

High Holiday Disability Tool Kit for Synagogue Professional Staff, Lay Leadership & Volunteers



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Abilities!

<https://www.respectability.org/resources/faith-inclusion-resources/>

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Shalom!

As you begin your preparations for High Holiday services and events, thank you for your commitment to community members with disabilities! Your actions show people with disabilities just how important they are to the fabric of your spiritual community, and how you have given forethought to making their time in the synagogue walls as accommodating and wonderful as possible.

This High Holidays Disability Tool Kit will help guide you with ideas to both welcome people with disabilities and educate/sensitize the members of your congregations without disabilities on being more inclusive. Still, your own members, especially those with disabilities, can give you other ideas as well.

This packet is a guide to help you better implement many of the services that you already provide. We have included tips and ideas to help with language, signage, seating assignments, ushers, and more. Remember, by being explicit you will make people with disabilities feel more welcome, and you will help raise awareness in your community that your house of worship is open to one and all equally.

This kit has been provided with the help of Shelley Cohen, Director of the [Jewish Inclusion Project](#), [Gateways](#), Rabbi Brian Beal, Samantha Fleischer, Hillary Steen, Meagan Buren, Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi, and Elisabeth Axel from [Art Beyond Sight](#). Special thanks to the cohort from UJAFedNY for synagogue inclusion. There exist at least two other High Holiday guides that are very informative, one by [Shelly Christensen](#) of Inclusion Innovations and the other by [United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism](#). We have listed their contact information later in this packet.

We at RespectAbility wish you a Shana Tova and sincerely hope you will find this packet helpful. We have a lot more free tools and materials online at:

<https://www.respectability.org/resources/faith-inclusion-resources/>

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

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Terminology

Use PERSON-FIRST language when speaking with/about people with disabilities

USE:

- The name of the person!
- “Person with a disability”
- “Person who uses a wheelchair”
- “Person with low vision” or “Person who is blind”
 - It’s okay to say, “It was good to see you” and “see you later”
- Person who has hearing loss but communicates in spoken language – “hard of hearing” or “Person with a hearing impairment”
- Person with profound hearing loss – “Person who is Deaf/deaf”
 - Many people who are Deaf communicate with sign language and consider themselves to be members of a cultural and linguistic minority group. They refer to themselves as Deaf with a capital “D,” and may be offended by the term “hearing impaired.”

DO NOT USE:

- “Disabled person”
- “Confined to a wheelchair” or “wheelchair-bound”
 - A wheelchair enables people to get around and participate in society; it’s liberating, not confining
- “Blind/Deaf person” or “deaf and dumb”
- Euphemistic terms – “physically challenged”
- Negative, disempowering words – “victim” or “sufferer”
- Never appropriate – “crippled” or “retarded,” “crazy/psycho/lunatic”
- Inappropriate – “handicapped”
 - But we acknowledge it’s the standard usage for public signage

Potential Accommodation Language

The following examples support the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). These statements may be used to communicate that you are an inclusive organization and invite individuals to let you know about their need for special accommodations.

- Individuals needing accommodations to participate in the meeting should contact (name) at 222-222-2222, no later than (deadline if appropriate) .
- Accommodation requests should be directed to (name) at 222-222-2222 no later than (deadline if appropriate) .
- Direct requests for accommodations to (name) at 222-222-2222, no later than (deadline if appropriate) .
- Requests for sign language interpreter or materials in alternative format should be made no later than (deadline if appropriate) to (name) at 222-222-2222.
- Individuals with disabilities requiring additional services to participate in the meeting should call 222-222-2222 by (deadline if appropriate) .
- Additional language may be added to state that requests for accommodations made after the advertised date will be honored to the maximum extent feasible.

Alternative Seating Arrangements

We know seating is always an issue for High Holiday services. Many synagogue members from long-standing congregations have holiday seats that have been in their family for generations. As communities age and as the population with mobility impairments grows, we would like to offer you an alternative way to think about trying to accommodate that population as well as to sensitize your communities to having seating arrangements that allows people with physical disabilities – such as ambulatory, visual, and auditory issues – to receive some type of preferential seating so they can engage in services meaningfully. This allows your congregants without disabilities to feel included in the process, and it facilitates the office to assign seats for congregants and guests with disabilities more effectively.

The below letter can be sent to those without disabilities who have reserved aisle seats or are seated in the front rows of the synagogue.

Dear congregant (Fname),

As always, we look forward to praying together at this momentous time of year – the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur holidays. Since our synagogue is forever working to be a more inclusive, sensitive, and spiritual community, we hope to become a congregation that is more sensitive and inclusive to close to 20% of the Jewish community that has some type of physical, developmental, or learning disability.

To minimize any constraints that would prevent or impede people with disabilities from enjoying services, we would appreciate if congregants without disabilities who have reserved aisle or front-section seats would consider giving up their seat to another member who has physical disabilities/mobility issues.

This will allow us to reserve seats for those congregants and guests with disabilities so they too can enjoy the service. We understand that this request might impose a hardship for those looking to pray together with their families, but we will try to arrange the final seating so families can sit in close proximity.

- **If you are willing to change your aisle seat with those with mobility impairments (might have a walker or a wheelchair), please contact xx – contact info.**
- **If you are willing to change your seat in the front section with those with visual or auditory (deaf, needs to read lips) disabilities, please contact xx – contact info.**

Thank you in advance for helping our congregation be a more welcoming and spiritual community. We look forward to praying together on these High Holy Days.

Childcare Services – Be Sure to Ask about Needed Accommodations

If your synagogue provides childcare services during the High Holiday services, please ensure that you ask parents if their children need special attention so the childcare for their child is safe and successful. On all forms to your congregation regarding childcare services, be sure to include a section for parents to note any special accommodations their children need. Include contact information for someone in the office to handle these requests. All communications about childcare services should note, if that is the case, that accommodations are available upon request.

Be sure that your childcare supervisors are familiar with working with children with disabilities. If they aren't and/or you cannot provide accommodations and services to meet the needs of an individual child, let the parents know in advance; they may be able to provide the needed supports or find an alternative. It is always better to be honest up front on what you can/cannot do.

Machzorim

We hope you ordered large-print machzorim and a Braille machzor for those with visual impairments. Please label these on an easily-accessible shelf and tell the ushers to mention them to people they think might need them.

2 Types of Accommodations for Hearing Impairments - Sign Language Interpreters and CART Captioning for Temples with Live Streaming and/or Screens

Both can be available upon advance request

1. The **Jewish Deaf Resource Center (JDRC)** provides interpreters fluent in American Sign Language (ASL) to translate the service. JDRC partially reimburses the cost associated with hiring an interpreter for Jewish events. Please contact:

Jewish Deaf Resource Center (JDRC) - <http://www.jdrc.org/>
Attn: Naomi Brunnlehrman
P.O. Box 318
Hartsdale, NY 10530
Voice or Text: 917-705-8941
Video-phone: 866-948-1771
Email: INFO@JDRC.ORG

We suggest that in your mailings about the High Holiday services, you print on the bottom that ASL interpreters are available on request and provide contact info for a point person in your office.

2. The firm **Total Caption** provides individuals with hearing loss who are not fluent in ASL Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART), also known as captioning, for services that are live streamed. Due to the high volume of requests for CART services during the High Holidays, Total Caption would appreciate your making requests at least three (3) weeks in advance of the service(s) during which the accommodation will be needed. Please contact:

Total Caption – www.totalcaption.com
Attn: Lauren Schechter
315 Pearsall Ave.
Ridgewood, NJ 07450
Phone: (201) 301-2435
Email: lauren@totalcaption.com

3. The **Washington Society of Jewish Deaf (WSJD)** provides programming to the deaf and hard of hearing community in Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia. WSJD connects the necessary communication needs to members of the deaf, deaf-blind, and hard of hearing community. The service includes interpreters

fluent in American Sign Language (ASL), Pidgin Signed English (PSE), Tactile Sign Language, oral dictations and Hebrew-to-English interpretations. The Washington Society of Jewish Deaf would appreciate your making requests about a week in advance of the service(s) during which the accommodation will be needed. Please contact:

Washington Society of Jewish Deaf (WSJD)- www.wsjdeaf.org

Attn: Susan F. Cohen
P.O. Box 4141
West McLean,
VA 22103-4141

Email: wsjd01@gmail.com

This list includes skill level, region availability, and whether or not the interpreter is Shomer Shabbos to help you better match interpreters to the assignment.

Name/Email address	Email Addresses	Region Availability	Skill level/Type of assignment
Mushka Angster (Shomer Shabbos)	Mushka775@yahoo.com	Metro Washington area	Comfortable with biblical Hebrew and English
Helen Rubin Avner	helenavner@gmail.com Helen@helenrubin.com	Metro Washington area	Hebrew-English interpreting; PSE
Sarah Blattberg	siblattberg@gmail.com maimou@umd.edu	Metro Washington area	Hebrew-English interpreting; ASL
Sheryl Cooper	Fingerworks@comcast.net	Washington DC metro area	Hebrew-English interpreting
Leana Jelen	Leana.jelen@galludet.edu	Washington DC metro area	Hebrew to English interpreting
Alix Kraminitz	Afk411@gmail.com	Washington DC metro area	English based assignments for Jewish community events

Barbara Iseron Libbin (Shomer Shabbos)	barbaralibbin@gmail.com	Specifically Ohr Kodesh Congregation and Jewish Day School events	English based and synagogue services
Diana Markel	d4markel@gmail.com	Washington DC metro area	English based assignment; meetings, workshops, clear signer
Dana Marlowe	DanaMarlowe@hotmail.com	Montgomery County or DC	Limited ability to translate from Hebrew to English to ASL; synagogue assignments; English based interpreting
Gary Morin	GaryMMorin@yahoo.com	Metro Washington area	Hebrew to English interpreting
Lisa Pershan	lpershan@gmail.com	Montgomery County (preferably Frederick, MD)	ASL interpreter; Willing to accept English based assignments
Marla Pollack	MSPollack@fcps.edu marlapollack@comcast.net	Virginia	English based interpreting; team interpreted High Holiday services
Carrie Quigley	pcquigley@erols.com pcquigley@comcast.net	Metro Washington DC area	Hebrew and English interpreting; tactile interpreting
Miako Rankin	Miako34@me.com	Metro Washington DC area	Complement an interpreter skilled in trilingual interpretation
Marla Rishty	Signon55@aol.com	Metro Washington DC area	English based and synagogue services; PSE
Judi Rockhill	Judirockhill@gmail.com	Washington DC metro area	English only

Lore Rosenthal	lore@simplicity-matter.org	Suburban Maryland	Hebrew-English interpreting for synagogues
Ellen Schein	AmiTamar@aol.com	Washington DC metro area	Hebrew and English Interpreting
Lindsey Snyder	Lindsey@tmail.com lindseyatwork@aol.com	Washington DC metro area	Hebrew and English interpreting
Joyce Dworsky-Srouer (Shomer Shabbos)	VitalSignsLLC@verizon.net	Washington DC metro area	Hebrew to English interpreting
Kelli Stein	Kelli.stein@gmail.com	Washington DC metro area	Basic Hebrew
Janis Sterling (Shomer Shabbos)	jpsterling@aol.com	Washington DC metro area	English based
Shira Leven Tassiello	sheeeeera@gmail.com	Montgomery County only	Hebrew to English interpreting; synagogue interpreting
Paula Tucker	pettucker@gmail.com	MD, VA, DC	Hebrew and English interpreting,
Harry Zarin & Starr Posner Zarin	handsz@verizon.net	Washington DC metro area	English based interpreting with some Hebrew
Harry Zisman	Hzisman1@gmail.com	Washington DC metro area	English based interpreting only; workshops and regular meetings; not do worship services

Sensory Calming Room

A sensory calming room (which can be a library, classroom, lounge or other quiet and comfortable place) should be provided as a community resource for those with sensory overload issues to take a break from services, specifically children with disabilities and their parents. This room should be accessible for those with mobility issues and contain quiet play toys, books, puzzles, and comfortable chairs. Parents would need to chaperone their children. If synagogue custom allows, there should be a live stream or an audio feed of the service so people can still feel like they are a part of the service.

Ushers and clergy should communicate to the congregation that this sensory calming room exists. Directions to the room from the sanctuary should be printed out and posted.

If addition, provide a basket of quiet fidget toys with a sign welcoming people to take one into the service if it would be helpful. Stick to toys that don't roll, bounce or make noise.

People with Disabilities Must be Considered in Any Synagogue's Evacuation Plan

We want to remind synagogues that people with disabilities need to be included in any evacuation plan and emergency procedures. Please make sure the security team has developed a plan that gives thought to those with temporary or permanent physical and developmental disabilities and knows how to guide them during an emergency.

FEMA's Office of Disability Integration and Coordination (<https://www.fema.gov/office-disability-integration-and-coordination>) has information and resources regarding evacuation plans and emergency procedures that include people with disabilities.

Much more information can also be found [here](#).

Signs and Directions

Signage helps raise the level of awareness that the congregation is being inclusive of people with disabilities. These clear signs can provide information about important locations, such as restrooms, the quiet room, water fountains, emergency exits, and the sanctuary, plus any accommodations specifically for people with disabilities. Here are examples of signage that might be helpful to use in your synagogue.



ELEVATOR



**PLEASE BE RESPECTFUL AND GIVE
PRIORITY TO PEOPLE WITH MOBILITY
ISSUES WHO NEED THE ELEVATOR**

Usher Tips for Greeting and Assisting

1. Welcome **all** guests equally:
Speak directly to the person with a disability; converse as you would with anyone else. Smile and greet all congregants. If shaking hands is a protocol, then be sure to offer a hand to everyone who enters the synagogue, regardless of ability level. If you have a question for someone with a disability who has an aide, ask the person with the disability first. The first attempt at conversation should be to the person with the disability instead of the aide. Making small talk with a person who has a disability is great, just like it is for anyone else.
2. Keep all doors and walkways **accessible**:
Make sure people are free to move throughout the space. If an entrance becomes particularly crowded, have another entrance if possible. Displays should not be in front of entrances, wastebaskets should not be in the middle of aisles, and boxes should not be stored on ramps.
3. Be aware of **invisible** disabilities:
Respect the person's needs and requests whenever possible, even if the disabilities are hidden. People may request something or act in a way that appears strange, but requests or behaviors may be disability-related. If accommodations are possible, they should be respected.
4. When in doubt, **ask!**
Ask people how you may assist; do not assume someone needs assistance. Not all people with disabilities need help. Always speak directly to the person with a disability. Be sensitive about physical contact. Some people with disabilities depend on their arms for balance.
5. Inform people about the **sensory calming room**:
The specifications about the sensory calming room are found on page nine of this packet. Make sure directions to the room are close to the sanctuary doors or are listed in your service packet. There may be moments when the sanctuary doors should remain closed, but please be aware that people with disabilities might need to exit the sanctuary if necessary even in these times. Ushers should let them leave.
6. If a person is **blind or has vision impairments**:
Identify yourself by name and note you're the usher. Offer your arm, don't take theirs. Offer a large-print or braille machzor. If applicable, walk on the opposite side of the guide dog. When walking, describe the setting while noting any

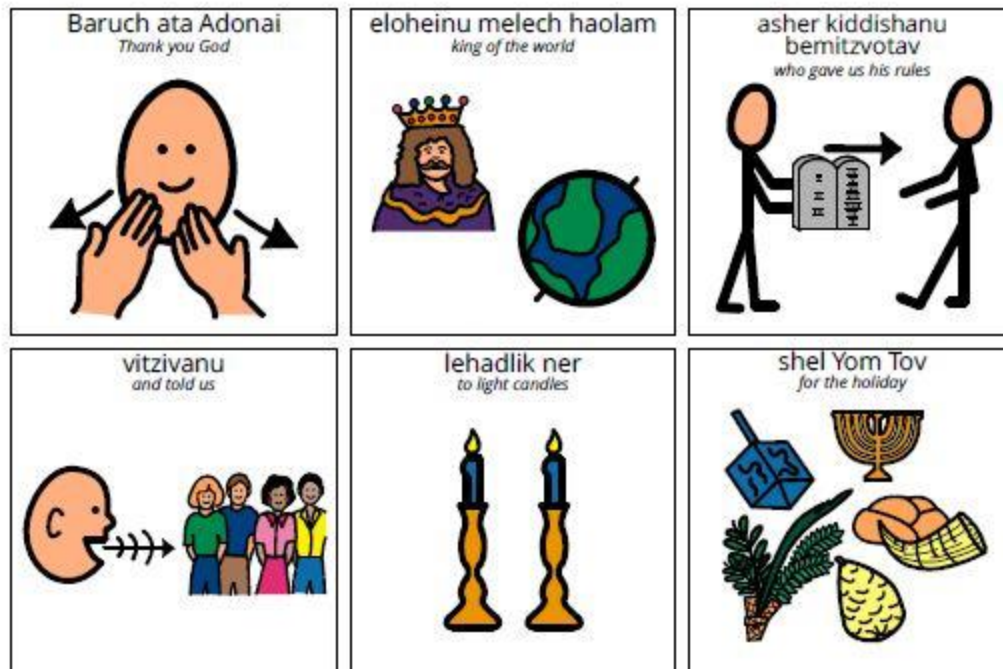
obstacles, like “Walk forward to the end of this aisle and make a full right.” When you reach the seat, ask if the person needs anything else and say you’re leaving.

7. If a person has a **developmental disability**:

Speak to the person in clear sentences, using simple words and concrete concepts. Don’t use baby talk or talk down to them. Gauge the pace, complexity, and vocabulary of your speech according to theirs. If the person is an adult, they can make their own decisions, unless you’re informed otherwise.

Visual Blessings and Social Stories

Children and adults with cognitive or learning disabilities might not be able to read the prayer book without supports. Gateways has some great free resources that utilize picture communication symbols developed by Mayer-Johnson™, the leading creator of symbol-adapted special education materials that assist individuals in overcoming speech, language and learning challenges. There are [blessings](#) with simplified language and visual supports and [social stories](#) such as “What to Think and Do If the Shofar Sounds Too Loud” and “My Parents May Fast on Yom Kippur.” These can be provided as accommodations during the service, kept in the sensory calming room and/or offered as resources prior to the High Holidays. These and other resources can be found at www.jgateways.org/Resources/High-Holiday.



Visual version of the blessing over the candles

Additional High Holiday Inclusion Kits

Additional High Holiday Kits that you might want to look at are as follows:

Shelly Christensen of Inclusion Innovations

- <http://inclusioninnovations.com/new-high-holidays-inclusive-congregations-guide-free/>
- shelly@inclusioninnovations.com or <http://inclusioninnovations.com/contact/>

United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism

- http://uscj.org/images/InclusionHighHoliday_packet-2009final.pdf
- 820 Second Avenue, New York, NY 10017-4504
- Telephone: 212-533-7800
- info@uscj.org

Example High Holiday Sermons

*Given by Leaders in 2015 while participating in
the Synagogue Inclusion Cohort of UJAFedNY*

Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove
Erev Rosh Hashanah, 5776

Inclusion

One of the oldest, and sweetest, and well known tales of the holiday season is told of a young Jewish boy, orphaned as a child and adopted into a warm hearted gentile family. The boy knew himself to be Jewish, though he did not know what exactly that meant. He lived a simple life as a shepherd, going out each day with his flock, playing his flute all along. One fall day, sitting at the side of the road, he noticed person after person traveling to the nearby city of Berdichev. One by one they passed, until the boy's curiosity got the best of him and he asked the travelers where exactly they were going.

“We are on our way to Berdichev to spend the high holidays with the great tzaddik, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev.”

“High Holidays,” the boy asked, “What are they?”

The men laughed, “Silly boy. The Jewish New Year and Yom Kippur – the whole world is being judged. You should not be here with sheep, you belong in the synagogue!”

The words struck a chord in the boy and not knowing what to do, but knowing he had to do something, and, not yet familiar the new High Holiday ticket policy, the boy and his flute followed the crowd into the synagogue. Never in his life had he seen such a sight. The sound of the Hazzan's voice, the townsfolk engaged in prayer, every iPhone out of sight and set to “vibrate.” It was at that moment that the boy knew, more than anything else, what he did not know. He could not read Hebrew, and he could not recite a single prayer. More than anything in the world he wanted to join in, but he lacked the tools to do so, and nobody, but nobody, paid him any attention. All thru Rosh Hashanah, and then Kol Nidre he sat, seeking a way into this holy community. The time for Neilah prayers arrived, the tension in the room mounted and he understood the sanctity of the waning hour. One by one, the worshippers gathered at the ark, silent and without kibitzing; in his eighth year the Rabbi's stern warnings seemed to have finally taken effect. So sacred was the moment, some say, they saw the head-usher offering prayers of his own, and some say...even the executive director.

With tears in his eyes and unable to contain himself any longer, the boy took out his flute and began to play. A joyous, flurry of blaring notes. All the worshippers froze and

stared, “How dare this child create such an outburst! How dare he desecrate our sacred day!” With every darting eye turned against him, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak ran off the bimah toward the terrified boy and embraced him. “This boy,” announced the Rebbe, “has saved us all. All day long, I saw that our prayers had not ascended to the heavens, and with the gates of Neilah closing, our names were not yet inscribed in the book of life. Only by way of his pure heart and the pure prayer of his flute, more true than any prayer offered by any of us today, have the gates of heaven opened. We owe this boy our gratitude...and may each one of us in this sacred hour learn to pray as he does.”

To each and every one here, old friends and new, I welcome you as we usher in the High Holiday Season and the Jewish Year of 5776. May it be a sweet year, filled with health and happiness, for you, your family, the Jewish people and all of humanity.

As we open our hearts and souls to the year ahead, this evening I want to talk to you what we need to do to make our community a more inclusive one. Who among us, I wonder, is that shepherd boy looking for a point of entry, but lacking the tools to do so? Who is it who stands at the periphery so desperate to be a stakeholder in our tradition – but unable to get in? How can we meet those people where they are in order to make their journey shorter, clearer and more easily traveled.

Let’s begin with the most obvious, the new High Holiday mahzor, Mahzor Lev Shalem, that sits in your hands. I want to publicly acknowledge and thank Deanna and Bob Adler and family for their generosity in underwriting this project. The prayers are the same, in some cases more traditional than before, but the spirit of this mahzor is one of inclusion--the translation of the prayers, the transliteration of the prayers for those unfamiliar with the Hebrew, the cues on when to bow, the explanatory comments and the beautiful readings that will accompany us on our journey in these days and years ahead. Though it lacks a flute, the ethic this new mahzor embodies is that of our story. An egalitarian prayer book with the patriarchs and matriarchs side by side, Yizkor meditations in memory of a parent who was hurtful, a *hineni* prayer for a male or female hazzan, and instructions for those new to Jewish prayer. Be it your first or fiftieth Rosh Hashanah this mahzor provides a path for those seeking entry into our tradition. We dedicate this mahzor this evening, we express our gratitude to the Adler family, and we pray that our humble petitions, now and in the years ahead, will be received by the heavens above.

Significant as the mahzor is, it is but the first, not final step towards creating an inclusive community. It is nothing short of remarkable to consider how many “outsiders” we will encounter in the days ahead, alerting us to the inclusive calling of the hour. The central figure of tomorrow’s Torah reading is Hagar, a name which literally means – “the stranger / *Ha-Ger*” – she and her son cast out of Abraham’s household, only to be brought back in by God. And then Hannah – a woman whose inability to have children inflicts incalculable mental anguish, her self-worth in the universe called into question as she must bear witness to the fruit bearing wombs of her contemporaries. The haftorah for

second day Rosh Hashana tells of the tears of Rachel, whose losses puts her in physical and spiritual exile. Perhaps most famously, the tortured relationship between Abraham and his son Isaac, who, according to numerous commentaries, struggled with his own developmental hurdles. On Yom Kippur afternoon, when we will encounter the prophet Jonah, who, from his very beginning to end, flees the boundaries of community. The high holidays are a rolodex of outsiders looking in; and in each and every case, redemption comes by way of a divine act that welcomes that individual back into the fold.

All of which begs the question for us today. Who is the shepherd boy, the person estranged amongst us seeking entry? What is it that we must do – God-like – to welcome them in? First and foremost, tonight we open our eyes to those seeking entry into the Jewish community. On more than one occasion, I have spoken of the need to reconsider our communal posture to the prospective convert. The Jewish community and our synagogue in particular must understand itself to be an agent towards creating Jewish families – not a gatekeeper preventing that from happening. We must do so because our children and grandchildren will, statistically speaking, fall in love with someone who is not Jewish. We must do so because we believe that the spirit and practice of Jewish life is compelling, worthwhile and worth sharing. We, who are committed to the Jewish future, must be ever eager to extend a warm embrace to those seeking to enter the Jewish fold.

To be an inclusive community, to make our synagogue reflect Isaiah's vision of a house of prayer for all people, will involve a soul searching inventory. There are so many lacking the keys to enter, each different, but each equally viewing the Jewish world from the outside in. The story of the shepherd boy is told many ways, interestingly, half the time the boy is raised in non-Jewish surroundings, half the time the boy is described as differentially abled. Proud as we are of our Matan program for children with differentiated needs, proud as we are that we live stream our services to home-bound members, we know there is much more we can do. We need to wire this room and others with hearing loop technologies to assist people with hearing loss. We need to make every part of the building wheelchair accessible including, especially so, this bimah. Lest we forget, some of our greatest biblical heroes faced disabilities of some sort. Isaac was blind, Jacob walked with a limp, Moses, our greatest prophet of all, had a speech impediment. Neither their spiritual potential, nor any of ours, is contingent on being labeled "fully able." On this subject, there is no "us" and "them," we are all equally endowed with infinite dignity. As you may well know, a *Sefer Torah* is rendered unfit/*pasul* if it is missing even a single letter. So too the "kashrut" of our entire community rests on each Jew being present, each Jew hearing God's voice according to his or her capacity.

In the years ahead, our community must understand its mission to be one of radical welcoming. Whether we succeed or not, however, depends not only on any one mahzor, bimah refurbishment, policy from the board or sermon from me. Our success depends on

each of you. How you greet the person of color walking into this building for the first time; what you say - not what I say, will determine if he or she will come back. Five years ago I announced that the clergy of Park Avenue will officiate at same-sex weddings. But how a gay couple is greeted when they walk in hand-in-hand, that only you can determine. What about the congregant whose hearing aid buzzes too loudly? What about the *utzidik* kid, who, God bless him, has trouble sitting still during services; speaking or singing a bit too loudly? Will you, like the congregants in our story, shoot darts at that child and his parents, or will your words and gestures communicate that your prayer, that the Jewish people, is more complete in the knowledge that ours is a community welcoming to everyone. One thing I know about the people at the periphery; they don't want your pity, in fact they don't want special treatment at all. All they want is that here in a synagogue of all places, they are greeted and received no differently than we would want for ourselves, as individuals created in the image of God. What is being Jewish, if not to live with an awareness that we were once strangers in a strange land and have that awareness inform all our interactions? As the prophet Isaiah teaches us on Yom Kippur, the rituals of Judaism are rendered hollow and meaningless if they are not accompanied by a compassionate and eager welcome of those strangers amongst us.

My beloved teacher, Dr. Eliezer Slomovic of blessed memory, once shared with me the story of God's complaint office. One day, three people (of sorts), walked in. The first was the *aleynu* prayer, the second was the prayer for rain/*geshem*, and the third was an old man. First, the *aleynu* prayer spoke up. "God, I am a prayer that affirms your sovereignty, calls for the establishment of your earthly kingdom and speaks to the aspirations of a broken humanity. I am so important, but you...you stuck me at the very end of every service right before mourner's kaddish. All anyone thinks about when they sing *aleynu* is the cookie they will eat Kiddush to follow. God, I deserve better than that. It is just not right."

Next, comes the prayer for rain / *geshem*, in Hebrew "*Mashiv Haruah U'Morid Hagashem*." "God," says the prayer, "what could be more important than rain. Our harvest, our well-being, our sustenance, our land, our people – it all depends on me, *geshem*. And yet four words are all I get. A *shtikele* of mention and sometimes the Cantor even forgets to recite me. God, it is just not right."

Third and finally comes the old man. "God, I am a modest man, and though I am alone in the world, I am content. Every week I come to shul, take my assigned seat at the back enjoying the words of the rabbi and the prayers of the hazaan. God, please don't think me vain, but when I come in and I look at everyone with their backs to me, with their *talesim* draped on their shoulders, and I see them and nobody notices me...and nobody greets me...God, it is just not right."

God thinks through the problems and the three complainers are called back in. To the *aleynu* prayer, God says: "Look, there is not a lot I can do. The prayer books have

already been printed, the Adlers made their donation, and the hazzan – well let’s just say he doesn’t handle change well. But this is what I can do. Three times a year, twice on Rosh Hashanah and once on Yom Kippur, I will make a very big deal of you. Right in the middle of the service, when the crowds are largest we will sing you full force. The Rabbi, the Cantor will get down on their knees and everyone will understand the importance of *aleynu*.” Satisfied, the *aleynu* smiled and left contented.

And to *geshem*, the prayer for rain, God replies. “Look, I get it. Rain is important. But you know how these new rabbis are. You know we live in a time of diminishing attention spans – they are pruning the service every chance they get. Besides, with these new desalination plants on the Mediterranean, some are wondering if we even still need a prayer for rain. But this is what I will do, once a year, at the end of Sukkot, on Shemini Atzeret, when everyone comes to shul for *yizkor*, we will pray for *geshem* to your heart’s delight. The *hazzan* will set you to glorious music, and you will have your proper due.” Satisfied, the *geshem* prayer smiled and left contented.

Finally, to the old man, God turns. “I tried and tried. I called the membership director, the executive director, I even put in a call to the Rabbi. But the seats just don’t move in the sanctuary and your seat in RR, well that is where you will be for the foreseeable future. But this is what I can do. Every Friday night, in the Kabbalat Shabbat Service there is a beautiful prayer called Lecha Dodi when the Sabbath bride is welcomed. At the conclusion of that prayer, from this day forward, I hereby decree that everyone will stand up, turn around with a smile and face the back of the room and everyone will see that you sir are there in shul.” And the old man smiled and left contented.

Friends, sometimes spiritual heroics involve nothing more than a kind word, warm handshake and generous smile. These are the gestures that designate us to be an inclusive community. In the days ahead, in the years ahead, every Friday night, and every day, may we never be so comfortable that we become inured to the needs of the outsider seeking in. After all, are we not, each and every one of us, desperately seeking to stand in God’s presence. May we always be the sort who signal, in spirit and in deed, that our community has been made whole by dint of the presence of another. *Kol Haneshama Tehallel Yah*. With all of our souls may we praise God. *Kol Haneshama Tehallel Yah*. May every soul may sing God’s praises. And may each and every one of us be blessed with a year of health, happiness and peace.

Rosh Hashanah Day 1, 5776
Rabbi Carie Carter
Park Slope Jewish Center

INCLUSION

Today, on Rosh Hashanah, the Sabbatical year of 5775 comes to a close. After a year of trying to do things differently—a year of evaluating our relationship to the land, to the food we eat, a year of offering debt relief and considering the interconnectedness of humanity, a year of letting go of personal control and expectation, this year of Shmitah—this year of Release and Refreshing—has ended. And, as one might ask professors who have just returned from Sabbatical, so we must ask ourselves: What do we do now? How might we at PSJC be different in this year following our year of letting go?

For me, the beginning of an answer to this question lies in the Torah reading we heard just a short time ago. It is the story of: Sarah's Intense Jealousy, the Expulsion of Hagar, the Near Death of Ishmael. The Torah reading we explore on this first day of Rosh Hashanah is clearly what Phyllis Tribble calls: A Text of Terror.

We are horrified when we read it—embarrassed and ashamed by our ancestor Sarah's harsh treatment of Hagar—literally referring to her as *amah* (Slave); abusing her (in a word used to describe the harsh labor with which the Egyptians afflicted the Israelites; and eventually banishing her (and her child) from her tent, sending them forth into the barren wilderness. We listen in disbelief to Abraham's acquiescence to Sarah's desire—his willingness to banish his first-born son (whom, only a short time earlier, had been circumcised, entering the covenant with his father Abraham and with God). Our eyes fill with tears as we join Hagar in her desperate crying over the fate of her son—alone beneath a bush awaiting death.

Yet, we are absolutely riveted to this tale, not solely for the drama of the situation—but because we recognize ourselves within it. Who in this room has not—at one moment or another in our lives—felt alone—or experienced the fear, if not the reality of the loneliness of isolation? Who does not harbor even the tiniest bit of fear at the prospect of being abandoned? *Al taazveini Al tashlicheinu*—we cry out on Yom Kippur. – Do not abandon us! Do not cast us away! It is among our deepest fears! Even the Psalm for the Days of Awe contains an allusion to the fear and despair of abandonment by parents: *ki avi v'imi azavuni –v'Adonai ya'asfeini*. (Though my father and my mother leave me, Adonai will care for me)

The Rabbis who established our system of Torah reading for Rosh Hashanah were cognizant of this connection, this relevancy as well. The official explanation for the selection of the Torah reading for today's most hope-filled day—A Day of Recalling the

Creation of our world and the tremendous possibilities born from it—is the statement at the start of the story: *V'Adonai Pakad et Sarah* --the moment when a long-barren Sarah is “remembered” by God. Yet there is another level to the inclusion of this story as well. For the Rabbis who fixed the liturgy of Rosh Hashanah recognized that on this day of celebrating the Creation of Humanity—we can not hide from one of the most basic realities of human existence—the potential for loneliness and isolation. And the Torah Reading for this first day of Rosh Hashanah is about exactly that.

From Hagar and Ishmael we learn that we as human beings have the ability to feel utterly isolated and alone

And from the actions of Sarah, we are reminded that WE have the ability to isolate, marginalize and expel others.

One of the privileges and responsibilities of being a congregational rabbi is to hear and to hold the stories of the members of this community. Because of that, I look out into this room and know that far too many of us—have tasted, have known the sadness, the isolation of Exile—literally or figuratively. We have felt isolated from home, family, or community. The reasons and degree may vary, but the reality of isolation is far too familiar—for far too many of us.

People in this room have been thrown out of their homes for coming out as Gay/as Trans. People in this room today have been kicked out of their community for marrying “out of our faith”. People in this room today have suffered the loss of friends/family as they’ve gone through life.

As a result, I know that we at PSJC recognize the harm done when someone is thrown out due to the color of their skin, their beliefs, sexuality, gender identity, or for so many other reasons. We don’t have to be reminded. And I am proud of the fact that we have long been a community that would be repulsed to be involved in such horrendous behavior. Despite the actions of our ancestor Sarah, we would never consider sending someone out into exile—knowing that they had no place to go. That I know.

As decent, sensitive human beings, our challenge is not an intentional/malicious expulsion. But a potentially more dangerous insidious problem—not outright cruelty, but a lack of attention; not explicit expulsion, but a simple OVERLOOKING of the needs of others ---of inadvertently putting up walls that make our community inaccessible or unwelcoming to others.

Earlier this year, I was reminded how easy it is to be blind to the needs of whole communities of individuals. With all the best of intentions, we as a community (like so many synagogues in America today) have fallen victim to the old adage: *Early to bed, early to rise makes a man Healthy and Wealthy and Wise.*

Honestly, I'm not sure about the early to bed/early to rise portion of the phrase (this is NYC after all), but the Healthy, Wealthy and Wise piece has indeed taken hold.

We (like so many others) focus on people who are Healthy and fit, those who are well-off financially (the Wealthy) , and the Wise (those whose intelligence is immediately clear). (or at least those who present as such). And we do so to the virtual exclusion of all others. Without even noticing it, we marginalize those who are economically disadvantaged, those who have physical or mental disabilities. . . .

To paraphrase Rabbi Sid Schwartz: "It is precisely because our institutions tend to privilege the "abled" that we essentially make those who might not appear as able invisible. Even if the disabled do not experience outright exclusion. . . many feel shunned when they do show up. Staying invisible is just easier for those not perceived to be as able but it doesn't lessen the sense that the Jewish community is a private club catering to those who are indeed, "healthy, wealthy and wise."

It is so easy to focus on the "high functioning" people in our midst—We measure ourselves against them—and feel ourselves healthier, wealthier, and wiser simply by being around them. Our focus is so narrow at times that those on the margins are simply overlooked. When it comes to questions of inclusion, it's not so much what we do—as much as what we don't do—that is at issue.

Consider the days when forms assumed a couple consisted of a man and a woman. It doesn't seem like a big thing—and I am sure it wasn't done maliciously, but for a same-sex couple, that was a clear message that we don't see you—you do not belong. We changed our forms to address that a long time ago, and recently, we made another change, namely to leave a blank for gender identification (no longer forcing people into a binary definition of gender that may not fit them), finally saying, in a very simple/basic way: You who are Trans are welcome and included here.

It is easy for us to ignore the needs of people we don't even recognize in our presence. A story was shared with me about a blind man who came to a rabbi of a synagogue to inquire as to whether or not the shul had a Braille Siddur on hand. "No", the rabbi responded kindly. "We actually do not have anyone who is blind in the shul." The visitor said: Have you ever thought that you don't have anyone who needs such a Siddur davka because you don't offer a Braille Siddur? There are blind people like me all around the neighborhood—looking for a place to pray---if we could only find siddur---and a synagogue --that saw us. "

How often do people just walk away because we inadvertently make them feel excluded and unseen? How simple is it to make sure we have large print siddurim, a braille machzor easily available for those with limited vision, an easy to use chairlift for those

with mobility issues? How easy it is to overlook these simple acts—and unintentionally—to make people feel unwelcomed.

Sometimes we feel like an outsider because we are unseen or invisible---
And sometimes it is because we feel so out of place that we are sure everyone is looking at us, like an animal in a zoo.

Consider the story of Kevin Connolly. Kevin was born without legs. Using a sort of leather body boot, Kevin hikes, camps, skis, and lives an active life. The amazing thing about Kevin is that being born without legs is not crippling for him. It is however, as the camera shows, crippling for us. Traveling around the globe by skateboard, Kevin shot photographs of people as they looked at him—32,000 photos. One sees shocked faces, tight lipped faces, angry and confused faces, sad faces, closed faces. Can you imagine what it must be like to be the recipient of those looks, day in and day out? To be made to feel so much on the outside of life—so alien—your being so devalued, so un-embraced by humanity?

And yet. . . .that is part of the reality of so many—so often.
And among the most often ignored, the most often overlooked, and the most common recipient of shocked looks----the most often made to feel “OTHER” in our society today are people with disabilities and their families.

Between 34-43 million people have some type of disability
More than 50% of people over age 65 (32 million) have some level of disability
Nine million people of all ages are severely disabled and need personal assistance for daily activities.

70 million adults deal with chronic pain; 4.8 million live with the effects of stroke
Nearly 1 child in every 166 is diagnosed with Autism.

And yet how often do we look the other way? How often do we refuse to adjust our “way of doing things” to make something more accessible for others?

I know a wonderful Brooklyn family who have one child with autism and one neurotypical child. They have created their own custom for one of the days of Rosh Hashanah: They go apple-picking as a family. It’s a beautiful custom. What challenges me is that they came up with this idea simply because they could not find a place that worked for their family (with their autistic child) in any synagogue in the area. How many families are ostracized, are exiled—like Ishmael?— How many in this shul are made to feel uncomfortable or unwelcomed because the needs of one member of the family are not taken into consideration. How many don’t even try to enter the doors of a synagogue because they simply don’t believe that people can see them through the walls, the barriers we have erected.

This, unfortunately, is the reality in our world today. But this does not have to be the case. And I’d argue that this is our year to find a different way. For this year following

Shnat Hashmitah is our year of embracing the Biblical tradition of *Hakhel*—the special once in seven year ritual of bringing the entire community together for the reading of the Torah. This is our year of *Hakhel*, of coming together—of figuring out how to lower those barriers and to create a community inclusive of ALL. This year, we have begun to open our eyes. For 16 months, we are the recipients of an “Inclusion Grant” from UJA-Federation of New York (a grant designed to help us become more aware of the needs of those with disabilities—and more intentional about becoming a more inclusive community. Through this grant, we receive funding and a great deal of support and training to teach our leaders, our teachers, our community as a whole how to be better aware and to more effectively meet the needs of those with disabilities and their families here at PSJC.

You may have noticed some early experiments/steps/adjustments we’ve made already.

- 1) Enlarging the font size on the weekly flyer
- 2) And increasing the size of names on name tags for those who need visual support.
- 3) Presenting clear signage to make people aware of what IS available
- 4) Working on improving and regularly confirming the sound quality—for those with auditory needs.
- 5) Making special seating available for those with mobility issues
- 6) Training the *madrichim* and teachers in our Hebrew School about teaching children with special needs
- 7) Providing resources for ushers to support requests for special accommodations to meet the needs of members of our community.
- 8) Creating a special sensory-sensitive Rosh Hashanah service at 3pm today with Aileen and Abe.
- 9) Addressing the quiet space needs of our community—by providing a quiet room downstairs to support sensory needs in addition to the quiet space in the library and a more private nursing space downstairs.

Critical to this effort is the establishment of a formal Inclusion Committee chaired by Shelly Klainberg to address the needs of people with disabilities. This Committee is off to a great start. Thanks to Shelly, Aileen and all who have already dedicated so much time and energy to this effort

Each of these actions—and so many more--- is important—but above all, the task of this committee and those who are guiding/supporting us with this grant—is to teach us, as a community, to Open our Eyes; to become more aware.

To understand what it might mean to be a truly inclusive community.

To become a place where people with disabilities—physical, mental, emotional—feel welcome and know they belong.

We understand that there are some limitations—and there are some things we will not be able to do immediately. We are not yet able to build an elevator, (unless someone wants to give me the 2 million we would need after services)-- but there is so much we can and must do.

We can change our language. We can learn how to be truly supportive. We can understand the real needs that exist in our community...we can open the walls of this synagogue as wide as can be. This year will demand a great deal of patience from us. We are willing to experiment, and we may make mistakes, but we will learn. What works for some may be a little uncomfortable for others. But we will come to understand (on a much deeper level) what it means to be a community-- making space for the needs of others, and trusting that our needs will be addressed. We will learn how to truly listen to others; how to grow our empathy. We will struggle to listen well, to understand a little more about what it means to live with a significant disability. We will learn how we might better use microphones, how to make our chairlift most effective, how to help (but not over-help) those in need of physical support, how to provide assistance in an effective and respectful way. We will learn how to make space in our hearts and in our sanctuary for children with special needs---children whose neurological or physical makeup prevents them from relating to the world in typical ways.

We will learn to LISTEN deeply to people's needs--to not assume we know! I think back to our member, Dylan's Friday night talk earlier this year when he shared with us that as a man with autism, he was not comfortable shaking hands and that clapping was difficult for him. I watched people literally sit on their hands at the end of his talk, striving to be responsive to this new information—no matter how much they wanted to applaud. From Dylan, we learned to listen a little better and learned how to make our synagogue a little more welcoming.

You see, so often, we just don't stop to listen—So many people go through life like Hagar and Ishmael, feeling alone, believing that their needs, their voices are going unheeded. Abraham and Sarah may have been deaf to the cries of Ishmael and Hagar. And Ishmael's own mother was almost overwhelmed by his tears. But his cry did not go unheeded. God heard Ishmael's cries and answered him: *Ba'asher hu sham*---exactly as he was in that moment.

Abraham and Sarah may not have heard—but GOD heard—and now WE too will hear! And this year, our task as a community is to say to ourselves and to every Ishmael in our midst—those here today and those still in the wilderness—that we are committed to sharpening our ability to hear. . . . (whatever your cry might be)-- because all belong to this community. . . .wherever you are at this moment.

While the Book of Leviticus makes it appear that one must meet some mythic notion of physical perfection to approach God, (suggesting that “*No man of your offspring throughout the generations who has a defect shall be qualified to offer the food of his God*”)-- the truth is: No one of us need be perfect—we all have our abilities/we all have our disabilities. We learn in Midrash Numbers Rabbah that “When the Jews left Egypt, almost all of them were disabled. *How did that happen to be? They had been working with bricks and clay, climbing to the tops of buildings. Those doing the construction work 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, blinding them. That’s how they became disabled.*”

Seldom do we know the true abilities, the internal life, the heart of the people we encounter. Those who look like they have the “perfect life” could very easily be struggling with personal demons. And those who would quickly be defined as a “person with disabilities”—have brilliance hidden within.

I once had the privilege of listening to Jacob Artson, the severely autistic son of Rabbi Brad Artson. With the help of an assistive technology device, Jacob (who can not speak) gave one of the most thoughtful, insightful talks about Jewish life and life in general that I’ve ever heard. When asked how he developed such brilliant thoughts, he said: Because of my autism. Everyone else is speaking all the time. I just listen, and so I’m able to think more clearly. No one expected such brilliance from Jacob, but when he was given an opportunity—and we were willing to listen—it was amazing to see what we had been missing.

On Rosh Hashanah, we celebrate the Creation of Humanity and we recall that each one of us was created *B’tzelem Elohim* (in the Image of G). Thus, at the start of this new year, we remind ourselves that it is our task to listen well, to look with attentive eyes and an open heart—so that we can recognize the *tzelem elohim* in each and every person who enters this community.

One of the most beautiful teachings within Judaism is that upon encountering someone with a disability—we must immediately acknowledge that our diversity is an expression of sacredness— by offering the blessing: *M’shneh et Habriyot*. Blessed are You, Adonai, Creator of all—who varies creatures. In saying this blessing, we are reminding ourselves of the varied and beautiful images of G we can encounter in our community and in our world.

In just a few moments, we will recite the Amidah and listen to the blasts of the Shofar at *Malchuyot, Zichronot* and *Shofarot*. The Mishnah asks: Why do we sound the shofar at Musaf and not (as one might expect) at the Shacharit service earlier in the day? Why? Because the call of the Shofar is the central sound of Rosh Hashanah—and we can not do

it early in the service because we need to wait for all to arrive—those who can easily enter and those who are challenged by the doorway of our shul.

As we hear the cry of the Shofar this year—in this year of *Hakhel*—this year of coming together---may we have a true coming together as a community. May we open ourselves and trust ourselves and those around us to be truly inclusive...

May its call open us to see the beauty, the strength, the value of each and every person in our midst—may it open our hearts to know the *Tzelem Elohim* in each person we encounter—and to celebrate the diversity of the community we are creating together.

Amen/ken y'hi ratzon

**Westchester Reform Temple
Cantor Amanda Kleinman**

K'doshim Introduction 5776

For my brother, Adam, accomplishing the most mundane activities required an almost superhuman effort. Adam was born with a host of physical and developmental challenges that complicated his ability to perform the tasks many of us take for granted. Growing up, household conversation often centered around the most detailed minutiae of everyday tasks: how would Adam get from the parking lot to the front door of his school? Could we find a car seat that would meet his needs? How would he get up that flight of stairs?

My parents faced an uphill battle in meeting Adam's basic, everyday needs, and that battle often drained them of every ounce of energy they had to give. Still, for my parents, just getting Adam dressed, fed, and through the doors of his school (as Herculean a feat as those tasks often were) was never enough. They would ask: how could we help Adam achieve his unique mission on this earth? How could we enable him to contribute to and benefit from our world? What did it mean for someone who didn't know what Passover was, for whom being called to the Torah would never be in the cards, to be part of a Jewish community? We were unable to answer all, or even most of these questions, but I don't believe that in any way lessened the importance of asking.

This afternoon's Torah portion, K'doshim, contains our most well-known Jewish text in support of inclusion of those with disabilities: "You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind." We must ensure that those with disabilities do not face those stumbling blocks that will keep them from coming through the doors of the synagogue – stumbling blocks like stairs leading up to the bima, or inaccessible bathrooms.

However, these iconic words, that give people with disabilities an entry point into the Jewish community, are followed soon after by a passage that stops them dead in their tracks: a mere two chapters later, we read about those who are disallowed from serving as priests: the Biblical text reads: "No man of your offspring throughout the ages who has a defect shall be qualified to offer the food of his God. No one who is blind, or lame, or has a limb too short or too long; no one who has a broken leg or a broken arm; or who is a hunchback . . ." By removing those physical stumbling blocks, we have enabled people with disabilities to come through our doors. But, what good is getting through the door, if once inside you're denied the chance to engage in a meaningful way?

The contradiction is troubling. How can we welcome people into our communities, only to relegate them to the fringes once they arrive? Rabbi Jack Reimer, who served as President Clinton's rabbinic advisor, points out that, in fact, our Torah was quite progressive for its time; other ancient cultures denied people with disabilities even the

most basic rights; he notes specifically the words of the Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, who went so far as to question the right of the person with a disability to live at all. This comparison does not mean we should be content with our Torah's *chiddush* – its positive innovation. Rather, it teaches us that becoming an inclusive community is a process. Our ancestors took a very important first step, and it is up to us to take the next ones: to ensure that people with disabilities enjoy not only physical access to our communities, but the ability to engage deeply and fully once they get here.

Here at WRT, values of inclusion are woven deeply into the fabric of our community. We had in mind the words of Leviticus 19 when we constructed our new building: wheelchair-accessible ramps flank both sides of our bima, and the elevator to our second-floor religious school classrooms ensures that not a single part of our building is inaccessible to our children. Values of inclusion also infuse our programming and educational choices: we are one a very small number of congregations with a full-time Learning Differences Coordinator, and each year we bring speakers to educate our teens for Jewish Disabilities awareness month.

Yet, being a community committed to inclusion requires us to evaluate our practices regularly. Are our playgrounds fully accessible? Should we have Braille prayer books available at all services? Are there families with children whose needs are not being met, whose stories we need to hear? To that end, WRT is honored to have been chosen to participate in the UJA Synagogue Inclusion Cohort. Over the course of the year, we will be working with consultants from RespectAbilityUSA to evaluate and improve upon our practices in the area of inclusion. Our work is already being led by our Inclusion Task Force, headed by our dedicated leader Susan Weiner. I would invite anyone who is interested in this work to join our task force; additionally, please come and share your own story with us. It is by hearing from you that we will know where best to focus our attention.

The UJA Synagogue Inclusion Cohort is subtitled with those famous words from the Book of Isaiah: “For my House shall be called a house of prayer for *all* people.” Let us all work together to actualize this vision of inclusivity in our own community.

Sermon—Kol Nidrei
Rabbi Heidi Hoover
Temple Beth Emeth
September 22, 2015

Isaiah chapter 56, verse 7: My house shall be a house of prayer for all peoples.

When I was in college, the value everyone was talking about was “diversity.” Diversity was desirable. It was considered good because there are lots of different kinds of people in the world. There was discussion of transitioning from thinking of the United States as a melting pot to thinking of it as a patchwork quilt—where the different pieces are all together but don’t lose their distinctiveness. The idea was that diversity is beneficial to everyone because everyone’s experience is enriched by knowing about the experiences and cultures of others who are different than ourselves. The focus was really on racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity, though there are many other kinds.

Over the past few years, while diversity has remained an important value, another has also been much-discussed in the circles I am in, and that value is inclusion. The concept of inclusion is similar to diversity, in that it involves integrating into the same community people who are different from each other. Inclusion, however, rather than referring to race, ethnicity, and culture, has to do with people who have disabilities or special needs.

One might ask: Why do we need specific focus on diversity or inclusion when we know that people in a community are different from each other? They should come and be different—so what? This is a question that could only be asked by someone who is in what I’ll call for this moment the mainstream of the community—someone who would generally not be perceived as different from what would be considered the typical range of participants.

The fact is that it is still not easy or comfortable for many who find themselves outside the mainstream to feel integrated in congregations. We like to believe that we are better at this than many other congregations, and perhaps we are. This Kol Nidrei evening, as we begin our day of atonement, I’d like to spend some time doing some self-examination of our community and ourselves regarding how well we really are doing with including as many people as we can, and how we can improve going forward.

We as a community are very interested in making as many people comfortable with us as we can. In some ways we do that very well. In other ways we have more to do, both at the individual level and at the congregational level.

To that end, at the congregational level, we applied for and were accepted as participants in the Inclusion Project, sponsored by UJA-Federation. This year, we are working with consultants from RespectAbility USA, an organization that helps analyze and address issues of inclusion of people with disabilities. We are also receiving grant money to help

improve our inclusiveness. This project is primarily focused on inclusion of children with special needs, but it actually will benefit us as a whole community.

It is very exciting to have been chosen to participate in the Inclusion Project. I've been told by the organizers that usually they would not choose such a small congregation to be included, but our application made it clear that we are really committed to inclusion of people with disabilities. I'm proud of that, and I hope you are too.

In the past, our religious school has been a good place for many children with special needs, who have had positive experiences, in some cases really triumphant, moving, beautiful experiences. These successes happened because of the talent and skill that the teachers here brought with them. There are other children who have quietly left our school because it didn't work for them, and we have to face that too.

We try to meet each student where he or she is at, to encourage each child to participate at his or her level, and not to compare children to one another. We try to foster community among them. We have really been dependent on what the teachers we hire bring to the table, though. If a teacher brings experience with children with special needs, or at least a good instinct for how to work with children with different needs and learning styles, then we do really well. But if they don't bring that experience or instinct, we have not been able to do much to help them. Through the Inclusion Project, one of our goals is to offer some training to our teachers that can help them get better at teaching all of our students, because when a teacher knows how to respond to students with special needs, he or she becomes better at teaching in a way that will be beneficial to all the students. We also hope to put in place a system so that we can continue to offer teacher training going forward.

There are some changes we have made recently that have helped people with disabilities. Railings have been added to the bimah; the first row of seats in the sanctuary was removed to make space for walkers and wheelchairs to get through, and when we got a new tenant in our building this year, we reclaimed a room on the first floor as our community room. It's accessible without needing to go up or down stairs.

Meanwhile, many parts of our building remain inaccessible to people who cannot navigate the stairs. It seems that there isn't much we can do about this. An elevator is prohibitively expensive for us, and with our building's layout, it's not clear where it would even be. We must be aware that this is a limitation of our community. We mitigate it as we can by holding smaller meetings in our first-floor community room and by bringing microphones off the bimah for those unable to climb the stairs to the bimah. We are very fortunate that it is possible to access our sanctuary without using stairs.

You have probably noticed that we have a new sound system in the sanctuary. Unlike the previous one, this one could accommodate a hearing loop for the hearing-impaired.

We're not there yet, but we are closer than we were.

As part of the Inclusion Project, we have formed an inclusion committee whose mission is to look for ways we can continue to increase our success in this area. The committee will look at what we can accomplish and what has to go on our wish list for later. Some of you have already decided you want to serve on that committee. If any of you who have not are intrigued by the idea, just let me know after Yom Kippur and you can be a part of this important work too.

Joining a committee isn't for everyone, though. This Yom Kippur, we look not only at what we have done and what we resolve to do as a community, but also at what we have done and not done as individuals, and how we might want to change.

This is a time for us to consider: When have we made assumptions about another person's behavior in our synagogue or their response to us? We sometimes assume that others are unfriendly or being deliberately inappropriate, when in fact they are consumed by a personal issue or have difficulty with social skills for reasons we don't know about.

When have we turned to look because of a disturbance of some kind in the sanctuary? Turning and looking is natural when we hear something unexpected, and it's often received as disapproval. A smile can defuse that feeling. How often do we smile at the person we've turned to look at?

Sometimes we might not approach someone we perceive as different from ourselves because we think it might feel awkward. If we all avoid a potentially awkward interaction, though, the person who we felt that way about may end up coming to our synagogue and having no one speak to them. That's a lonely feeling.

We won't always get it right, and it is the task of every one of us, disabled or not disabled at this time, with whatever needs we might have, to have patience with each other, to assume good intentions, and to work together to help as many people as possible to feel comfortable.

It may be that this doesn't sound very spiritual. Maybe it doesn't sound like what you'd think of as soul-searching, repenting, atoning, renewing. The thing is, though, that in order to change for the better, we often have to ask practical questions and take practical steps. As we do this practical work, let us remember that it is also sacred work, in the service of the One who created all beings in God's image, in all our diversity and with all our different needs.

Everyone who comes to our community is looking for basically the same things. We're looking for an opportunity to participate in Judaism, a connection to something greater than ourselves, comfort and peace, friendly people to interact with. Each one of us has the

ability to help someone else find what they're looking for here. It doesn't always come naturally, and depending on our own personalities and those of the people we encounter, it isn't always easy.

In the Bible, God says through the prophet Isaiah, "My house shall be a house of prayer for all peoples." Now, the meaning of that when Isaiah wrote it was that eventually, at the end of days, everyone would worship God. But it can have another meaning for us. "My house shall be a house of prayer for all peoples" can mean that our synagogue isn't just for people who are all more or less the same. It isn't just for people who are easy to accommodate. It's also, ideally, a place for people who aren't easy to include.

It is the nature of boundaries and inclusion that most decisions made to include some people will exclude others. If a service includes people whose special needs mean that they make a lot of noise, that service would exclude people who have trouble hearing and therefore need a largely quiet environment, for example. We are a small community and therefore it isn't always easy to navigate how to address situations where the needs of some conflict with the needs of others. Part of our work is to recognize that and be compassionate with one another, even as we each want our own needs met.

There is also a place for openness. The more we can feel comfortable sharing with each other what our needs are, the more opportunities there can be for helping each other. This involves the need for trust in each other, though, which doesn't always come quickly. And depending on an individual's situation, he or she may not feel comfortable revealing something they believe may cause them to be stigmatized, even if it increases the chances of misunderstanding if the condition is not revealed.

Finally, it's necessary for us to own our own feelings and reactions. By that I mean that when we have a reaction to something, it is not the fault of someone else. If we choose not to reveal a disability or special need that we have or a loved one has, we can't expect others to know about it. If we feel awkward around someone who is acting in an unusual way, that awkward feeling is coming from us; the other person is not creating it.

As we enter the new year, there are many reasons to feel good about ourselves as a community and as individuals for the way we interact with each other, with our various needs and quirks. There is also room for improvement, as there always is for us humans. Let us be compassionate toward one another. Let us build trust that will allow for greater openness. Let us remember that if we are not disabled now, chances are we will be at some point in our lives, every one of us. Let us do teshuvah and repent for the times we have been less inclusive than we would like, and let us forgive ourselves for that as we renew our commitment to moving toward a day when our synagogue can be a house of prayer for all people. Amen and g'mar chatimah tovah—may you be sealed for a good year to come.

Rabbi Linda Henry Goodman, Union Temple of Brooklyn
The Inclusion Grant
Rosh Hashanah Morning, 5777 – October 3, 2016

We don't know all that much about Isaac, son of Abraham and Sarah, but in light of the events in our Torah portion this morning, we might imagine that he was traumatized, to say the least. And in fact, he went on to live a rather undistinguished life, living in many ways in his father's shadow. But, he married a nice young woman, with whom he raised two sons. He accumulated some wealth. But all in all, a weak and ineffectual character. Toward the end, he went blind. He was disabled – and needed his sons to take care of him. Yet, as we know, even in his blindness he had the capacity for great blessing – and through his blessing, he ultimately charted the course of our history as a people. If Isaac, magically, were to appear at our door this Rosh Hashanah, how would he fare? He was one of the three patriarchs of our people. Would he find a place of comfort in our congregational home?

“You shall not insult the deaf, nor place a stumbling block before the blind.” We will read it in our Torah portion on Yom Kippur Afternoon. So how effectively have *we* removed the stumbling blocks: for people with poor vision, people with limited mobility, people whose perception styles do not conform to what we *used* to think of as “the norm?” Isaiah teaches us: “My house shall be called a House of Prayer for all peoples. . .” And so we ask ourselves, is *our* house truly a house of prayer for *all* peoples?

About a year and a half ago, our congregation set out on a journey – a journey which will be ongoing in the coming years. Thanks to the efforts of Mindy Sherry, our Director of Youth and Family Engagement, our application was accepted to join a cohort of six congregations on this extremely important journey. The journey was funded by UJA-Federation of New York, with additional funding from the Leo Oppenheimer & Flora Oppenheimer Haas Foundation. The grant we received was for a pilot program called “The Synagogue Inclusion Project.” I've mentioned it in various bulletin articles, and we have talked about it at various times throughout the temple. But in case you missed it, here is a bit of background.

The Synagogue Inclusion Project is a groundbreaking 18-month pilot program, to formulate an approach toward integrating members of our community with disabilities. In addition to Union Temple, the pilot synagogue cohort included: Park Avenue Synagogue in Manhattan, Temple Beth Emeth v'Ohr Progressive Shaari Zedek, over in Kensington, Conservative Synagogue Adath Israel of Riverdale, the Park Slope Jewish Center, and Westchester Reform Temple in Scarsdale. Obviously, a combination of large, small, urban and suburban, Reform and Conservative. What we *shared* was the desire to be more inclusive of people with disabilities. The 18-month process has taken us through evaluations of attitudes, facilities, focus groups, website evaluations, field trips, educator training programs, conferences, and personalized coaching for clergy, staff

and lay leadership. The efforts were supported by the nonprofit disability group *RespectAbility*, led by Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi, along with Shelley Cohen, Meagan Buren and the organization called MATAN, whose mission it is to educate Jewish leaders, educators and communities, empowering them to create learning environments supportive of children with special needs.

At one of the preliminary meetings of our committee, Shelley Cohen walked with us through our building with an iPad recorder. She noticed doors that opened and closed on each other; steps in areas that are supposed to be flat; signage that did not clearly indicate where the handicapped accessible restroom is located, and additional stumbling blocks, which I'll mention shortly.

Shelley lives in Manhattan, and belongs to the Lincoln Square Synagogue on the West Side. What makes her such an expert? Life makes her an expert. Her son Nathaniel, now deceased, unfortunately, spent his life dealing with the effects of Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy, which forced him to use a wheelchair when he became quadriplegic.

And now, I have my own *mechilah* to do. Because in thinking about Shelley, and all the responsibilities that she has had to shoulder in her life, I found myself thinking at first blush - "Oh - that's why she has studied this situation so thoroughly - to help her son." And a similar thought about Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi, whose child has various disabilities. "That's why she's doing this." And then, I overheard myself. "Really? You mean, sensitivity to the needs of people with disabilities is only for those who *live* with disabilities? No one else needs to be concerned?" It's not that we're insensitive or unfeeling. *Of course* we're all sensitive people, and capable of great compassion. It's just that there are so many things in life that compete for our attention, that unless something absolutely gets in our face and demands that we *see* and *understand*, it's just too easy for us to pass by, without really even noticing. That's the way it is, often, for people with disabilities. . . . But we are all vulnerable. Obviously, none of us wants anything to happen to us, or to anyone we care about. But sometimes, it does.

Some of you may remember my mom, Jeanette, *aleha hashalom*. For about ten years, she fought mightily against the ravages of Parkinson's Disease. But in her last year or two, she too needed a wheelchair to get around. And she used to come down here with her aide on the Holidays and sit right over there on the aisle. She had a great career as a school teacher, and as my mom, and then, there she was. . . . We all wish for a long, happy, and healthy life. And why not. But none of us is immune.

So here's what we've accomplished so far at Union Temple, through direct use of the grant money:

- Sensitivity training for our teachers to help them understand and work with sensory and attention issues;
- We now have a Hebrew specialist to work one-on-one with students who can benefit from individual guidance and tutoring;

- We have developed a highly specific student learning questionnaire, so that our parents can help us *understand* their children's needs and learning styles more completely;
- For Bar/Bat Mitzvah training, we've always had high standards, and we're maintaining them. But we have come to understand that each student needs to have their bar/bat mitzvah, and approach their studies and tweak the service in a way that is most helpful to promoting their own sense of accomplishment. This includes a new computer program that will enable me, and all those involved with every student - to remain connected at all times, particularly the students;
- Come this November at our First Friday Family Service – that's on November 4th - we will roll out for the first time, our new Visual Tefila, which we have purchased from the CCAR -
 - Visual T'filah™ utilizes contemporary technology - projectors and screens, and the like - to display liturgy - with art and other visual imagery. It's not just a "PowerPoint service," but draws forth elements from our history and tradition that were sacrificed when other technologies emerged.
 - It allows us to incorporate into the service -- art; visual awe; liturgical creativity; and dynamic prayer. Yes, we'll still use our prayer books. But for some people, it will be easier NOT to.
- Some of you are benefitting from the grant right now. If you happen to be using a large-print machzor, and feel comfortable raising your hand to let us know, please do.
- Mindy and I, and a few members of our lay committee, have attended all-day workshops at UJA-Federation, which have been eye-opening and inspiring. We even have a plaque from Federation commending us for entering into this process. Does it mean that we're done? No, we're not done - we're *far* from done! Some of our needs can be accomplished relatively easily; like improved signage; and placing a mezuzah at our new entrance, when we have it, at a lower angle. Other needs will cost more money – more than we have right at this moment. A hearing loop, for instance; and perhaps most obviously, this bimah. You know, bimahs like this are relatively common, particularly in metropolitan synagogues that were built in the 1920's and '30's. The operative ideology was that one would walk up into God's presence. I guess it just wasn't part of their consciousness that one could also *roll* up to God. But structural changes are difficult and costly. For now, we will try our best. In a conversation with some bar/bat mitzvah parents last week, for instance, I made it clear that if Grandma can't walk up to the Torah for the generation-passing ritual, we'll bring the Torah down to Grandma. We've done it before, and we'll do whatever we need to - to make it easier.

Many things that may seem insignificant and invisible to most; but to people with disabilities, they are huge, and sometimes, insurmountable.

We read today about Isaac, son of Abraham and Sarah. As it happens, I am an ardent fan of another Isaac – the great violinist Itzhak Perlman – in my book, certainly one of the

greatest violinists who has ever lived, and whose sweet playing I listen to anytime I have the chance. As we all know, Itzhak Perlman grew up at a time just before the polio vaccine came into its own, and thus he has spent his entire life in braces, in a chair, or on crutches. Those of us who have attended his concerts became familiar over the years with the almost superhuman efforts he had to put out, just to get on and off the stage, and to stand up on his aluminums and bow to his adoring audiences. But now, thankfully, he has a scooter that allows him to drive on and off the stage with the greatest of ease. First time I saw it, I thought, of course! It makes perfect sense! Sometimes the answer is right in front of your nose, but it takes a while to notice it.

For Isaac, son of Abraham and Sarah, in addition to the blindness of his old age, there may have been other difficulties with which he struggled during his life. We will never know. We *do* know he had a son named Jacob.

So I will leave you today with a story about another Jacob – the son of my Rabbi colleagues, ---

I can see in my son, a beautiful soul, and a *zisse neshomeh* trying to express itself, and I see his sickness trying to shut him in. I see Jacob beating against the limits of his autism, struggling to emerge. I know my Jacob from the inside out, and I know that my Jacob is not his illness. But I also see people shying away from Jacob — confusing his illness for him and not seeing the beautiful boy but seeing instead a label, autism. Jacob isn't autism and Jacob isn't autistic. Jacob is Jacob. And he is like every other child, precious, and sweet, and beautiful if you can learn to address him in a way that he can respond to. It takes effort. It takes starting with Jacob's illness and working toward Jacob's soul, so that his label is a tool, not an obstruction. We live in a world of labels; we live in a world of division. We live in a world that sees only the label and dismisses the person beyond the label. We don't take time to see the person who that label is hiding, who that label is distorting and covering. I have learned that everybody is somebody's Jacob. And every Jacob has parents who, like me, pray that someone out there will be able to see their "Jacob" with love and with compassion. That some kind soul will look beyond the label and will care for their child with kindness and warmth. We all need to see other people as worthy of our love, not just the ones who are easy to love or to respect, but most particularly those who are not: the nudnik who won't leave you alone, that's somebody's Jacob. The person at work who keeps saying those annoying things, that's somebody's Jacob. The fellow congregant everyone avoids after services, she is somebody's Jacob. . . .

On this day of our New Year, we pray for wisdom and strength to embrace *all* the Jacobs in our midst with acceptance, and love, and respect, as children of the Living God. May all who would come here to join us in peace, always find their way in and around this House of God.