



**From Longing to Belonging—
Be More Than a House of Prayer for All Peoples**
By Shelly Christensen, MA, FAAIDD

Author's Note: As we approach the new year, think about a new approach to what we traditionally call "inclusion." After you read this excerpt from my new book, *From Longing to Belonging—A Practical Guide to Including People with Disabilities in Your Faith Community*, I hope that you will begin to think about "inclusion" in the context of "belonging." Supporting people with disabilities and mental health conditions and those who love them is much deeper and more rewarding to all than just providing a seat in shul, or a large print *mahzor*. At the end of this chapter, you'll find several questions that will help you consider how your synagogue can encourage all people to feel that great sense of belonging. *Shana tova u'metuka!*

“I will bring them to My holy mount, and I will cause them to rejoice in My house of prayer, their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be acceptable upon My altar, for My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”

– Isaiah 56:7

After I outlined *From Longing to Belonging—A Practical Guide to Including People with Disabilities in Your Faith Community*, I searched for biblical texts to illustrate why inclusion and belonging are so important in the faith community context. As I was preparing for a keynote presentation in Chicago, I kept coming back to Isaiah 56:7, “For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”

Many congregations and faith-based organizations have adopted this part of Isaiah 56:7 to frame the concept of including people with disabilities and mental health conditions. I wondered if there was more to this particular verse that would provide context for my presentation on the *Spirit of Belonging* and the *Structure of Inclusion*.

I turned to Google and searched the phrase “House of prayer for all peoples.” I read the first part of Isaiah 56:7 with joy!

“I will bring them to My holy mount, and I will cause them to rejoice in My house of prayer, their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be acceptable upon My altar.”

This became the inspiration for my presentation, and eventually, this book. I thought, here is the way to understand what it means to be human. In God’s eyes, each soul contributes to this world. God doesn’t just bring us to God’s holy mount. God accepts the gifts we contribute, and we all rejoice in the holy connections we make with each other. In God’s eyes, everyone belongs. That is how our communities become houses of prayer for all people. This is God’s concept of inclusion. I knew it could become ours.

We can become so focused on the phrase “for all people” that we lose sight of God’s intent for a house of prayer.

Isaiah tells us that God will bring the people to God’s holy mount, and cause them to rejoice in God’s house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be acceptable upon God’s altar. God’s house of prayer is a place where each person can rejoice, contribute, and participate. The emphasis is on individuals—not on organizations. We are called to think differently about community membership, participation, and *belonging* to actualize God’s definition of inclusion.

Many synagogues and Jewish community organizations are aware that people with disabilities are not part of the community or have limited access to participation. Many are not sure where to begin to change that.

When we emphasize *for all people*, faith-based organizations often jump to how to include the broadest number of people, without regard for individual preferences about how they want to be included. Sometimes we think this means renovating physical spaces at great financial cost, making broad changes to essential programming or worship, or starting a special program. We believe that doing these things makes our organizations “inclusive.”

The definition of inclusion is difficult to wrap our heads around. In the past, being inclusive meant creating special services, classes, or inviting groups of individuals with disabilities to occasionally visit a congregation. Even now, some congregations consider themselves inclusive because people with disabilities attend a special disability inclusion service. Some synagogues offer segregated classes for children with disabilities. When held during regular religious school hours, these classes are considered inclusive because students can go to music and worship with their non-disabled peers.

When our congregations limit participation, how do people with disabilities and mental health conditions feel about having restricted access to participate?

What does it mean to belong?

Becoming a more inclusive congregation starts with your own understanding of what it means to belong. From that vantage point, you gain a clear perspective of what many people with disabilities and mental health conditions seek to have in their lives. You learn that having a disability is *never* a reason to exclude someone from Jewish community life.

What does belonging to my Jewish community mean to me?

Belonging is based on relationships within the community that encourage and empower people with disabilities and mental health conditions to participate like anyone else. Belonging occurs when community members build relationships *with* people with disabilities, listening to what is important to them and how they want to be involved.

Take a moment and think: What does belonging to my Jewish community and/or synagogue mean to me? Find paper and pen or use your electronic device to capture your answer.

What are three things you value by belonging to the Jewish community? These things should be so essential and important to you that you cannot imagine their absence. Be specific. For me, it's being a *Bar* and *Bat Mitzvah* tutor for my congregation, chanting from the Torah, and celebrating holidays with family and friends.

What three things did you write down?

Imagine your life without them. Would you miss them? How would you feel?

Next, imagine if the things that you value were never even part of your life. Now think about someone in your congregation telling you there's one activity you can attend, a special service, or class. How does it feel to have someone else make decisions about how you participate?

Our communities are not whole until all of us belong.

Every one of us has something valuable to share within our Jewish community and with each other. We have strengths, talents, and skills to share, in addition to needs that can be met by a caring community.

People with disabilities can participate in any, and all, programs you offer. People can thrive and flourish in sacred environments where the community comes together for a common purpose.

Judith Snow, a writer, activist, and actor, lived with quadriplegia. I heard her speak at the Summer Institute on Theology and Disability shortly before she died. Judith spoke about belonging.

She said, "Faith communities need to remember that my real relationship with the world is as a created being in a personal relationship with God. I have much more I can contribute and many ways to experience a fulfilling and quality life in the community. Everything we are can be useful to someone else.

I wrote in my notes: Faith communities must learn and believe that *anyone* who wants to belong already has a personal relationship with God, and wants to explore it, share it, give it, and participate, not as a person with a disability, but as a *person who has a relationship with God*.

Ask yourself:

- What do I have to do to overcome labeling a person as "disabled?"
- Is it imperative to label someone first in order to accept and understand them?
- Or can faith communities simply acknowledge that in God's house we *celebrate* everyone's differences and relationships with God without labeling people?

Finally, my close friend and disability rights advocate, Rabbi Lynne Landsberg z'l' said, "We don't welcome people with disabilities because they have disabilities. We welcome them because they are people."

And this, my fellow travelers, is what makes a house of prayer for all people.

Food for Thought:

- In what ways could the full text of Isaiah 56:7 change how your community thinks about belonging and inclusion?
- How does identifying three things that are important to you in your Jewish life change how you think about belonging and inclusion?
- What are three ways you can begin to practice the Spirit of Belonging?

Shelly Christensen is an author, international speaker and consultant in the faith community disability inclusion movement. Shelly's newest book is [*From Longing to Belonging-A Practical Guide to Including People with Disabilities and Mental Health Conditions in Your Faith Community.*](#) Drawing on extensive personal and professional experiences, Shelly offers a new approach to inclusion that builds upon our past endeavors and brings together the two pillars of inclusive communities--the *Spirit of Belonging* and the *Structure of Inclusion*.

Shelly directed the award-winning Jewish Community Inclusion Program for People with Disabilities in Minneapolis for thirteen years. She is co-founder and organizer of Jewish Disability Awareness, Acceptance and Inclusion Month (JDAIM) and contributes to numerous Jewish and interfaith inclusion initiatives in educational and leadership roles.

Shelly believes that people with disabilities and mental health conditions, and those who love them, want what anyone else wants—to belong, to participate, and to contribute to the Jewish community.