



Famous Figures from History and Today With Disabilities



Biblical Leaders with Disabilities

- **Jacob** limped after wrestling with the angel. Rather than becoming a sign of weakness, this limp came to symbolize Jacob's transformative moment, "I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been saved." (Gen. 32:31) In fact, Israelite tradition sanctified Jacob's limp by avoiding eating that part of the thigh (Gen. 32:33)
- **Leah** probably suffered from some sort of eye problem. Genesis 29:17 describes her as having *einei racot*, which may mean weak eyes, or may imply short-sightedness, lazy eyes, an inability to make eye contact, strangely-shaped eyes, or, as Rashi suggests, different-colored eyes.
- **Miriam** had leprosy. Although this required that she be quarantined and sent out from the community, her community's care remained with her. Moses prayed that she be healed and restored to them. She was not forgotten in her distress. (Num. 12, especially 12:10-13)
- **Saul** suffered from depression and bouts of insanity, or perhaps from bipolar disorder). (The book of I Samuel, especially 10:19-23, esp. 22; 11:5-7; 16:14)
- **Moses**, the stutterer, is the only one who can see God face-to-face
 - Moses had a stutter, yet he was chosen to lead the chosen, the Israelites.
 - A drash on Moses' stutter, by Shelly Christensen:

Centuries ago, the Jewish people followed a powerful leader from Egypt into the wilderness and a new future. Little did they know that without G-d's inclusion, Moses might never have been chosen.

In *Shemot* (Exodus 4:11) when G-d spoke to Moses and told him that he would lead his People out of Egypt, Moses replied that he could not accept this role for he was slow of speech and heavy of tongue. Moses' self-assessment caused G-d to be angry and G-d said, "Who made man's mouth? Or who makes one mute, or deaf or seeing or blind? Isn't it I, G-d?"

G-d made it possible for Moses to fulfill his destiny by providing Aaron to speak for Moses. It was, in fact, a way of leveling the playing field or providing an accommodation. Moses could now do the work that G-d had commanded him to do. He would survive many more tests of faith and strength to lead His People.

G-d chose Moses because of the personal vision and strength he possessed. His speech disability was insignificant in G-d's plan.

Shelly Christensen, "Even Moses Needed a Voice: A Jewish Heritage of Inclusion," Jewish Community Guide to Inclusion of People with Disabilities, p. 1.

- After Mt. Sinai, Moses had to wear a veil to cover his shining face.
- **Isaac** was blind in later life (Gen. 27:1) and likely had post-traumatic stress disorder and perhaps a developmental disability as well.
 - Sources for the idea that Isaac had developmental disabilities:
 - According to rabbinic tradition, Isaac was an adult at the Akeidah (37 years old; Sarah was 90 when Isaac was born and 127 at her death, and the rabbis held that she died at the shock of hearing of his death)
 - Isaac is largely a silent patriarch; Rebecca received a version of the covenant in their generation.
 - Unlike other biblical heroes, Isaac's wife was chosen for him; Abraham is clear that Eliezer should seek a wife for Isaac but leave Isaac behind. (Gen. 24:1-9)
 - Rabbi Deborah Goldmann points out that when Rebecca first sees Isaac (Gen. 24:64), she literally *falls* from the camel. Some commentators have read this as falling in love. But perhaps, Rabbi Goldmann suggests, Rebecca was startled by Isaac's appearance.
 - Isaac lived in his mother's tent as an adult. (Gen. 24:67)
 - Both Rabbi Deborah Goldmann and Rabbi Dan Goldblatt wrote sermons on the idea that Isaac was developmentally disabled. They elaborate on the ideas presented

above in [sermons available online](#).

- The interpretation that Isaac had post-traumatic stress disorder is based largely on his silence and passivity following the Akeidah. Rebecca was the dominant ancestor in that generation, and it is she who receives the promise that her seed will become a great nation. (Gen. 25:22-23).
- Another support for Isaac being differently-minded than his peers is that he is shown as meditative, and perhaps a bit of a loner. In Gen 24:63, we encounter Isaac, meditating or praying alone in a field.
- For Isaac's disabilities as a source of inspiration, see text 15 in [online text resources](#) and Rabbi Goldmann's and Rabbi Goldblatt's sermons noted above. Rabbi Goldman notes that the accommodations that Isaac's family made for him should inspire us to make accommodations for those in our community with disabilities. Now, when we have such a greater understanding of how to compassionately and effectively accommodate disabilities, we should be able to make our tent inclusive even more than our ancestors. And unlike Isaac's family, we should ask people what we can do for them—and what we should let them or invite them to do for themselves.

Artists, Athletes, Political Leaders, & Scientists with Disabilities

Some information below comes from *Jewish Community Guide to Inclusion of People with Disabilities*, p. 226; Wikipedia; and other online sources.

- **Abraham Lincoln** suffered from Depression and Marfan syndrome, a growth disorder that causes a sufferer to grow very tall, very quickly, stressing the heart. (Perhaps compare him to Saul, both of whom led a people.)
- **Franklin Delano Roosevelt**, another great leader, suffered from polio and could not stand or walk without crutches. He was elected four times as President of the United States, from 1932 to 1944, helped the country survive the depression, and led it through World War II.
- **Wilma Rudolph** was also afflicted with polio as a child. She went on to become an accomplished sprinter and was the first American woman, and African-American woman, to win three gold medals in one Olympic Games.
- Astrophysicist **Stephen Hawking** contracted a form of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, a degenerative neuro-muscular condition, when he was in college. Despite becoming almost completely paralyzed, he has made major contributions in cosmology, quantum gravity, the study of black holes, and written the bestseller *A Brief History of Time*.
- **Chuck Close** is a prominent American painter and photographer known for his large portraits. Despite suffering a spinal artery collapse that has confined him to a wheelchair, he continues to create paintings that are seen in museums throughout the world.
- Artist **Frida Kahlo** contracted polio at age six, and may have had spina bifida. She also suffered numerous severe injuries in a bus accident, resulting in thirty-five surgeries and hospitalizations, a leg amputation, and extreme pain throughout her life. Yet she still became one of the most renowned painters of the 20th century.
- Actor **Danny Glover** (*Lethal Weapon*) was placed in a class for students with mental retardation until he was in high school and did not learn to read or write until after he had graduated.
- **Marlee Matlin**, who has been deaf since she was 18 months old, was the youngest person to win the Academy Award for Best Actress in a Leading Role, which she did for *Children of a*

Lesser God. She has continued to act on stage and in over 30 film and TV roles, including *Seinfeld* and *The West Wing*.

- **Walt Disney** did not learn to read until he was nine. He drew pictures to help him remember what he was learning.
- Actor **James Earl Jones**, the voice of Darth Vader and CNN, overcame a stutter that so embarrassed him he refused to speak in school. He learned to speak without stuttering by reading poetry.
- **Albert Einstein** was kicked out of school for behavioral problems; his teachers thought he could not learn. He did not learn to read until he was nine years old.
- **Jim Abbot** was born with no right hand. He still played quarterback in college, participated in the Olympics, and became a major league pitcher, throwing a no-hitter at Yankee Stadium.
- Mystery novelist **Agatha Christie** had a learning disability called dysgraphia, which prevented her writing from being legible or easily understood. She had to dictate all 100-plus of her novels, stories and plays, and became the best-selling book writer of all time, according to the Guinness Book of World records.
- **Hans Christian Andersen, Alexander Graham Bell** and **Cher** are among the millions who have dyslexia.