



RUDERMAN SYNAGOGUE INCLUSION PROJECT



FOSTERING THE INCLUSION OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES: A GUIDE TO HIGH HOLIDAY ACTIVITIES

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The overarching goal of CJP and the Ruderman Synagogue Inclusion Project is to support congregations in their efforts to build inclusive congregations. The Days of Awe provide us with unique opportunities to examine our inclusion efforts and understand what progress we've made in viewing inclusion as fundamental to Jewish life. We've created these brief recommendations that can be implemented by a small number of people in a short period of time. We hope that you find this guide useful and encourage you to share it broadly among the members of your community.

Include People with Disabilities and Their Families in Congregational Honors

Too often the efforts of people with disabilities and their family's efforts are overlooked. Recognizing the contributions of all congregational members—including those with disabilities—can help raise awareness about how much they add to the congregation. Does someone with a disability volunteer in child care or religious school? Is there someone who frequently serves as a greeter or consistently shows up wherever volunteers are needed? You can help by suggesting congregants for an honor or an *Aliyah*. In addition, make sure that anyone receiving an honor or an *Aliyah* has the opportunity to review and practice the ritual so that they can feel more comfortable during the service.

Offer Programming About Inclusion

Increased attendance during the High Holidays makes it a perfect time to integrate an inclusion message into your congregation's services. Some rabbis may feature inclusion topics in a sermon, but that's not the only way to get the message out.

Lay leaders can:

- Highlight inclusion during Shabbat Nitzavim. The Shabbat immediately before Rosh Hashanah reminds us that everyone was present to enter into the covenant, making this a natural time to bring the importance of inclusion to the forefront. Whether it's through a study session, or a Dvar Torah given by someone with a disability, or even a simple message in the weekly bulletin, you can reach more members of your community during this time of year.
- Ask the president of your congregation to address inclusion in his or her annual message.
- Some congregations rely on lay leaders to conduct a study session on the afternoon of Yom Kippur. This is a reflective time and an opportunity to share personal stories about the meaning of inclusion.



RUDERMAN SYNAGOGUE INCLUSION PROJECT



Train Ushers and Greeters About Inclusion Etiquette

Ushers and greeters can be a newcomer's first contact with your congregation, and the warmth of this initial welcome can make a real difference to everyone, whether they have a disability or not. Providing a brief training about disability can help these ambassadors to feel comfortable and confident in their roles.

- Before each service, make sure that large print materials are readily available. Similarly, if your congregation has assistive hearing devices, make sure that all ushers know how they work and have them prominently displayed.
- Greeting is the first and most important step to helping all congregants feel welcomed. Too often, interactions with those who appear to have a disability are overly formal and stilted because the greeter fears that they may make a mistake in communication. Genuine warmth and friendliness is more important than following a particular protocol. As Ginny Thornberg writes in *That All May Worship*, "What do you say when you meet a person with a disability? How about: 'Hello.'"
- Always speak directly to the person with a disability, even if they are accompanied by an assistant or a sign language interpreter. Do not speak as if the person with a disability is not present. If this person is an adult, speak to them as you would anyone else and avoid any greetings that you might use with a child.
- Ushers should be prompt to offer assistance but not assume that help is needed. Ask if you can be of assistance and then let the person describe what would be helpful. If someone who is blind asks for you to guide her to a seat, do not take her hand and pull her toward a seat. Instead, extend your arm, telling her that you are doing so, and let the person take hold of your arm and follow.
- Other Resources: Several of the High Holiday inclusion guides listed in the resource section at the end of this document provide additional suggestions for usher training.



RUDERMAN SYNAGOGUE INCLUSION PROJECT



Improve Accessibility

There is a widespread perception that improving access for people with disabilities involves costly building renovations. Yet there are countless small but significant improvements that can be made, and this is an especially good time of year to make these changes.

- Purchase large print *machzorim* and *siddurim* and keep them in same location as those with regular print.
- Improving your interior and exterior signage helps everyone! Where are the restrooms? Is the accessible restroom in a separate location? Signs can clear things up without forcing people to ask.
- Clearly mark your accessible entrance on the exterior and interior of the building, and note if it is separate from the main entrance
- Check all of the accessible parking signs to be sure that they are they are still useable especially if some are stored away and brought out as extras for the holidays. If new signs need to be purchased, consider choosing those with the new 'dynamic' accessibility symbol. The intent of this updated symbol is to signal that a person with mobility difficulties is active rather than a passive recipient of help. Using the symbol is a signal that your congregation is committed to inclusion rather than simply following imposed regulations. The new versions of signs are [available online](#) and can increasingly be purchased "off the shelf."

Ensure that there is a *mezuzah* and baskets for kippot at the wheelchair appropriate height – between three or four feet above the floor. Inviting the congregation to join in the *mezuzah* hanging ritual can send a powerful message that inclusion is not a project of a single person or committee, but the work of the entire congregation.

When your congregation reviews their security and emergency procedures before the High Holidays, ensure that people with disabilities are included in any evacuation plan.

Share Information About Accommodations That Are Currently Available

Too often congregations don't prominently share their information about their accessibility features. Make it easy to find this information on the **homepage of your website, on your social media pages, on High Holiday packets, and in weekly bulletins**. This helps people who need an accommodation and communicates your commitment to inclusion.



RUDERMAN SYNAGOGUE INCLUSION PROJECT



If your offerings are extensive, don't attempt to put all details on your home page. A simple welcome statement can be followed by a link to more information about accessibility features.

If your accessibility improvements are minimal, openly discuss the limitations and include a message that the congregation recognizes the limitation and is committed to making improvements.

In High Holiday information, you should also mention any special offerings such as a service that includes an ASL interpreter or the option to bring the bimah down to floor level. Provide contact information and if necessary, a notification deadline if wheelchair seating or large print materials need to be reserved.

Have you run into problems with accessible seating located in areas where particular families are used to sitting 'for generations'? If yes, the RespectAbility High Holiday Guide offers a strategy for dealing with this.

The accessibility information should include:

- A brief statement of welcome.
- Information on your active inclusion committee, if you have one.
- Information about public transportation or ride sharing (as appropriate for your congregation's observance).
- Information on accessible exterior and interior entrances including the main door, the social hall, sanctuary, and classrooms. If some activities are on different floors, note whether there is an elevator or lift.
- Information on bathroom accessibility, including whether there is a single unit large enough for a wheelchair user and an assistant.
- Information on bimah accessibility or accommodation. If your bimah is not accessible but you can bring a reading table onto the floor level for particular services, provide this detail.
- Large-print *siddurim*, *machzorim* and *chumashim* and other materials.
- Assisted-hearing devices.
- Sign language interpretation
- Printed copies of sermon available before the service.



RUDERMAN SYNAGOGUE INCLUSION PROJECT



- Toys or books for children attending services.
- Any efforts to address chemical sensitivities.
- Childcare offered during services as well as who to contact to describe the child's needs.
- Dietary considerations during shared meals, as well as for Kiddush.
- Make sure to include contact information of someone who can answer additional questions or clarify details.

Too often, inclusion is viewed as an all or nothing effort. Yet the journey for most congregations is incremental. If your inclusion efforts are not yet what you had hoped they would be, the most important thing is for your congregation to do more than it did last year. Your single most important effort is to be sure that people of all abilities are warmly and genuinely made to feel welcomed.

Additional Resources

[“That All May Worship: An Interfaith Welcome to People with Disabilities”](#) by The American Association of People with Disabilities.

[Online usher training](#) created by Temple Emanu-El-Beth Shalom in Montreal.

[Building evacuation considerations for people with disabilities](#) created by the National Fire Protection Association.

[Strategies for providing accessible seating](#) in areas of the temple where particular families have been used to sitting. Created by RespectAbility.