



RUDERMAN SYNAGOGUE INCLUSION PROJECT



WHY INCLUSION MATTERS

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There are a few things that I've never heard said by any Rabbi or synagogue board member: We have too many active members. We have too many people enriching our prayer experience by leading or praying with us. We have too many people adding their talent to our boards and committees. We have too many people donating to or raising funds for our synagogue. Rather, talent is sought after.

As a young Jew in my 20s and 30s, I moved around the country for professional development like so many of my cohort. I found that my participation as an active member was sought after, perhaps even gently vied for. Yet, as a person with a disability who has been privileged to have choices, I have only considered synagogues where I felt welcomed upon arrival. Any other synagogue lost out on whatever I have to offer. Today, I ask you to consider the idea that your synagogue may also be losing out.

Proactive Inclusion

Think about the most active members of your community for a moment. How many of them gave you a heads up that they would one day be important participants? For how many of them did the community get a warning to prepare? Probably not too many. I'm guessing that on the first day that they first showed up at a service or program, or called the office to inquire about the schedule, you had no notion that someday that person would become your synagogue president, or a weekly leader of Kabbalat Shabbat, or the head of your social action committee, or even just your favorite person to sit next to on Shabbat morning. Certainly, in a community with as many options as ours, it is unlikely that they would have sat patiently, waiting to participate in your community while you first began working out how to let them in.

Attracting Talent

This, then, is the biggest reason why inclusion matters – especially proactive inclusion that welcomes people with a broad range of disabilities without them having to ask. Simply put, the purely practical reason to be broadly proactively inclusive is so that you can be prepared to benefit from the wonderful talents and charms of the shul shopper with a disability who you haven't yet met. Focus less on the idea that it is the right thing to do, and focus more on the idea that your congregation will miss out on talented people if you are not prepared to include them. Inclusion is something you can't afford not to do.



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Disability Can Happen to You

There's another reason why inclusion matters. Those of us in the disability community understand that if people live long enough, eventually they'll be one of us. If you wait to practice inclusion until one of your most active members suddenly acquires a disability, or has a child with one, you may lose that member while you're still trying to figure it out. If you get ahead of the game, their disability does not become your lost opportunity, but rather a life experience.

The Spillover Affect

The last reason why inclusion matters is what I will call "the spillover effect." When you begin to structure your programs, your services and your activities to be broadly inclusive to people with disabilities, your mindset becomes more flexible. Little by little, each member comes to be fully embraced to whatever degree they want to.

What started out as an inclusive prayer culture so that people with autism or an attention deficit could participate spills over – now anyone with small children can access services, even if childcare isn't available. What began as community collaboration to provide transportation to those who can't drive because of disability becomes a resource for the person who can't afford a car.

With the change in mindset, the synagogue becomes more open for everyone. Such a synagogue becomes known as a place where you will be accepted for who you are. In the never-ending competition for members, your synagogue suddenly has a leg up, not only for people with disabilities, but for anyone who is worried that the cookie-cutter might not be the answer for them. This is what an inclusive community looks like.