



RUDERMAN SYNAGOGUE INCLUSION PROJECT



Getting Started on the Roadmap to Inclusion By Matan Koch

The road to full inclusion in our synagogues is a path without a definite end. When the rabbis told us that it was not upon us to finish the important work of perfecting this world, they gave us a tacit acknowledgment that truly important processes of self-improvement are really never done. If you have chosen to read this document, then you and your synagogue have taken it upon yourselves to follow the other half of the rabbinic admonition and not abstain from that which must be done. The good news is that while there is no definite end, there is, perhaps, a definite beginning, and that is what we aim to provide you with here.

A note on usage: this getting started guide will contain illustrative examples but is not intended as a checklist. This initial phase of work is an assessment and planning process and should be an ongoing dialogue with your community, focused on the needs of your community.

I. FORM A TEAM

This is too much work for one individual to accomplish. While an official inclusion committee can be developed later in the process, a small group of core individuals (even two people) to backstop each other and share the work is very important. Because everyone will come away with different information and impressions when they learn about a particular problem, your report will be richer by having a small group of people working on this together, and it is more likely the result will ring true to more members of the congregation.

II. TAKE AN INVENTORY

A. Assess the resources that you have available. There is an overwhelming likelihood that someone in the past has done something to make your community potentially more inclusive for people with disabilities. A great way to start is by making a list of what you already have. Some examples:



RUDERMAN SYNAGOGUE INCLUSION PROJECT



1. Any physical accessibility features, from ramps (inside and out), elevators or power doors to accessible bathrooms
 2. Any materials or devices, from grab bars, microphones/assisted listening devices/hearing loops to large print prayer books
 3. Any congregational strategies in use for people with transportation difficulties, or other practical barriers to get to shul. Maybe the community is already accustomed to carpooling children, or picking up the elderly. This framework can be an inclusion resource.
 4. Any relationships, formal or informal, with sign language or other interpreters
 5. Any educational policies, or worship policies, or just as important, anything else that your synagogue may already have done on a case-by-case basis that has helped to include a member with a disability
- B. Learn about how (or if) these resources are currently used.** Accessibility features are fantastic, but only if they are consistently available, known and utilized. Common questions by way of example might be:
1. Do all accessible doors work and are they unlocked?
 2. Do congregants, greeters and professional lay leaders know where the accessible features are, whether bathrooms, books, or hearing loops? Make sure you ask the people who are performing these roles, not committee chairs or others who can report what should be happening.
 3. Are the available features clearly advertised in most synagogue materials including weekly Sabbath handouts, the website, and any membership materials? Are they plainly apparent and labeled for those who are looking?
 4. Do you insist on microphone usage if a sound system is available? Amplification and assistive listening are useless without the microphone. (Hint: get in the habit of asking for microphone use even if you can hear the speaker. If the microphone isn't in use, it's likely that someone is struggling to hear the speaker.)
 5. Do clergy, professional and lay leaders know the solutions the synagogue has employed in the past for people with different needs so that they can offer them upon request? Are they prepared to honor requests?



RUDERMAN SYNAGOGUE INCLUSION PROJECT



C. Eliminate any barriers that can be quickly removed

- Check the batteries on assisted listening devices
- Dust off the large print siddurim and place in clearly visible area
- If you have a sign language interpreter on some occasions, ask him/her to teach the entire congregation one or two key signs for what is about to be interpreted

D. Tell the congregation what you did and what your early success is, then invite others to join. For example, you could follow these steps:

- a. Announcement on Friday night
- b. Article in newsletter
- c. One picture is worth a 1000 words: Display on bulletin boards—photos of where things are for everyone to see
- d. Ask that information go into High Holiday guides for ushers/greeters etc.
- e. Make sure the office has all of this information in an easily accessible area

III. FORM AN INCLUSION COMMITTEE OR TASK FORCE

You will likely have found at least a few more members of the congregation who are willing to work on establishing a plan of action. Because committee formation works in different ways depending on the congregation, in some congregations getting a formal committee established poses roadblocks. In such situations, don't hesitate to form a "task force" or "working group" instead of an actual committee.

Try to have people other than those who are already professionally committed to disability inclusion on the committee—people outside the world of special education and disability can be enormously helpful in translating key ideas and top priorities to members of the congregation who are not so familiar with these efforts.



RUDERMAN SYNAGOGUE INCLUSION PROJECT



To be successful:

- A. **The committee must be dedicated to action.** Thinking about inclusion is wonderful, but to actually begin to practice inclusion, some number of people at your synagogue, even if it's only two or three, need to commit themselves to the idea that they are going to intentionally focus on a working plan for inclusion. *The function of the group has to be transparent: responsibilities are to do x through a process of y in z time frame.*
- B. **It's crucial to have people with disabilities on the committee.** Many people with disabilities, in addition to understanding their own disabilities, have had the opportunity to develop increased sensitivity and understanding regarding the broader needs of the disability community. *They can also help set priorities and may be aware of experts in your community who can be helpful. That being said, it's often uncomfortable for a person with a disability to speak for the entire group or to try to work within a framework of "this is being done for me."*
- C. **Seek involvement from the clergy and the leadership.** The goal of your committee is to promote real change at the congregation, in areas that may range through worship, education, programming, physical planning and fundraising, just to name a few. Almost all of these changes require buy-in from the clergy and lay leadership of the congregation. Having these representatives on the committee makes certain that their perspectives are available, and gives you a direct point of contact with each group. Obviously, there are benefits if these representatives are the senior Rabbi and the president, but never underestimate the value of a committed but more junior leader.
- D. **Establish that your committee is open to input from everyone.** As a practical matter, a good working committee should try to limit its membership to a workable number. Having more than 12 to 15 committee members is likely to create an unworkable committee. It should be clear, however, that while these 12 to 15 members are doing the work, they are doing it in service to the community and that the community can share thoughts, ideas, requests and needs at any time with any of the members, who can then pass their comments along to the committee.



RUDERMAN SYNAGOGUE INCLUSION PROJECT



IV. LISTEN TO YOUR COMMUNITY

- A. Learn from the real experts.** Nobody knows better than your own members the barriers that they experience to inclusion. Before any committee can embark on a meaningful strategy of inclusion, you need to hear what your community wants. In a rural community, transportation may be infinitely more important than a massive capital campaign for an automatic door opener. On the other hand, an urban synagogue where all of the members travel by public transportation may find that a clear path to the subway or bus stop is a major pain point. Only the people living the experience in your community know what they need.
- B. Seek feedback in different forms.** It is perhaps not surprising that people that feel as though they do not have a place inside your community are not always comfortable standing up at an open meeting to share the obstacles that make them feel excluded. It's important to have these open meetings, but also to seek feedback in other forms. Examples include a prominently printed email address shared in all synagogue publications encouraging people to share concerns, advertising in the synagogue bulletin of the availability of one-on-one meetings with clergy or members of the inclusion committee to privately share concerns which will remain anonymous, and adding a question to any telephonic survey that you might be preparing to conduct of the congregation. **Anyone, whether or not they are someone whom you think of as a person with a disability, may have something at the synagogue that they find to be a barrier to their participation. A true inclusion committee will listen to all concerns, not segregate those it believes to be disability related.**
- C. Report your results.** This might sound like a no-brainer, but one of the biggest dangers in the broad-based gathering of input is that that input is never broadly communicated and in effect gets lost. Keep a running tally of all ideas and concerns and make them available.

V. FORMULATE A PLAN

- A. Using your problem list, divide items into four categories**
- 1. Short-Term Problems.** These are items that can be immediately and easily addressed. The solution is known, the budget is available, small or unnecessary, and all that is really required is a plan and will for implementation.



RUDERMAN SYNAGOGUE INCLUSION PROJECT



2. **Immediate-Focus Problems.** These are items that seem important, and seem solvable, but the solution is not self-evident, or the budget, though manageable, is not immediately available.
3. **Long-Term Problems.** These are the problems that truly vex you. Maybe they require major architectural changes or the hiring of new personnel. Maybe they require the development of completely new programs and expertise. Almost certainly, they require major budgetary commitment.
4. **Off-Topic Problems.** In any broad-based request for feedback, you will receive thoughts and ideas or concerns that seem irrelevant to your goals. The overwhelming temptation is to dismiss these out of hand. To do that would be a mistake. You have been gifted with invaluable insight into concerns of your membership. Maybe the problems will never be addressed by the inclusion committee, but a generational committee, or a continuity committee will be formed one day and this list will be a gold mine. Maybe as your understanding of inclusion deepens, you will find that something you previously thought was off-topic is in fact a facet of the way your congregation now chooses to define inclusion. You never have to act on information deemed irrelevant, but if you discard it you can never change your mind.

B. Devise separate strategies for each category

1. **Short-Term Problems.** The strategic move here is simplest. By their very definition, these problems are solvable, and all you need is to propose and implement short-term solutions. To quote Rabbi Hillel: "If not now, when?"
2. **Immediate-Focus Problems.**
 - a. Now would be a good time to sit down with an expert, either from within your own community, or hired from the outside. If resources are not available, put on your creative thinking caps.
 - b. First look at the entire list. Ask the question, do we have quick fixes for any of these problems. A common example that I like to offer is a doorbell while trying to raise funds for an automatic door, or a portable ramp while trying to raise funds for true bimah access.



RUDERMAN SYNAGOGUE INCLUSION PROJECT



- c. Then pick the two or three most troubling problems for permanent solutions. Work with your expert, and, if they are willing, with the member or members that raised the concern, and come up with a strategy. The strategy should include, at minimum:
 - i. The steps necessary to solve the problem
 - ii. The budget necessary to solve the problem and the fundraising strategy to achieve that budget
 - iii. The different synagogue groups or functions whose participation in the solution is necessary and the strategies of their engagement
 - iv. A timeframe for completion
- d. If a solution is not readily apparent, and you don't have access to an expert, you might come back to this website to see if we've posted a solution, or send us a request for one. Conversely, you might think about sharing solutions that you develop in-house with CJP so that we can share them with the community. An inclusive community is to all of our benefits.
- e. Once you've finished the first set, be ready to move on to the next.

3. Long-Term Problems

- a. Like the immediate focus problems, start by thinking about quick fix temporary solutions.
- b. Unlike the immediate focus problems, these problems probably won't be solved in committee. The committee should instead work to incorporate the solutions and the long-term fundraising and organizational development plans for the synagogue. The key role of the committee is to make sure that no budget meeting, strategic plan, or congregational meeting happens without serious thought being given to the long-term strategies affecting these issues. It probably is necessary for the committee to provide granular solutions, but broad strokes solutions should be fleshed out so that the board and the membership have something on which to focus.



RUDERMAN SYNAGOGUE INCLUSION PROJECT



VI. GENERAL POINTERS

- A. **Never stop listening.** A good inclusion committee is always open to new input, alert for new needs to arise and aware of complications as plans are implemented. This includes a sensitivity to voices opposed to change, to make sure that their viewpoints are as well represented as possible in the changes made.
- B. **Never lose sight of the root cause of a problem.** Try to identify to what degree the root of an identified concern is structural, programmatic and/or attitudinal. Working to change attitudes on inclusion is every bit as important as changing the building.
- C. **Solutions should be universal.** Individual concerns are to be tailored to the barrier that each person experiences, such as physical access to a particular event for a particular type of disability, but solutions should be tailored around the broadest access to the greatest number of events, once the initial concern has pointed to the fact that this is an area of opportunity for the congregation. If physical access to synagogue events has been identified as a problem, then that is the problem that the committee should work on, subsuming within the work access to the particular event.
- D. **Some is always better than none.** Just because the perfect solution is currently beyond your grasp doesn't mean you shouldn't do as much as possible.
- E. **If you don't build it, you won't know if they will come.** While you should always focus on the needs of your individual community, the more universal a solution, the more likely that it will bring in someone who never before thought that they had a place in your congregation. Even the change in culture from implementing the solution will promote inclusion.