



# RUDERMAN SYNAGOGUE INCLUSION PROJECT



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## **HELP! MY SYNAGOGUE ISN'T ACCESSIBLE!**

If you're reading this article, then you are probably a motivated, caring Jew who wants to include people with disabilities. Yet, you take a look at your seemingly ancient synagogue, and you say, "I don't even know how a person with a mobility impairment would get in."

The momentary frustration that this causes is good because it can goad you and the rest of the congregation to action, but don't let it lead to despair. First of all, you are not alone. Many congregations in the Greater Boston area report some level of impediment to access by people with disabilities. Second of all, the question of how to get people with disabilities in the door can open up a wellspring of creativity and ingenuity. You may be surprised by how much you can accomplish by creating and implementing a plan for access.

### **So Where Do You Get Started?**

Your first step is to engage a consultant. Not sure where to find one? The Ruderman Synagogue Inclusion Project (RSIP) can help.

For a list of qualified consultants in your area, contact Molly Silver, manager of the Ruderman Synagogue Inclusion Project, at [mollys@cjp.org](mailto:mollys@cjp.org) or at 617-457-8852.

When you begin working with your consultant, make it clear that you need both short-term and long-term plans.

### **Short-Term Planning**

#### **Building and Sanctuary Entrances**

At the first stage, you devise an immediate, pragmatic plan to begin bringing people in the door – literally. Identify which actual door presents the fewest obstacles and work with your consultant to determine the most likely path from street to sanctuary.

For example: Is there a door to the building with one step? Is there a path to the sanctuary with one or no steps?



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For areas where there are just one or two steps, you can purchase reasonably priced portable ramps, of the length recommended by your consultant, to get people in the door. Post signs that direct people to the accessible entryway, and equip that doorway with a doorbell to alert ushers or security.

## **Seating**

Next, look at your sanctuary. Assuming that you can work out a wheelchair-accessible path, is there anywhere to sit? Can you move chairs or remove a pew to make space for mobility equipment? If there is no place for accessible seating in the sanctuary, look throughout the building. If there is space in the library or social hall, approach your rabbi about possibly moving some services there. It's not a complete answer, but it is a start.

## **Restrooms**

Your short-term project will not likely include rebuilding your restroom, but your consultant may recommend ways that the sink and toilet can be used by people with mobility impairments until a full refit can be arranged.

## **Long-Term Planning**

Your long-term plan should be comprehensive yet cost-conscious, and will explore ramps and elevators, lifts to the bimah and fully accessible bathrooms.

You want a good accessible bathroom, for instance, but that doesn't mean every bathroom in the synagogue must be completely rebuilt. You want an accessible sanctuary, but you don't necessarily need to start from scratch. A good consultant will help you find balance and will likely be able to help you engage an architect.

## **Funding**

For any improvements, funding is a key issue. A capital campaign may be a possibility, but it makes sense to review all options. Reach out to your movement, other Jewish organizations and local churches to learn how they funded their accessibility improvements. Is there someone in your congregation who might know about local and state grants? And of course, look to congregants of means who are looking for a way to contribute.

The real momentum for such an effort comes when access becomes a communal passion. The most important way to create a passion for this work is to implement your short-term plan as soon as possible. If your synagogue is currently inaccessible, it's likely that you don't have any regularly attending members with disabilities, but experience shows that the interest is there in almost every community, including the siblings, parents, grandparents, and children of current members. Once a few people are taking advantage



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of the improvements you've made, the passion to make it better for them will grow.

For example, you might hold services in the social hall once a month because your sanctuary is inaccessible. If a person with a disability is a regular and spirited attendee, other members of your congregation will likely begin to miss them during the other services. Similarly, the longtime member who felt that the synagogue was closed to her aging, mobility-impaired husband, could be emboldened by these steps, and raise a spirited voice for the changes needed to foster his inclusion. It may be slow, but it will build. Sometimes a campaign of physical modification begins with a campaign of attitude modification.

## **Focus on What You Can Do**

Even if your physical access remains minimal in the short term, it is important to focus on the ways that you can meet the needs of people with other types of disabilities.

Do you have an audio system, and can you create a synagogue policy that it should be used at all times to help people with hearing impairments? Can you create awareness and tolerance for the fact that not everyone who wants to participate in services is able to stay still or remain seated and quiet? Can you provide liturgical materials for people with visual or intellectual disabilities, and train your ushers in basic hospitality for them? Can you look at transportation opportunities for people who need help getting to your building?

You can show movies or host speakers that raise awareness about the need for inclusion and accessibility. These should be used sparingly, as they take resources away from the goal, but, used appropriately, they can be fundraisers, not just awareness raisers.

Consider asking your youth group to make accessibility the target of their annual social action project or fundraiser. Kids are growing up in a much more inclusive world; once they are aware of the inaccessibility at your synagogue, it is likely they will become vocal advocates for change.

So, your synagogue isn't accessible today. The bad news is, that won't be changing overnight. The good news is, you can start the process of change right now. In the ancient words of Rabbi Hillel, if not now, when?