

Open Wide the Gates, the Gates of the Temple So That All May Worship: Information for the High Holidays from USCJ

Human beings mint many coins from the same mold, and they are all identical. But the Holy One, blessed be God, strikes us all from the mold of the first human and each one of us is unique. (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5)

Oh God, may all created in Your image recognize that they are kin, so that in one spirit and in one friendship, they may be forever united before You. (Traditional Liturgy)

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
Acknowledgments	2
USCJ’s Commission on Inclusion of People with Disabilities	3
Advisory Council Members	4
A Message about Inclusion from USCJ.....	4
Getting Started	5
Form a Committee on Inclusion.....	5
How Welcoming is Your Congregation: Identifying Barriers	5
Providing Effective Communication	5
A Word About Large Print	6
Ways to Include People with Disabilities During the High Holidays.....	6
10 Steps to Making a Difference Now: Usher Training.....	6
Low Cost Solutions for Removing Barriers at Your Synagogue.....	7
Jewish Sources & Texts to Use in Sermons and Study Sessions	8
Resources Available.....	11
Readings on Inclusion.....	11
Tools and Resources.....	11

Introduction

As Yom Kippur draws to a close with the *Ne'ilah* service, we plead with God in the haunting *P'tah Lanu Sha'ar B'Eit Ne'ilat Sha'ar* prayer:

**Open for us the gates, even as they are closing.
The day is waning, the sun is low.
The hour is late, a year has slipped away.
Let us enter the gates at last.
Lord, have compassion Pardon, forgive, take pity.
Grant us atonement. Help us to conquer our iniquity and sin.**

Excerpted from a *piyyut* recited at *Ne'ilah* on *Yom Kippur Mahzor* for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Rabbi Jules Harlow

This prayer refers to the image of the gates of heaven closing at the end of the Day of Atonement. However, for a person with a disability, the gates to his/her synagogue may prevent him/her from being able to participate fully in all aspects of congregational life. Consequently, this must be a year-round prayer and challenge.

As we reflect upon our personal lives during this High Holiday season, let us also examine our congregation and do *teshuvah*, if we have failed to make it fully accessible and inclusive for everyone, including people with disabilities.

United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism's Commission on Inclusion of People with Disabilities is pleased to provide you with this High Holiday information packet. We designed it to provide you with information and resources focused on enhancing inclusion and meaningful participation of your congregants with disabilities. The Commission recognizes the challenges you face but also acknowledges your desire to remove barriers.

May the New Year be one of peace among all people...and may we continue to open wide the gates to Jewish Life so that all may worship.

Acknowledgments

The materials included in this Packet were developed in response to frequently asked questions received by USCJ's Commission on Inclusion of People with Disabilities some of which are posted to the Inclusion Page on USCJ's website. This is a work in progress and you are strongly encouraged to help populate this page with additional information.

Many thanks to our lay and professional leaders who share a commitment to inclusion of Jews with disabilities.

Special appreciation goes to a few women who went above and beyond to share their expertise and graciously devote their time to create this packet. They are Sara Rubinow Simon, Linda Zimmerman, Sandy Miller-Jacobs, Lenore Layman, Susie Drazen, Sally Abbey, and Shelly Christensen. Additional gratitude is extended to Shelly and Lenore for granting permission to draw from their excellent publications included in the Resource Section starting on page 14. They are:

- Jewish Community guide to Inclusion of People with Disabilities by Shelly Christensen, The Minneapolis Jewish Community Inclusion Program for People with Disabilities; and
- Jewish Disabilities Awareness Month Resource Packet by Lenore Layman,

In order for our Synagogues to truly be a House of God—a house for all people during the upcoming High Holidays, we are well-advised to hear the words of Rabbi Tarfon (*Pirke Avot* 2:20 and 2:21):

You are not required to complete the task, yet you are not free to desist from it.

We hope you find these materials helpful. If you have any questions about how to incorporate this information into your holiday preparations, you should contact USCJ's Inclusion Specialist Jennifer Gendel at gendel@uscj.org.

And, finally, when you have a moment, please let us know if these materials were useful and if so, how? If not, what can the Commission do to help you open your gates even wider? Please send your comments and suggestions to inclusion@uscj.org with the subject line: High Holidays Information Packet. May the coming year be one of inclusion and meaningful participation for all who seek to enter the gates of our Synagogues.

Shelley Kaplan

Co-Chair, USCJ Commission on Inclusion of People with Disabilities

Sara Rubinow Simon

Co-Chair, USCJ Commission on Inclusion of People with Disabilities

USCJ's Commission on Inclusion of People with Disabilities

Our Jewish values teach us that each of us is created in God's image and each of us is to be valued. The mission of USCJ's Commission on Inclusion of People with Disabilities is to sensitize and educate professional and lay leadership to the profoundly important responsibility of synagogues and their programs to be accessible to those who would otherwise be denied the opportunity to participate in all aspects of synagogue life, and to assist congregations in meeting the needs of members with disabilities for creating an inclusive and welcoming environment.

Help us to assist others by sharing your stories. Please tell us how you've helped remove barriers for people with disabilities in your Synagogues and Religious programs. This information will be posted for others to try in their communities.

Advisory Council Members (2010)

Shelley Kaplan (Co-Chair)
Rabbi Moshe Edelman
Lenore Layman
Wendy Light
Helen Miller
Joanne Palmer
Dr. Sara Rubinow Simon (Co-Chair)
Linda F. Zimmerman

Dr. David Ackerman
Rabbi Evan Jaffe
Rabbi Robert Layman
Naomi Yadin Mendick
Dr. Sandy Miller-Jacobs
Kay Pomerantz
Rabbi Scott Sokol

**A Message about Inclusion from United Synagogue
of Conservative Judaism**

September 2010

It is the goal of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism's Commission on Inclusion of People with Disabilities to remind and teach us that all human beings are created in God's image and each of us is to be valued.

Our holy and sacred mission is simple—to sensitize professional and lay leadership to the profoundly important responsibility of synagogues to be accessible—architecturally, programmatically and attitudinally—to those who would otherwise be denied the opportunity to participate in all aspects of synagogue life, and to assist Congregations in meeting the needs of members with disabilities.

Together, we will determine what has failed, what works and what needs improvement. We will learn from your own practices, successes and failures and determine how to better serve Jews with disabilities.

As you prepare for the High Holidays, and beyond, remember that we all hope to live long enough to reach the age where certain abilities are diminished. Let us create a world that will embrace and include us as we, God willing, reach that stage of life. —*Kol Yisrael Areivim Zeh BaZeh*—all Israel is responsible for one another.

Rabbi Jerome Epstein
USCJ Executive Vice-President

Dr. Ray Goldstein
USCJ International President

Getting Started

Form a Committee on Inclusion

To get started, bring together a group of individuals who are interested in helping your synagogue become more welcoming to people with disabilities and their families. Learn why everyone in a synagogue benefits from an Inclusion Committee.

How Welcoming is Your Congregation: Identifying Barriers

Identifying barriers to inclusion is the next step. The Jewish Community Guide to Inclusion of People with Disabilities (JCG) by Shelly Christensen and the National Organization on Disability (NOD) offer several tools available to help you find out.

The Checklist for Your Journey published in Jewish Community Guide to Inclusion of People with Disabilities is a comprehensive survey tool designed for Jewish organizations.

Use **Audit of Barriers** to identify the specific attitudinal, communications and architectural barriers that are keeping people with disabilities from fully participating in congregational life. This information will soon be moved from this location to the website for the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD).

Use **Journey of a Congregation** to determine your congregation's overall level of commitment toward the goal of full participation and inclusion of children and adults with disabilities.

Providing Effective Communication

Communication is the interchange of thoughts, ideas, feelings, and facts. There is a barrier to communication when the content of a message is not understood. Various devices and sensitive actions can help compensate for visual, auditory or mental disabilities so that every person can absorb the message of God's love.

Here are some ways to provide effective communication for your congregants who may have hearing and/or visual impairments:

1. Provide large-print *siddurim* and *humashim*.
2. Provide all print information in other formats such as large print, Braille and/or audio tape. Use 18-point, bold, sans serif font.
3. Assistive listening devices (ALDs) are available for people who are hard of hearing. Provide neck loops that are compatible with hearing aids.
4. Sermons are available in large print and on tape.
5. Entire services are available on tape. Listen to Rabbi Mark Zimmerman sing parts of the liturgy from the Conservative Movement's Siddur Sim Shalom.
6. Make sure your existing sound system is in good working order.
7. Provide a sign language interpreter upon request, if needed and available.
8. Provide adequate lighting.
9. Provide a comfortable way for people with disabilities within the congregation to offer suggestions for removing barriers without being made to feel like they are complaining.

A Word about Large Print

The symbol for large print is **'Large Print'** printed in **18 Point** or larger text. In addition to indicating that large print versions of books, pamphlets, guides and programs are available, you may use the symbol in your High Holiday materials to indicate that print materials may be provided in large print. Sans serif or modified serif print with good contrast is highly recommended, and pay special attention to letter and word spacing.

Ways to Include People with Disabilities during the High Holidays

People with disabilities can greatly enrich the entire community through their presence. They may not believe that general invitations are really for them. Personal contact following announcements and mailings will confirm your sincerity. The following are possible ways in which to include your congregants with disabilities during the High Holidays and throughout the year:

1. Membership in sisterhood and men's club
2. Committee involvement
3. Social action
4. Usher / greeter
5. *Aliyot*
6. *Petihah*
7. Volunteer activities
8. Fundraising
9. Religious school aide
10. *Kiddush* and *Oneg* set up
11. *Minyan* member
12. *Bar* and *Bat Mitzvah*
13. Educational supports

Source: Jewish Disabilities Awareness Month Resource Packet by Lenore Layman, Partnership for Jewish Life and Learning.

10 Steps to Making a Difference Now: Usher Training

Ushers enhance High Holy Day services by greeting worshippers, taking tickets, and providing hearing aids and large *siddurim* and *humashim* to those who need them. They are usually the first people to greet incoming congregants and can set the tone for a positive experience. Strengthen their presence by providing training for your ushers and greeters prior to the High Holidays. Make sure they are aware of all accessibility features and accommodations provided by your synagogue.

The following may be used as a handout during this training:

1. I will treat ALL people as PEOPLE FIRST—as I would like to be treated.
2. I will SPEAK DIRECTLY to the person with a disability, not only to the nearby family member, companion, interpreter, or the canine companion.

3. I will offer to SHAKE HANDS when introduced to a person with a disability (Persons with limited hand use or who wear an artificial limb may shake hands. Shaking the left hand is OK, too.)
4. I will place myself at EYE LEVEL, in front of the person for easy conversation with a person in a wheelchair or with a walker.
5. I will OFFER ASSISTANCE AND WAIT until the offer is accepted. I will wait and then ask for instructions.
6. I will be PATIENT AND WAIT for the person who has difficulty speaking, rather than speaking for the person. If I don't understand, I will tell the person to PLEASE REPEAT BECAUSE I REALLY WANT TO BE OF ASSISTANCE. I may help by asking short questions that require short answers, a nod, or a shake of the head.
7. I will see the WHOLENESS OF SPIRIT beneath the surface of someone with a disability and overcome the tendency to turn away or ignore the person.
8. I will treat adults with developmental disabilities as adults, not as children. I will use first names only when using the same familiarity for all people.

Use words that show Kavod

Words reflect and mold attitudes and should be chosen with care. Understanding the importance of appropriate language is the first step toward recognizing that people with disabilities are, first and foremost, people who should NOT be defined by their disability. We respect a person's humanity not only through how we treat each other, but through the language we use. When we treat people with *kavod* (honor and respect), we use language that shows respect.

Sarah is a person with a disability (not Sarah is disabled or handicapped.)

Yosef has epilepsy (not Yosef is epileptic.)

David uses a wheelchair (not David is wheelchair bound.)

Source: Excerpts from the Jewish Community Guide to Inclusion of People with Disabilities.

Low Cost Solutions for Removing Barriers at Your Synagogue

Removing barriers to inclusion and meaningful participation does not always have to be expensive. There are many things you can do right now that are relatively easy and inexpensive to begin to make your building more inclusive such as:

1. Set aside an area and provide an application form for persons with disabilities to specify the type of accommodation needed.
2. Post *Mezuzot* at wheelchair height in appropriate locations
3. Assign volunteers, such as members of your youth group, to assist with congregants who have developmental or and learning disabilities in synagogue prayer.

4. Provide a quiet room with an intercom so that anyone who experiences anxiety, for whatever reason, can go and still hear the service.
5. Make available large print *Siddurim* and *Birkat Hamazon* books available. (can also use photocopy machine to make large print copies if finances are tight)
6. Connect the music on hold feature of your synagogue telephone systems to the sound systems in the sanctuary. Services can then be transmitted to members that are homebound or in the hospitals. Purchase loaner speaker phones to aid in listening.
7. Provide or arrange transportation using volunteers to assist members with disabilities attend services.
8. Build a portable non-electric reader's table with height adjustments to accommodate wheelchair and non-wheelchair users with a simple adjustment.
9. For people who use wheelchairs or are unable to ascend the *Bimah* and are called for an *Aliyah*, set up a table on main level or sanctuary and take the *Sifrei Torah* from the main lectern to this table.
10. Provide lighted magnifiers.
11. Provide signage to let people know that accommodations are available from the ushers upon request. Train your ushers!
12. Distribute a booklet about your efforts to welcome people with disabilities.
13. Install handrails on the steps to the *Aron HaKodesh*.
14. Establish an inclusion fund to defray the expenses associated with improved access. Money is deposited into this fund either by direct donation or is the result of fundraising activities of the Inclusion Committee.

Jewish Sources & Texts to Use in Sermons and Study Sessions

The following quotations come directly from Jewish sources and provide an excellent foundation for use in sermons or other study sessions when talking about the inclusion of people with disabilities.

God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. (*Genesis 1:31*)

For my house shall be a house of prayer for all people. (*Isaiah 56:5*)

Welcome everyone—with joy. (*Pirkei Avot 1:15*)

Oh God, may all created in your image recognize that they are kin, so that in one spirit and in one friendship, they may be forever united before you. (Traditional Liturgy)

Welcome everyone with joy. (*Pirke Avot 1:15*)

You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind. (*Leviticus 19:14*) [We do not wittingly place a stumbling block before people with disabilities, yet by ignoring their needs, we do inadvertently place a stumbling block before them.]

And Moses said unto the Lord: Oh Lord, I am not a man of words, neither in the past, nor since hast Thou spoken unto Thy servant; for I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue. (*Exodus 4:10*)

When a person insults someone else, it is his own defect that he is revealing. (*Kedushim 70a*)

All of Israel is responsible for one another. (*Shavuot 39a*)

Human beings mint many coins from the same mold, and they are all identical. But the holy one, blessed be God, strikes us all from the mold of the first human and each one of us is unique. (*Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5*)

Every member of the people of Israel is obligated to study Torah—regardless of whether one is rich or poor, physically able or with physical disability. (*Maimonides, Mishne Torah, Hilchot Talmud Torah Ch. 10*)

If there be among you a person with needs, thou shalt not harden thy heart, but thou shalt surely open thy hand. (*Deuteronomy 15:7*)

Do what is good and right in the sight of God. (*Deuteronomy 6:19*)

Hillel said, —Be like the disciples of Aaron, love peace and pursue peace, love all people and bring them close to the Torah. (*Pirke Avot 1:12*)

What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. (*Micah 6:8*)

Anyone who deprives a student of being taught Torah is as if he robs him of his father's legacy. As it says, —Torah *tziva lanu Moshe morasha kehillat Yaakov* – Moshe commanded us the Torah, an inheritance of the Congregation of Yaakov. (*Devarim 33:4*) (*Sanhedrin 91b*)

Rav Yochanan said: during the entire forty days and nights that Moshe Rabbeinu spent on Mt. Sinai, he kept learning the Torah and forgetting it. Finally, it was given to him as a gift. Why did this happen? To provide an answer for the slow learners.

The *Penai Moshe* explains:

—Why, the *Gemara* asks, —was the Torah not given to *Moshe* as a gift at the outset? To provide an answer for the slow learners who forget whatever they learn. 'When they ask, why should we labor for no purpose?' The answer will be from *Moshe* himself, who learned and reviewed even though it was all forgotten, until finally it was given to him as a complete gift. (*Horayot 3:5*):

Ben Azzai taught: Do not disdain any person; do not under-rate the importance of anything – For there is no person who does not have his hour, and there is no thing without its place in the sun. (*Pirkei Avot* 4:3)

A student should not say —I have understood when s/he has not understood. Rather, s/he should ask again, even several times. And, if the teacher gets angry and abuses the student verbally, she or he should say to the teacher, —Teacher, this is Torah and I must learn it, even if my capacity is inadequate. (*Maimonides, Mishne Torah, Hilkhos Talmud Torah, 4:4*)

When the Israelites left Egypt, most of them were disabled in some way. Why? Because they had been working with clay and bricks climbing to the tops of buildings. Those doing the construction work in Egypt would get to the upper levels of the building, and a rock would fall on them and cut off their hands; or a beam, or some clay would get into their eyes and blind them. This is how they became disabled. When they arrived at the Sinai Desert, God said, —Such is the honor of Torah that I will give it to this generation of disabilities. If I were to wait for others, I would hold up the giving of the Torah.

The *Midrash* goes on to describe how angels —cured all of the disabilities so that they could receive the Torah, but I don't think that adds to the point. If anything, it may make it worse. In my view, the point is *kakh hu k'vodah shel torah*--such is the honor of Torah that our community cannot afford to exclude people from hearing its message. (Rabbi Michael Safra, B'nai Israel Congregation, Rockville, Maryland)

In so many ways we are trying to create the sense of community by inviting all people to use the front door of the Congregation as a portal from the impersonal world of business to the personalized community of spirit. (Rabbi Rick Sherwin, Congregation Beth Am, Longwood, Florida)

The decency of a society is measured by how it cares for its least powerful members. (*Etz Hayim*, commentary ed. by Rabbi Harold Kushner)

....and all Thy children shall be taught of God and great will be the peace of Thy children. (*Isaiah* 54:13)

Resources Available

Readings on Inclusion

- **Who Makes People Different** presents traditional sources about disabilities and examines modern views and theological implications. Resource Book, produced by USY
- In ***Mishaneh Ha-Briyyot: A New Jewish Approach to Disabilities***, Rabbi Elliot Dorff presents what he calls a Copernican revolution in how Jews should understand and treat disabilities.
- Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson explores how his son, Jacob, who has autism, taught him not to put his head down and rush but instead to walk with God in **Jacob Who Loves the Sabbath**
- Shelley Kaplan looks at ways in which synagogues have made prayer accessible to people with disabilities in **Opening the Gates of Prayer**
- Rabbi Michael Safra writes about Disability Shabbat in **Beyond Accommodation: The Need for the Truly Inclusive Community**
- Rabbi Avi Weiss points out why we all benefit when we use ramps rather than stairs in **Lessons of the Ramp**

Tools and Resources

Jewish Community Guide to Inclusion of People with Disabilities by Shelly Christensen offers a step-by-step road map for inclusion committees to assess, envision, organize and implement an inclusion plan tailored to meet the unique needs of each Jewish organization

<http://inclusioninnovations.com/>

Jewish Disability Awareness and Inclusion Month Program Guide by Shelly Christensen

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/5fgv0n7t7w1r8m7/FINAL%20JDAIM%20Guide%202019.pdf?dl=0>

V'Khol Banayikh: Jewish Education for All, A Jewish Special Needs Resource Guide, Edited by Sara Rubinow Simon, Linda Forrest, and Ellen Fishman, Torah Aura Publishing Company, this new Guide contains an extensive section on building an inclusive Jewish community with pieces from USCJ and is available from the Torah Aura website at www.torahaura.com.

Life Through the Lens of a Special Educator by Sandy Miller-Jacobs is an informative and insightful blog about inclusion and meaningful participation, <http://lifethroughthelensofaspecialeducator.blogspot.com/>

The **Anti-Defamation League** offers a curriculum with lessons for all grade levels on integrating people with disabilities into mainstream schools. https://www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resources-for-educators-parents-families/lesson-plans?ed_cat_id%5B159%5D=159

The **Americans With Disabilities Act** has implications for synagogues and other religious institutions. <https://www.ada.gov/>

The **Council for Jews with Special Needs** offers a wealth of resources on inclusion. <http://www.cjsn.org/>

JBI International offers people who have visual impairments audio, large print, and Braille books, magazines and cultural programs; many of which are of Jewish interest. <http://www.jbilibrary.org/>

Best Practices for Inclusion of People with Disabilities: A Work in Progress

“A best practice is a technique or method that, through experience and research, has proven to reliably lead to a desired result.”

(Source: http://searchsoftwarequality.techtarget.com/sDefinition/0,,sid92_gci498678,00.html)