



RUDERMAN SYNAGOGUE INCLUSION PROJECT



THE POWER OF INCLUSION

From an RSIP Rabbi

Keynote Address at the October 2016 Lion of Judah Luncheon, CJP

Thank you for inviting me this morning to share with you why creating an inclusive culture in our synagogues is so important. I joined Ohabei Shalom six years ago — and I remember the day I was shown our beautiful and historic Sanctuary. It is in fact the oldest synagogue in Massachusetts. I was duly impressed by the majesty of the space. But two things were a source of deep disappointment. I wouldn't share this story with just *any* group but since we are *not* in mixed company I am comfortable telling you that the first source of disappointment was the bathroom off the bima. The water closet was "perfect" for a man but far from inclusive for women rabbis! And the bima, which was high above the seating area, could only be accessed by climbing steep steps, which meant that people using walkers or wheelchairs were automatically excluded. The bathroom situation was quickly fixed but it took four years before we were able to put a ramp in the Sanctuary.

During those years we adjusted in all sorts of cumbersome and less cumbersome ways so that we could include people with physical disabilities in the service. However, when we finally had the opportunity to do renovations to our building, we lowered the bima and installed a ramp. I can't tell you how meaningful it has been to be able to call up a grandparent using a walker for an aliyah or to honor a young man in a wheelchair by inviting him to sit on the bima — as we did for the High Holydays just a week ago.

This past Rosh Hashanah my sermon was on inclusion; I wanted to share with our largest audience my excitement in doing this work as a partner with Ruderman and CJP in the Synagogue Inclusion Project. "Yes," I said, "We have a wheelchair-accessible bima, and accessible bathrooms, and large print prayer books, and special hearing devices, but whether we succeed in making everyone in our community feel at home depends on interactions and relationships — on how we integrate those with physical, emotional, or intellectual disabilities into the very fabric of our community."

I was reminded of the d'var by a young man with Down syndrome who celebrated his bar mitzvah at Ohabei Shalom *exactly* a year ago. It was the Shabbat of Col ha Moed Sukkot, and Henry spoke about the power of seeing. The parsha — Ki Tissa, which we'll be reading this Shabbat, is about Moses smashing the tablets when he *sees* the Israelites worshipping the golden calf. It's also about Moses desperately wanting to *see* God's face. In his d'var Henry said: "Although the power of seeing is strong, there are forces we *can't* see that are equally real and powerful." He went on to explain: "It makes me think of love — which is something we can't see but we know exists; we feel its power." And then he shared this example: "I can think of different experiences that have made me realize that something invisible to our eyes — like love — can be real and strong. For example, this past winter I went on the synagogue retreat to Portsmouth, N.H. My classmates and teachers — all of us — did so many fun things together. We did activities that I had never done before, and I felt that I was part of a community that is close and loving towards me."

Henry worked with me on his d'var — as do all the students at our shul. And on the day of his bar mitzvah he chanted Torah and read his d'var in front of a community who had known him since he started in our Religious School in second grade. And, as you might imagine, we all shared in the excitement of that day.

And thanks to the support we are receiving through CJP as part of the Ruderman initiative, we are taking our work to the "next level." The first thing we've done is to create a survey so that we can hear firsthand from the community about what we are doing well and where we are falling short. This survey was developed by a newly formed Inclusion Committee, who relied on CJP and Ruderman to bring best practices to this important initiative. And with the help of the CJP Ruderman Inclusion Project we've also put up professionally made signs everywhere in our building — indicating wheelchair-accessible spaces and routes — a simple change that makes for a much more welcoming environment for anyone with restricted mobility. And a simple change that *I've* made during services is asking people to rise in "body and or spirit" — which also sends a strong message of inclusion. Also, prior to the High Holydays we brought a consultant to provide training to our Board, our staff, and our ushers on inclusion so that those of us who are on the "front lines," so to speak, can better understand what we need to do to make everyone feel at home in our synagogue.

I am grateful for the visionary role that CJP and the Ruderman Foundation play in our community. When Federations, Foundations, and donors like all of you partner together our impact is truly limitless.

My own vision for this work is best expressed by a phrase I saw in front of a house of worship this past summer. It read: "Come as you are and leave changed." My hope is that our community can be a place that embraces its congregants as they are *and* that provides everyone with opportunities to grow and learn so that we *do* change and become our very best selves. Thank you and *moadim l'simcha*.

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