

Inbar cultivates self-acceptance, love among disabled Israelis

INCLUSION MATTERS

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PETACH TIKVAH, Israel – At the nonprofit organization Inbar, Shalomi Eldar and Shoshi Margolin empower people who have disabilities to achieve self-acceptance and find romantic partners. The mission is two-pronged: to remove individuals’ internal barriers to dating and to advocate changing societal attitudes towards individuals who have disabilities.

Located in Petach Tikvah, Inbar currently serves individuals between the ages of 20-35 who have physical and ‘high-functioning developmental disabilities.’ Approximately half of the 500 members are religiously observant.

At Temple Shalom in Newton recently, Eldar described Inbar’s mission and its inception from mitzvah to nonprofit. The group’s co-founder and chairman, Eldar has a strong connection to Boston. He taught at the Maimonides School from 1998 to 2002 and enjoys “recharging” at the Boston Kollel. He is a rabbi who studied computers and works at Intel as a software engineer. He is married and the father of five children, ages 3 to 20.

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The story of Inbar started late one night. Eldar was teaching a shiur near his home in Haifa. Shaul Inbar, a young man who has “severe CP,” told him after the class that he was feeling very lonely. Shaul is confined to a wheelchair and it is difficult to comprehend his speech. He is a rabbi who studies halachic issues related to disabilities. In the past, he had expressed this feeling, and Eldar had sympathized but felt helpless. He had tried to encourage Shaul to lower his expectations.

“Maybe I was part of the problem,” Eldar later admitted.

His attitude shifted. He realized other people had physical disabilities and were single and lonely. He offered to organize a singles event. Eldar and Shaul received 30 requests for information. The singles event occurred five weeks later, although, as Eldar said, he “had no experience planning singles events.” Participants arrived from throughout Israel.

Eldar organized several additional informal events and classes in dating skills. During the next two years, he recruited volunteers and matchmakers, and organized events and dating workshops every two months. He was working full-time at Intel while managing this project.

Eventually, he decided to register as a nonprofit in order to raise money and hire staff. Eldar and Shaul co-founded a nonprofit and named it Inbar. Shaul's marriage, captured on video, was Inbar's first success. Watch the emotional event at youtu.be/BU5EK-yEwAs.

Shoshi Margolin

Eldar and Shaul met Shoshi Margolin when she applied for the position of executive director. Eldar smiled widely as he described her: "If you spend half an hour with Shoshi, you will find yourself signing a mortgage." They selected her from hundreds of applicants. She had an MBA, was working at Bank Leumi managing multi-million shekel funds, and had planned budgets for Israeli Air Force rescue missions. As an aside, she mentioned in her cover letter that she had a physical disability.

Margolin is charismatic and warm; she speaks rapidly and with enthusiasm. She describes the duality of her self-perception as a woman who has a disability. The duality is whether she is a woman who is capable of anything or a person who is a disability and limited options. According to Margolin, the duality pervades the consciousness of other singles who have disabilities and is reinforced by society, which prevents these singles from marrying. She noted individuals with disabilities internalize harsh societal messages:

"Companionship with another loving and accepting person is a basic need of all human beings," she noted in an email. "Unfortunately, people with disabilities often find it very difficult to fulfill this need. They are burdened not only by their disabilities but also by society's attitude, which is reflected with the doubt of whether people with disabilities are worthy and able to be part of a significant relationship. As a result, they themselves, their families, professionals and people around often find themselves wondering whether they are even worthy of the gift of a relationship and marriage."

Margolin grew up in Hadera in a supportive family. "I knew I'm a gift, a present," she noted.

Her conflict about her identity started at a young age; she was certain she could achieve whatever she wanted professionally and that she would never marry. Therefore, her primary ambition was to be financially independent. She was ambivalent about her disability.

"I was very detached from it," she noted. "When I saw someone on television who was in a wheelchair, I would turn off the television."

She also felt lack of respect. "Society treats us like children, like second or third best," she noted.

Margolin delayed dating for many years. "I started to date in my 30s, and it was disastrous," she noted. "There are a lot of predators, very dangerous."

Her life changed when she attended a relationship workshop in Tel Aviv. The facilitator, Rachel Wheeler, became her personal coach. The workshop and coaching were instrumental in helping her gain confidence in dating and of her identity.

“She helped me to accept my personal limitations, meet men, including knowing which ones not to meet, and taught me what to talk about on dates,” Margolin noted. Wheeler also helped her “not suppress that I have a disability or ignore that I have it, how not to be devastated, how to look at it the right way.”

“Even with a very supporting family and all my successful career, it was so hard for me to do the journey of self-acceptance and to change in me the beliefs of society,” she noted.

After working with Wheeler, Margolin met and married a “wonderful man.”

Joining Inbar

Margolin became director of Inbar because she saw an opportunity to share her mission and her personal achievements. She hired Wheeler to lead workshops, noting, “If she were not in my life, I would go looking for a date.”

By infusing her boundless enthusiasm and creativity and Rachel Kolette Wheeler on her side as a strategic consultant, program developer senior trainer and coach they instituted many changes at the nonprofit. Today, Inbar boasts divisions for physical and high-functioning developmental disabilities, 20-week intensive workshops, ‘mini’ workshops, volunteer mentors, and community events. Wheeler with Margolin developed ‘Inbar language’, discussed below.

The workshop on physical disabilities is titled “The Way to Relationship”, created and led by Rachel Kolette Wheeler is offered in Hebrew and English to Inbar members. As a graduate of the program tells her story: born as a premature infant twin, she was denied the use of her legs from birth. She overcame many obstacles to become an officer in the Navy and obtain a master’s degree in biotechnology. She has a meaningful career, but until she discovered Inbar, had never dated. She had always assumed that her own limitations were preventing her from achieving that final milestone. Through the interpersonal growth she attained in the workshops and other programs, she was able to date for the first time at age 32. <https://youtu.be/clrQpMKpHkY>). Mini workshop topics have included ‘the song of the heart’ meditation/music workshop, ‘Yemima methos’ self-awareness workshop; and intuitive drawing. Today, Inbar boasts divisions for physical and high-functioning developmental disabilities, 20-week intensive workshops, ‘mini’ workshops, volunteer mentors and community events.

Volunteer mentors provide individual coaching to supplement the workshops. Mentors are married individuals, some of whom have disabilities. They provide positive role models of successful relationships and marriage. Margolin said that in every workshop, “less than half” of the participants say that they have friends who have “good marriages.” She said that some participants lack self-esteem and mentors play a valuable role: “If you absorb belief you are less than others, how can you achieve a healthy empowering relationship?”

Mentors also guide participants in selecting partners and appropriate dating behavior. Wheeler created the mentor project and Margolin herself participated in the first training program and acts as a mentor to program participants. She said, "These mentors will often be the only individual in the disabled person's life that holds the belief that a good relationship and marriage are possible for him or her." Mentors receive training and supervision and Inbar is in the process of recruiting and training additional mentors. Inbar language uses terms including "all abilities" instead of "disability," "every person can have love and be loved," and "internal GPS." A 'personal GPS' is "what is right and wrong for me, who I am, how I perceive myself with disability, and how I deal with it."

Inbar provides social events for its members who have physical disabilities. Each event has a specific goal, including increasing self-esteem or social interaction. Vendors donate food and entertainment. Margolin planned a 'styling' event because "people with disabilities feel detached from their bodies." Stylists, makeup artists, and photographers staged an event to help members look and feel beautiful. Sarah, age 41, in a wheelchair her entire life, said that she felt beautiful for the first time. Other events have included a Purim party, a barbecue, 'stand-up,' a singer, and using voice to interact with emotions. As a matter of principle, Inbar provides formal meals at the events; Margolin believes that the quality of the food affects participants' feeling of self-worth; staffers invite prospective workshop participants to attend events, to enable them to experience the culture of Inbar.

It is not sufficient to address internal barriers to self-acceptance and relationship; individuals who have disabilities require societal affirmation. To reverse negative stereotypes, Inbar staffers invite the (nondisabled) community to participate in some of their events. Inbar also trains its participants to speak at community centers, schools, and the private sector. In the nine years since Inbar was founded, 20 couples have married, and hundreds have dated. One could say that the coming together of Eldar and Margolin to help hundreds of individuals is bashert.

For more information, visit <https://inbardate.org.il/en/inbar-english/>. *Newton's Rachael Wurtman, J.D., M.S. is a special education consultant whose areas of expertise include mental health and Autism Spectrum Disorder. Contact her at rachael.wurtman@gmail.com.*