what they're struggling with in a way that it will be heard and well received and also give parents the comfort and camaraderie that they need."

"So I might be kind of hiding from my neighbor because all those kids are playing outside and I know it won't go well for my child if he tries to join them," Dr. Eliason continued. "We'll talk about different ways I can approach the subject with my neighbor so I don't have to sit inside and hide the experience."

"You could say something like 'my child is having a hard time finding a social niche in school and I want to help him grow in that area - could your kids pop over for half an hour? I think it would be really good for him.' It might be helpful to set up a structured activity during that time that you know your child will do well with and to serve snacks the neighbors would enjoy." This type of conversation should help reduce the stigma and help parents feel less alone, she said. "The next time I run into

that neighbor, they'll likely ask how my child is doing.

"I hope that parents will walk away with very tangible, practical skills and tools that they'll be able to implement at home, use to help them feel less alone, and use as they work with their child's school and, overall, that the children will be the beneficiaries of all this."

Shulamith Roth is the head of school at Yeshivat Shalshet, a yeshiva day school in Paramus for students

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with language-based learning disabilities. She agrees that parenting an out-of-the-box child can be isolating.

"Navigating something challenging, something different, can feel exceptionally lonely and confusing," she said. "Providing the opportunity for parents and family

members to come together to hear from professionals, but also just to be with others who are going through something similar, provides a sense of camaraderie, and helps people feel a sense of belonging, a sense of normalcy. And it provides guidance when you really don't know where else to turn or to look."

"The premise of the 'Inspired by Ilona' series, in and of itself, really speaks to the importance of this panel," she continued. "Both as a professional and as a parent, I feel that the work the Bravmans are doing is exceptionally important; it's inspiring and crucial for our community."

She will talk about the importance of parents knowing, "first and foremost, that they are not alone," and it can be very helpful to seek guidance from professionals and from people who have been coping with similar situations. At the same time, parents are the experts with their own child and they are their child's best advocate, she said. And there are no one-size-fits-all answers, or even right-or-wrong answers; parents should use the resources available to help them decide what's best for their child.

It's important to celebrate strengths, in addition to strengthening areas in which students are more vulnerable, and that it's important to let children know that they can still be smart and that they still have what to contribute, she said. "Everybody's teeth fall out at different times, everybody grows to be a different height, and everybody's good at different things. As adults, we can learn to be more comfortable with that. College students are free to choose their courses, but kids are

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made to feel like you need to be good at everything or you're a failure. There's very black-and-white thinking with a lot of kids - you're either good at everything or you're bad at everything."

She also thinks the community has grown a lot in recognizing that kids getting what they need, and learning in a different way, doesn't mean that they're not bright or different in a bad way. "I think we've made a lot of strides in our inclusivity over the years," she said. "We still have a lot of work to do, but the first step is talking about it and helping everyone understand that the issue does not have to remain behind closed doors. And hosting a panel like this does that; it brings it out in the open, it calls attention to the fact that there's something going on that we need to talk about as a community."

"And the more people who come out, who acknowledge that this is important, whether it impacts them, or a family member, or a friend that they know, or a student that they know, but they come out to support, and listen, and be a part of this important conversation, I think that begins to destigmatize some of these issues," she said.

"And I think some people who are not directly affected will come. I think people want to know how to support, how to be there for their friends. I think people want to grow and people want to learn. I was very interested in going to the last panel, which focused on supporting loved ones who have chosen an alternate direction in their Jewish observance, to hear what the speakers had to say about a topic that doesn't impact

me personally, but that impacts our community and I think is important.

"I think that the work the Bravmans are doing by bringing the 'Inspired by Ilona' series to the community is phenomenal," she continued. "If there's one person that we can help feel less alone, feel that there is a place to turn, and feel that we're here for them as a community, I'm happy and proud to be part of this program."

Ms. Goodman is a board-certified behavior analyst in Teaneck. She specializes in coaching parents of children with developmental disabilities and behavior challenges. She works mainly with adults who parent or teach out-of-the-box children and coaches them using an applied behavior analytic model.

Ms. Goodman also finds that parents of out-of-the-box children tend to feel very alone. "That's something that comes up in my practice over and over again," she said. "Parents feel like they're the only ones living with these stressors, and I often wish I could fill a room with all the people who feel they are the only ones so that they could actually see - oh, there are lots of us."

"So even just a meeting in a community of people who are all feeling similarly can be really helpful."

She thinks parents tend to feel alone because people often are not comfortable talking about children struggling with these issues. People also tend to assume that "if I have children, I should know how to parent them," she said.

"I think that's a fair assumption if you have

in-the-box-kids because we're wired to intuitively know how to parent them," she said.

"But as soon as you have an out-of-the-box child, all bets are off, it's no longer true; your really good intuition and good intentions don't work as intended, and so you're left feeling like a failure when, in fact, the failure is in the assumption that good intuitive parenting should meet the needs of an out-of-the-box child. It doesn't."

Ms. Goodman plans to address some of the challenges parents may face at home. She will also talk about how parents can navigate their relationship with their child's school and advocate for their child properly. She hopes "the panel will allow people to walk away with the realizations that it's not their fault and that they're not alone."

Who: Dr. Rebecca Eliason, Psy.D, MS; Shulamit Roth, M.S., CCC-SLP; and Michelle Goodman, M.A., BCBA

What: Will talk about "The Out-of-the-Box Child: Strategies for Successful Parenting"

When: Monday, May 15, at 8 p.m.

Where: Congregation Shomrei Torah in Fair Lawn/ Livestream available at inspiredbyilona.com

For more information: inspiredbtiltona@outlook.com

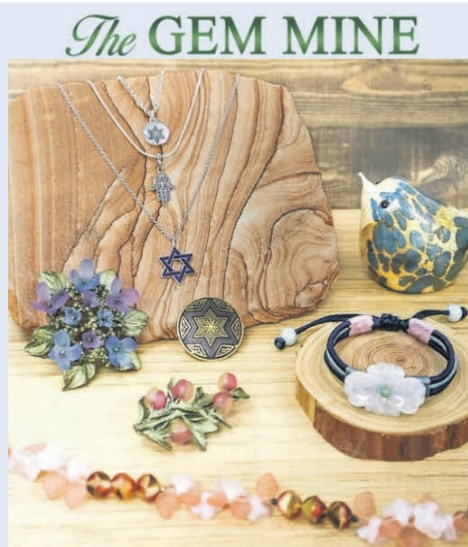
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