

# Breaking Through **Gender and Disability** by Rabbi Denise Handlarski



Picture it: twelve women gathered together to learn self-defense skills. This is the culmination of their course. They are breaking boards. The energy is electric as the crack of each board breaking resonates through the room. Women are literally trembling with excitement and elation. Can you picture these women? My guess is they're not what you picture. These are women with mobility disabilities. They use scooters, wheelchairs, canes, and crutches. They range in age from in their early twenties to their late sixties. Some have intellectual disabilities as well as physical ones. They are from all walks of life. They came here together for empowerment, and they found it, along with a sense of shared experience, mutual understanding, and support. These women are warriors.

If you know me through the Humanistic Jewish movement, you might know me as a rabbi; I serve the Oraynu Congregation in Toronto. You might know me as an intersectional feminist; I have written and done videos on the topics of gender and Judaism, Jews and white privilege, Jewish text from a feminist perspective, etc. You might know me as someone who loves text study; I have a background in literature that I bring to Jewish learning. You might know me as a teacher; I worked for years teaching secondary and post-secondary courses and now teach people becoming teachers themselves. You might not know that I have spent the past twenty years taking and teaching women's self-defense courses. And the self-defense part has so many applications and resonances with the Jewish parts. Especially now.

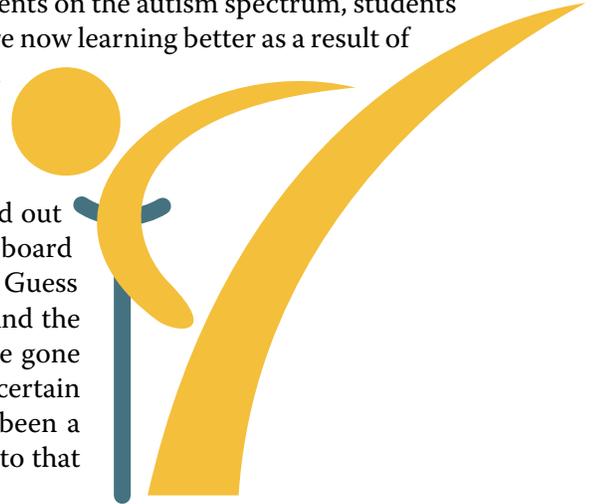
Back to the board-breaking women. When women break boards, they are not only smashing wood: they are smashing stereotypes. The first time I broke a board I remember thinking that I could do anything; that I had

been lied to my whole life about what limitations there were based on the fact that I was a woman. When I teach any group of women and girls, but especially groups with multiple disabilities, I am so aware of the myriad and multiple ways that we are disadvantaged. I would never call being female or being feminine a disability. But it is sometimes a disadvantage. Yes, women and girls are discriminated against. But a much more pervasive yet insidious disadvantage is our global culture of sexual violence. Women everywhere say no to jobs, internships, opportunities, classes and courses, lab time, and much more because of the ever-present fear of harassment and assault. Or we leave school or work because we are harassed or assaulted. The recent revelations that emerged via the #metoo movement made that very clear. And, truly, what we have heard is not even the tip of the iceberg. Gender-based violence encompasses the most underreported crimes. We will frankly never know how many women have been raped, attacked, harassed, stalked, forced to quit their jobs, forced to work with their attackers. But we do know that every woman is touched by this violence in some way or other. Even if we have never been attacked, we know we could be and it influences our decisions and actions every day.

This is even truer for women and girls with disabilities. Again, sexual harassment and assault are underreported, so no statistic can fully capture the scope of the problem. But our best research suggests that women and girls with disabilities are four times more likely to be assaulted. That might surprise you. Often when we see images of rape in the movies, the victim is "stereotypically attractive." But rape is a crime of power, not a crime of passion. And what counts as "attractive" is far broader than the images we see

anyway. Perhaps we should not be surprised that Hollywood gets this picture so very wrong, now that we know more about just how mired in sexual violence Hollywood has always been. Teaching self-defense to women with disabilities is therefore necessary but hard work. Most of these women have been assaulted. All of them are well-aware of the culture of contempt that gives rise to this violence.

I mentioned that I'm a teacher. Part of my job is to teach about how we foster meaningful inclusion for students with special education needs in the classroom. You may have heard recent buzzwords like "differentiated instruction," meaning the same concept or skill can be taught using multiple methods and means, thus reaching a diverse population of learners. I might teach math using words, pictures, or 3-D models. I might teach a short story using voice, drama, and analysis of its text. I might teach biology using computer images, textbooks, environmental study in the lab and out of doors, etc. What we know is that some of this differentiation began as a way to reach students with identified special education needs, such as students on the autism spectrum, students with learning disabilities, etc., but the impact is that many more students are now learning better as a result of this differentiation. As just one example, we found that students with special education needs often perform better with access to a personal tablet or laptop that enables them to use apps or programs such as text-to-speech software. So some students with identified needs received these tablets and laptops. But have you met adolescents? They felt strange being singled out and weren't using the technology to which they were entitled. In a school board near where I teach, there is a pilot project that gives every student a tablet. Guess what? The students with special education needs now use their tablets. And the students without special education needs also use them. And grades have gone up in both populations. What we used to think of as "accommodating" certain learning needs now is more about acknowledging that there has always been a diversity of ways of learning and we are better teachers if we are teaching to that diversity all the time.



Back to the women in self-defense classes. I teach for Wen-Do Women's Self-Defence, which is an intersectional feminist organization. The way we foster inclusion is more holistic and meaningful than I've seen anywhere else. We see diversity and difference as strengths that women can use when fighting back. And we make learning accessible for women of any ability/disability in each class we teach. When I've taught women who are blind or low-vision, I have to get sharper with my words. Usually when teaching something physical, people watch first and then do it themselves. For women who can't see what I'm doing, I need to describe in a way that paints a picture. Here's an example: I'm teaching a back kick. I say "raise your hands (already in fists) on the side of your kicking leg. Lift the kicking leg so your foot is beside the knee of the standing leg. Your goal is to kick straight back behind you. Imagine a can on a stool right behind your own knee. Crush that can with your heel." They do it perfectly.

When we teach women who use scooters and wheelchairs, we teach them how to actually use their mobility devices as weapons-at-hand — how to roll over toes or back into knees, how to turn on a dime into an attacker. We teach how to pull attackers down to our level. We teach that it is often the moment when the attacker thinks we're most vulnerable that we are at our strongest. That is one of the greatest lessons of my life, and it applies in all kinds of ways.

If you are Jewish, you can imagine how it applies to our people. We have been victimized and targeted in many ways and in many lands. Sometimes it is when we have seemed weakest that we have pulled off the most stunning feats of strength. We blew up a crematorium at Auschwitz. The Warsaw Ghetto fought much longer and stronger than anyone could have expected. We survived a genocide and then built a country. In North America, we have overcome hatred and xenophobia to become well-established and well-respected in every industry and most communities. I'm not saying things are perfect. I'm saying we come together when the odds are against us and we become better and stronger.

This has resonances for gender too. There are many theories as to why women are outpacing men in academic achievement, entrance to post-secondary institutions, and some professions now. Anti-feminists make the claim that it's because women have come "too far" and decry the oppression of men. This is an argument that is so anti-feminist and anti-woman that the makers of the argument have to ignore a lot of reality to make it jibe. There remain obvious advantages still afforded to men (especially white, non-disabled men) in all of these sectors. (If you're interested in learning more about this, please read the countless feminist accounts of women not being taken seriously, being mansplained, being mistreated and overlooked. These accounts are everywhere.) Even

...continued on page 18



## “Breaking Through”

...continued from page 9

with affirmative action programs, we still find disproportionate numbers of men in the upper echelons of most fields and over-represented in the highest earning fields. And, again, the threat and fact of sexual violence has cost countless women their jobs, their deserved promotions, and their ability to continue to work in toxic environments. It’s not a reality most men have ever had to face. And yet, women (especially white, non-disabled women) are beginning to catch up. The truth is, we don’t know exactly why it is that in some places women are now beginning to outcompete men in school and in some professions, but there is a growing theory that I find compelling: women are beginning to benefit from sexism. I know this sounds backwards. And please don’t misunderstand me: sexism is bad and needs to end. But the hidden advantage of all of the sexist disadvantages, including lower expectations, less attention and talk-time in school, fewer supports and programs for girls, and, of course, a culture rife with harassment and assault, is that women and girls learn how to rise above and keep on keeping on. We got good at excelling in difficult and unfavorable environments. And in a difficult economy, those skills give us traction.

It is not so different for Jews. I have been asked more than once how it is that Jewish communities have become so affluent and successful (obviously not all Jews are affluent and successful, but our communities have certainly gained in stature on the whole). Given our history of persecution, how is it that we have been able to become so successful? As with women, there may be many factors. But one such factor, surely, is our learned ability to rise above tough circumstances, to meet the demands of unfavorable societies, and to become better and stronger in doing so.

What I’m saying is this: the nexus between privilege and disability is complex and shifting. Yes, there is male privilege and women are at a disadvantage. Yes, there is antisemitism and Jews are not the privileged cultural or religious group in North America. And, yet, look at what is possible.

In that room, when women were breaking their boards, I was sitting beside a woman who was blind. As each and every woman approached to break a board, I described what was happening. She was so thrilled each time she heard that loud crack, she literally shook. When it was her turn to break a board, she used her instructor’s voice to guide her, she made a perfect hit, she heard the board smash, and she sobbed. We all sobbed. One of the greatest privileges of my life has been working with these women. Having to be sharper with my words, having to consider how to make my teaching accessible, having to find ways of offering empowerment in difficult circumstances, all of this has made me a better teacher, a better rabbi, and a better ally.

That moment made me reflect back on my first board breaking. I watched a friend go first. She smashed it like it was nothing, calmly looked down, and said “we’re going to be fine.” I think of that moment often. When I feel the weight of privilege and disability, when the unfairness of the world gets to be too much, I think of the strength and power of the women I’ve seen transform into better, stronger, more confident, more kickass versions of themselves, locating power in their bodies in a world that tells us what to do with those bodies, how they should look, and how vulnerable they are. I think of the ways we are smarter and stronger than we ever got credit for. I think of how much we have overcome and continue to accomplish together. And I think: “We’re going to be fine.”

### Subscribe to Humanistic Judaism Magazine

#### One Year Subscription

\$25 U.S.    \$31 Canada    \$43 Overseas

Card # \_\_\_\_\_

Visa   MC                      Exp. \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

*Please mail to:* The Society for Humanistic Judaism  
28611 West Twelve Mile Road, Farmington Hills, MI 48334  
Or subscribe online at [www.shj.org/subscribe](http://www.shj.org/subscribe)  
(all rates in U.S. Dollars)