



RUDERMAN SYNAGOGUE INCLUSION PROJECT



BLINDNESS AND LOW VISION: INCLUSION RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SYNAGOGUES

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The number of people impacted by blindness or low vision is increasing as our population ages, making it more important than ever for our synagogues to become as inclusive, accessible, and accommodating as possible. In fact, the National Federation of the Blind reported in 2013 that 7.3 million Americans are blind or have low vision, which means that more than one in 50 people are affected. Of those who struggle with blindness or low vision, 40% are 64 years old or older.

Jews are often called the People of the Book, and our prayer and activity truly reflect this. Whether your community relies on the prayers and Psalms of the traditional service, or is centered around an interpretive liturgy that you print anew every week, the idea of following along on a written page is central to our prayer. Almost every Jewish event features study and readings from holy texts, handouts, poems, and pages from the Talmud. Without finding ways for everyone to participate, more and more Jews will be left behind.

Low Vision vs. Blind

The term “low vision” is used to describe a loss of visual acuity that does not result in total blindness. It applies to individuals with sight who are unable to read a newspaper at a normal distance of viewing, even with the aid of glasses or contact lenses.

The term “legally blind” refers to people that have less than 20/200 vision in their better eye, or a limited field of vision that is 20 degrees or less at its widest point. People who are legally blind may have some useful vision.

Some of the strategies that we offer here for people who have low vision will be of absolutely no use to someone who is blind. It is also important to remember that many people with low vision appreciate opportunities to use the vision that they have, rather than using accommodations intended for those who are completely blind.

We hope this handout will serve as a useful starting point for your congregation as you work toward becoming more inclusive and accessible. Any policies that you create should include input from members who are blind or have low vision, and you should check regularly with them to ensure that these policies are useful, and to get additional recommendations.



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Whatever recommendations your synagogue adopts, make them known to everyone, and ensure that they are followed. For example, even if your congregation has large print siddurim that are regularly used, when a committee chair ‘forgets’ to do a large print agenda for a meeting, it impacts the ability of a congregant with low vision to fully participate.

Recommendations for Including People With Low Vision

Lighting

Proper bright lighting will help people with low vision to make the best use they can of the vision that they have. When assessing the lighting in your synagogue, don’t forget to consider hallways and restrooms, as well as sanctuaries and classrooms.

Signage

Unsurprisingly, most of the rules with regard to signage focus on font, contrast, size, and tactile quality. The ADA offers [excellent guidelines on compliant signage](#).

Uneven Flooring or Staircases

A staircase or uneven flooring can be hard to perceive for people with low vision. Consider signage, high contrast coloring, or other creative messages to demonstrate these differences.

Printed Materials

True large print materials use expanded font sizes and spacing, while preserving the layout and readability of your documents. Make sure that any and all supplementary materials are available in large format. However, remember that an entire Chumash in large form is incredibly heavy. For Torah study or services, consider providing the weekly Parasha in a handout, and possibly providing stands for those who want to use the whole book.

Creating large print materials by using a large setting on a photocopier is likely to distort the text and is not recommended. The American Council of the Blind provides useful guidance on [creating large print materials in this document](#).

PowerPoint or other screen projected media can pose particular challenges for people with low vision. Always make large format print copies available, and, if you’re in an environment where your audience



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has access to their own devices, consider making the electronic file available as well. Be sure to follow the format guidelines above when designing PowerPoint documents so that they enlarge properly.

Recommendations For Including People With Blindness

Welcoming Congregants and Providing Transportation

Until self-driving cars become commonplace, blind people cannot drive. If your synagogue is not easily accessible by public transportation, this can be a major obstacle for blind person. Consider putting together a team of people willing to provide transportation for your blind members and make sure that people know that this service is available.

Communication

It's amazing how common sense sometimes deserts us when we are confronted with a new activity or situation. When reading the following recommendations, your first thought will be "of course." These guidelines may be particularly useful for your congregation's greeters, but could apply to anyone who wants to be friendly and helpful to their fellow congregants who are blind.

- Address the blind person directly – don't speak to their friends (or guide dog!) first.
- Tell the blind person who you are – your voice may not be instantly recognizable, especially in noisy situations or if you use a hushed voice before a service.
- If you are in a group, make it clear who you are addressing. It can be very embarrassing to reply to a remark addressed to someone else.
- If there are new people at the synagogue, blind or partially sighted people will need a sighted person to tell them that that person is there and introduce them.
- Let the blind or partially sighted person know when you are moving away, so he or she is not left talking to empty space!

Physical Surroundings

A blind or partially sighted person may want you to describe the room and its setting to them so that they can orientate themselves in the space.

A consistent layout will do a great deal to make sure that your regulars who are blind feel as comfortable in your synagogue as anyone else.



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Try to refrain from moving chairs and leaving things in unexpected places, as this presents a hazard to a blind or partially sighted person.

Sometimes, as we continue toward our goal to make our synagogues welcoming to everyone, we encounter competing needs. Young children running around are a wonderful expression of our vibrant communities, but can present a hazard to blind people or those with low vision. Teach the children to be careful and look out, and give the blind and low vision members a heads up about what's going on.

Guiding

Knowing the best way for a greeter to guide a person who is blind is not always intuitive. You can acquaint them with the simple practices for guiding people with low vision found here, but always remember that the most important thing is to provide help in the way that the individual requests.

- If it appears that a visitor would benefit from a sighted guide, you may identify yourself and offer assistance. If assistance is accepted, you may offer your arm to the guest. The visitor will lightly hold your arm directly above the elbow.
- You should not pull or push the visitor or hold his or her arm. Instead, relax and walk at a comfortable, normal pace. Nobody likes to be dragged!
- Allow the visitor to walk a step or two behind you, and indicate changes in terrain, such as stairs, narrow spaces, and escalators, by hesitating briefly as you approach them and explaining what you are about to do.
- When seating the guest, ask if you may show him or her the back of the chair. If the response is yes, simply place the guest's hand on the chair back.
- When it is time for you to leave, indicate that you are leaving his or her presence.
- Note the recurring theme of offering and asking, so the person receives the assistance they would like.
- You should not touch or remove mobility canes unless requested to do so and should not interfere with guide dogs or other service animals.

Printed Materials

Statistically, only about 5% of blind people are conversant in braille, so it is usually not helpful to purchase a braille *siddurim*. If a particular member asks for braille materials, then you could work on obtaining them.



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A much better option is to make sure that all of your printed materials, from newsletters to handouts, to bulletins and study guides, are optimized for screen reading technology. Use this Guide to Making Documents Accessible to People Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired by Jennifer Sutton for further detail, particularly pages 13 and 14.

Website Accessibility

Ensuring that your website is accessible for people with low vision or who use web readers requires consistent review, as website design and technology is constantly evolving. A good place to start is by checking out [the Americans with Disabilities Act \(ADA\) website guide](#).

Community Engagement

You can make your community welcoming to people who are blind or have low vision by inviting them to participate in all aspects of the community, whether in worship, board and committee service, or events. They will make a home in your synagogue, and you will have incredible new talent.