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SYNAGOGUES FOR ALL ABILITIES:

A STUDY ON BECOMING INCLUSIVE

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UJA-Federation of New York is committed to strengthening synagogues. Over the years, we have identified and examined the attributes that enable synagogues to thrive. As synagogues strive to be 21st century institutions where robust Jewish life can thrive, it is critical that they be welcoming and inclusive. Thriving synagogues strive to more fully represent and engage the full spectrum of their community, and there should not be barriers for those who wish to connect. Every realm of synagogue life such as worship, education, pastoral care, social action, or simply socialization, is accessible to people of all abilities.

UJA-Federation of New York's Synagogue Inclusion Project is funded by the Oppenheimer Haas Foundation and is designed to support synagogues in creating communities where people of all abilities are valued, included, and can fully participate in congregational life. Over the past four years, synagogues have worked with UJA to undergo assessments, develop action plans, and implement immediate change toward successful inclusion.

This report shows the powerful change that a focus on disability inclusion can create in a synagogue, highlights keys to success and steps to consider for leaders looking to move inclusion forward in their communities, and exhibits the long-term impact of action planning on each congregation's inclusion journey.

We hope this report can be used to discover easy inclusion steps for your congregation, to plan self-guided evaluation, or just to begin a conversation about disability inclusion within your community.

To access additional resources around synagogue inclusion, go to ujafedny.org/get-info/for-synagogues.

We welcome your thoughts and reflections, and we want to hear how you use this report in your synagogues. Write to us at synagogues@ujafedny.org.

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Introduction

UJA-Federation of New York's Synagogue Inclusion Project is a grant-funded initiative designed to support synagogues in creating communities where people of all abilities are valued, are included, and can fully participate in congregational life. Over the past four years, synagogues have worked with UJA to undergo assessments, develop action plans, and implement immediate change toward successful inclusion.

The first two Synagogue Inclusion Project cohorts brought together a total of 14 synagogues, with another eight currently participating in the program's 3rd cycle. These 22 participant congregations are among more than 600 that UJA serves in its eight-county catchment area (NYC's five boroughs, Nassau and Suffolk counties on Long Island, and Westchester). In addition to geographical differences, the synagogues vary in membership size, physical and staff resources, and denominational affiliation.

The congregations profiled throughout this report participated in an intensive process, beginning with a 360° assessment (Synagogue Inclusion Inventory) to identify strengths and challenges, followed by the creation of an action plan that pinpointed goals including immediate changes, short-term opportunities, and long-term aspirations. The entire process from assessment to implementation was guided by synagogue leadership with mentorship and support from their individual project coach. The program also included opportunities for communal learning sessions with leaders in the field of disability inclusion; these ongoing convenings bring together synagogues currently in the project as well as those from earlier cohorts.

In the current iteration of the Synagogue Inclusion Project, emphasis has shifted from cohort-specific learning to the individual synagogue learning process, allowing for a broader group of participating synagogues while maintaining the depth of impact for each congregation.

This report shows the powerful change that a focus on disability inclusion can create in a synagogue, highlights keys to success and steps to consider for leaders looking to move inclusion forward in their communities, and exhibits the long-term impact of action planning on each congregation's inclusion journey.




The report includes a variety of cases from the program's past four years, describing both the synagogues' work during the project timeline and their ongoing steps toward creating inclusive environments. The report highlights synagogues large and small, urban and suburban, and of various denominations, all brought together in a shared process of discovery and positive change.

The findings and stories shared in this report can be used to discover easy inclusion steps for your congregation, to plan self-guided evaluation, or just to begin a conversation about disability inclusion within your community.



Guide to Reading the Report

In addition to the narrative describing each synagogue's journey, the case studies are categorized by three characteristics. These color-coded tags provide quick context for each synagogue and can help you identify stories of synagogues like your own.



1. Size

-  Small (0 – 300 member units)
-  Medium (300 – 600 member units)
-  Large (600+ member units)

2. Location

-  Urban (New York City)
-  Suburban (Long Island/Westchester)

3. Building control

-  Own (full control over physical space)
-  Rent (partial/no control over physical space)

4. Denomination





-  Traditional Egalitarian
-  Conservative
-  Renewal
-  Reform

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Executive Summary

At the core of a thriving congregation is a commitment to ensuring that every individual is valued and has a place in the community. The UJA-Federation of New York's Synagogue Inclusion Project, funded by the Oppenheimer Haas Foundation, engages with synagogues to create communities where people of all abilities are valued, included, and can fully participate in congregational life.

Participation in the Synagogue Inclusion Project provides congregations with opportunities to learn, grow, and increase their capacity around the inclusion of people with disabilities. This report highlights the experiences of a sample of participating congregations, bringing to light the key factors that enabled their success.

The central finding of this report is that meaningful, sustainable change in the area of disability inclusion need not be significantly time-consuming nor cost-prohibitive, illustrating that becoming a more inclusive community is not an onerous process to be feared. There are many simple, cost-effective ways to increase accessibility that will, in turn, help to shape the inclusive culture of the synagogue community.

Finally, a goal of this report is to help congregations who seek to become more inclusive of people with disabilities to identify ways they can replicate these efforts within their own communities.

KEY FINDINGS

- **No one person within a congregation can effect sustainable change on their own.** Advancing the goal of increased disability inclusion is dependent on a congregation's ability to engage both committed lay leaders and professionals who will not only move specific tasks forward, but also cultivate additional leadership committed to a vision of sustained inclusion.
- **Inclusion does not mean expensive.** Learning to recognize bias, dispel long-held assumptions, and change attitudes is free. In addition, many of the changes a synagogue can make to help its membership embrace a culture of inclusion cost very little. While there are many synagogue buildings that require costly changes to become fully accessible, such efforts are not mutually exclusive with culture change. A congregation need not wait until it has the means to do it all; rather when a synagogue starts with what is within its means, opportunities for more often open along the way.
- **Inclusion is a process, not a destination.** Becoming an inclusive congregation is not about checking items off a list and reaching an end-point. Rather, an inclusive synagogue recognizes that the needs of all members are constantly changing. A large part of inclusion is being prepared to address needs as they arise as well as being flexible enough to shift or adapt when the situation requires it.
- **Transparency is critical.** Openly sharing a community's inclusive efforts increases awareness and helps to both shift the culture of the congregation at large as well as bring forward additional concerns for consideration. While a synagogue can engage in any number of tasks to become more accessible and inclusive, if the membership at large is unaware of these efforts, they have not truly met their goal of becoming an inclusive community.

EIGHT STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TO HELP YOUR CONGREGATION BECOME MORE INCLUSIVE

1. Assemble a team of key stakeholders.

As noted in the key findings, inclusion of people with disabilities cannot be advanced by one person alone. Assemble a core group of professionals and lay people. Include someone with disabilities and the parent/caregiver of someone with disabilities who has a vested interest in the growth of your community.

2. Conduct a self-assessment.

UJA-Federation of New York's Synagogue Inclusion Inventory is a tool to help identify barriers to the full participation of people with disabilities that exist in your community. This inventory will help you recognize areas of strength as well as acknowledge where improvement is needed in a variety of different areas.

3. Recognize that true inclusion requires a culture shift.

Culture change is a process. Recognize that you have embarked on a long-term endeavor and that the process itself can and will be as significant as the destination.

4. Work toward a vision.

Most synagogues already have a Vision and/or Mission Statement. It is significant to ensure that the work of becoming more inclusive is in line with (and not counter to) your synagogue's existing vision. Ensure the synagogue's vision includes a message of inclusion of people of all abilities.

5. Dream big and set goals.

Brainstorm a comprehensive list of all the things your community would hope to do. Do not engage in discussions of what may or may not be possible, as you will limit yourself. The items on your list will naturally fall into one of three categories: low-hanging fruit, short-term goals and long-term goals.

6. Begin with low-hanging fruit.

"Low-hanging fruit" refers to those tasks which can be quickly and easily accomplished in order to build positive momentum. This often includes things such as adding signage, moving items to be more visible or more easily reached, or something else that would be considered "easy" in your community. Initial success sets the stage to continue the forward momentum.

7. Share.

Let the congregation at large know about your efforts to increase inclusion. Changing a culture requires transparency and support; there is no reason to keep your work a secret until a program, event, or significant change is ready. Inclusion is not about any isolated program; it is about relationships. Invite others into your conversations.

8. Prioritize goals and see them to fruition.

Explore other goals and discuss what is realistic and possible in the short-term and what must be tabled for a later point in time. This is most frequently the place where congregations get stuck. Ideally, you will choose 3-5 goals to act on within a year, but if you must choose only one to enable movement forward, do that. As you turn each goal into action, build in opportunities for assessment and reflection. Share your successes, and learn from any missteps or challenges. Then do it all again.



CASE STUDIES

FORT TRYON JEWISH CENTER

MANHATTAN, NEW YORK



Fort Tryon Jewish Center (FTJC) is an urban, independent synagogue founded in 1938 that identifies as traditional and egalitarian. FTJC is located in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan with approximately 140 member units and a family-learning model for children with their parents through grade eight.

FTJC states that it is uniquely poised to engage in the work of disability inclusion: “Inclusion and diversity are core to our self-identity because of our traditional egalitarian ethos and because we are a growing and emerging community that is always striving and struggling to properly welcome, accommodate, and retain new members.”

At the outset of the Synagogue Inclusion Project, FTJC believed their greatest barrier to be physical space. Because they are renters, the limited ability to control the physical space — from bathrooms to wheelchair accessibility to signage — can be frustrating. Due to space restrictions, for four years FTJC held two separate minyanim on Shabbat evening, one in an inaccessible institutional space and another that rotated through various members’ accessible apartments. The difficulty of always making a minyan in the accessible location became a source of tension and frustration.

FTJC identified an internal social-justice team to serve as an inclusion committee. This group was composed of members who have a range of disabilities as well as allies to identify issues and suggest solutions to other committee leaders in the synagogue.

While the Synagogue Inclusion Project unfolded in the same way as at other participating congregations, it became clear that FTJC’s journey would be unique. The initial 360° Assessment (Synagogue Inclusion Inventory) highlights the challenges of their rented spaces. However, it also points to areas of strength and opportunities for culture change within their control.

Shortly after the project’s launch, FTJC began offering a designated space for those unable to fast on Yom Kippur to eat without having to leave the synagogue and go home, as well as a quiet/sensory-calming room on both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Also early in the project, sermons were delivered on Shabbat mornings (when the community has one minyan in a more physically accessible space within the rented building) with a focus on disability and accessibility issues, one by the rabbi and one by a member leader with disabilities. Over the course of this project, FTJC established a mechanism for requesting and hiring ASL interpreters, and developed language for their website on how to make such a request.

Recognizing the various limitations and challenges highlighted by the Inclusion Survey in the area of physical accessibility, key leadership amplified negotiations with their landlords to find solutions. In addition, members of FTJC’s internal social-justice team selected the issue of sound and hearing accessibility as their focus for this project. It is important to note that FTJC’s traditional halachic orientation, especially regarding Shabbat observance, and with many attendees coming from Orthodox backgrounds, means that various technological solutions available to more liberal congregations would not be so readily accepted within their community.

As FTJC set out to engage in meaningful dialogue around the issue of hearing accessibility, the process became deeply challenging. While committed to the value of increased disability inclusion, the committee dynamic was fraught with tension, and congregants at large had deep disagreements about the possibility of introducing microphones. One co-chair with disabilities became increasingly dissatisfied throughout the process and ultimately chose to resign from the synagogue.

In navigating this painful development, while seeking to maintain their status as a project participant, FTJC

sought guidance from their congregational coach, who advised perseverance to the remaining co-chair and rabbi:

My thoughts primarily center on the importance of continuing the inclusion project at the FTJC as you continue to build your vibrant, liturgically traditional, egalitarian synagogue community. By your very practice, you are quite unique. Building a culture of inclusion, where members of your congregation see the strength that comes from embracing the diversity within the FTJC community, would significantly enhance your mission. Therefore, it would be my suggestion to re-engage the FTJC inclusion committee that includes many of the previous participants who see participation as a means of helping their synagogue identify, learn, problem-solve, and increase capacity for inclusive policies, procedures, and practices. It would be meaningful to compose the committee of people of different ages, life stages, and differing abilities, including people who currently identify as having a disability or who have a family member with a disability.

While this experience remains sensitive for leaders and other members of the community, the lessons to be gleaned from the challenge are instructive. When tensions rise around a specific issue, many synagogue communities give up. It is common for committees to disband or for the “hot button” issue to be dropped entirely. The grace with which FTJC, with the warm and kind spiritual guidance of their rabbi, faced this obstacle and sought to move forward, demonstrates that communities can encounter stumbling blocks in their quest to become more inclusive, and that perseverance and understanding can ultimately lead to progress.

Rather than give up in the face of anger and frustration, the team at FTJC recognized that the community had not yet had enough common language and understanding



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to undertake these complex conversations. The team revised its goals and shifted its project focus to the organization of a Yom Iyun (Weekend of Learning) to help the congregation at large gain a basic education around the terms, principles, and patterns of disability, accessibility, and ableism. This included the identification of a number of members willing to take on new roles in implementing the Weekend of Learning and future initiatives as part of the disability and accessibility team, a standing committee to be relaunched following the Yom Iyun in December 2019.

The most significant outcome of this project for FTJC was the ability to engage in deep learning and meaningful conversations within their community around disability inclusion. Notable changes that occurred because of project participation include modifying the synagogue website with more accessible digital content, alternate text, and enhanced visual accessibility; increased education of staff and leaders, including youth educators; innovation of a “quiet hakafah” with more gentle dancing during Simchat Torah; development of an usher training; and development of a safety team in partnership with the community from which they rent space.

When reflecting on their participation in this project, synagogue leaders noted:

The greatest gift we received was in the person of our coach, who provided guidance and support over bumps in the road, and helped us liaise with UJA as we reconsidered our goals and process. We learned that inclusion is not about being nice but about upholding accessibility as a justice issue that deserves priority alongside other values of our community.

In an interview with FTJC’s rabbi after the completion of the formal project, he shared that although their situation was painful while going through it, the work of disability inclusion did not start and end with the Synagogue Inclusion Project. “Our work in this area came before, during, and continues now after the cohort.” This is profoundly instructive to others wishing to create meaningful, sustained change in their communities.

Further, their request for an accessible space for Friday night worship was finally granted, and their landlords have installed a ramp. The rabbi noted that their work in the project helped them to more fully leverage their ability to bring about this change. There is no longer a need to maintain a separate, accessible minyan, and FTJC now welcomes Shabbat together as a community.

PARK AVENUE SYNAGOGUE

MANHATTAN, NEW YORK



Park Avenue Synagogue (PAS) was founded in 1882 and is located on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. This Conservative congregation has approximately 1,700 member units and employs 80 full-time staff members, including five rabbis and two cantors. PAS has approximately 500 students and 60 part-time teachers in its religious school.

Before the start of the Synagogue Inclusion Project, the PAS religious school had two classrooms fully dedicated to students with disabilities in addition to opportunities for one-on-one support and tutoring. Students in those classes spent most classroom time in their separate class but were also incorporated into prayer services alongside their entire grade level of peers. When beginning their inclusion work, PAS leadership noted that their school “embraces children with various learning needs” but that it cannot “handle extreme developmental or emotional challenges.”

The synagogue already had an inclusion committee in place, employed a part-time inclusion coordinator, and had launched an inclusion task force. However, much of the synagogue’s inclusion work had been focused solely in the school and other youth programming, and they realized that they wanted to have a wider impact. One rabbi noted, “It’s easy to sell inclusion efforts for kids, but what happens when they grow up?” PAS did not want to miss out on the full lifespan of inclusion.

As they began to embark on this effort, one rabbi spoke about the importance of inclusion from the pulpit, stating: “We imagine the ability for everyone to participate with proper supports where necessary in all aspects of synagogue learning and life. We envision a welcoming place where there is a shared sense that we are all created in God’s image and that we embrace our diversity with courage, patience, and hope.” In joining the Synagogue Inclusion Project, PAS hoped to improve community attitudes toward people with disabilities, offer more inclusive worship, and overcome a number of past barriers to inclusion, including costs, staff time, and cultural issues.

At the beginning of the Synagogue Inclusion Project, PAS held two focus groups open to the entire PAS community. Most attendees were community members who identified as having a disability or having a family member with a disability as well as professionals working with people with disabilities. Participants in each focus group shared a sense of hopefulness that participation in the project could be transformational.

These focus groups also made clear that the largest inclusion-related issues at PAS were not about physical accessibility but about communal attitudes. One congregant shared, “It kills my mother when they say, ‘Please rise’ instead of ‘Those who can rise, please do.’ She [isn’t able to] stand and the kids ask, ‘What is Grandma supposed to do?’” Another discussed feeling judged by other congregants for not being able to “control their kid.” Many attendees noted that the synagogue has responded well when they asked for particular accommodations, but that inclusion efforts took place only on a case-by-case basis. This required individuals with disabilities and/or their family members to constantly advocate in order to have their needs met.

One small tension arose from the focus groups. Within the broad label of inclusion, there were internal disputes over the different kinds of people represented in the room and which disabilities or identities “counted” for inclusion. This raises a more general challenge that PAS faced throughout their inclusion work: not all concerns could be addressed at once, and expectations of immediate rather than gradual change occasionally led to frustration or in-fighting among Inclusion Committee members and other stakeholders.

PAS also undertook a comprehensive Synagogue Inclusion Inventory, assessing the existing physical accessibility, practices and policies, and awareness and attitudes around inclusion. Through this process, professional and lay leaders were able to identify priorities to be addressed.

In terms of physical accessibility, PAS faced a few limitations. These included a lack of accommodations for those who cannot hold heavy books, mezuzot located too high to be reached for people using wheelchairs and people of short stature, and a lack of priority seating for people with mobility limitations or using wheelchairs.

PAS had begun focusing on inclusive policies and practices prior to conducting the inventory. As a result, many policies were already established or in the process of rolling out, including full disability inclusion in the religious school and proactive feedback collection from visitors and members with disabilities. In terms of practices, however, PAS was missing language about inclusion in its mission statement and program publicity materials, and leaders did not use person-first language or invite congregants to “stand as they are able” during services.

With regard to awareness and attitudes, the inventory uncovered concerns similar to those expressed in the focus groups. Ushers, worship leaders, and congregants could improve in appropriately accommodating and responding to people with disabilities, particularly in cases of disruptive behavior during services. Disability awareness was also missing from the breadth of educational offerings, both in the religious school curricula and in the workshops/themed Shabbats offered to all congregants.

With regard to awareness and stigma reduction, one rabbi delivered a sermon on inclusion during the High Holidays. The Inclusion Committee and professional staff believed that this would kick off the project and set the tone for other inclusion opportunities to follow. Highlights from the ongoing project were also shared with the community during Jewish Disability Awareness and Inclusion Month (JDAIM).

Staff and lay leaders also began to proactively reach out to visitors or members with disabilities to solicit their feedback and identify their needs. In this way, they embraced the vision of a more inclusive community and demonstrated their strength of leadership as they led by example.

PAS also planned numerous physical changes. Ramps were added in addition to the existing steps both in the synagogue’s front lobby and leading to the bimah. Leadership began to work on providing clear signage

to direct people to large-print and Braille siddurim, ensuring that *tallitot* and *kippot* were accessible to people with limited mobility, and creating a sensory-calming room for children with disabilities that could be used during holidays and Shabbat. The congregation used the opportunity of these physical changes to celebrate and publicize their ongoing inclusion work, hosting a ritual ceremony to celebrate and publicize the installation of lower mezuzot in the main sanctuary.

The synagogue also planned to develop a formal inclusion policy to be a part of the website, synagogue application, and all printed materials. The development of that formal policy, combined with efforts to publicize available transportation to synagogue events and offer formal accommodations for students with disabilities to become b’nai mitzvah, filled many of the gaps in policies and practices that the assessment originally uncovered.

Throughout these extensive efforts, one of the biggest changes at PAS was the expansion of the Inclusion Committee in order to help sustain these efforts over time. The Inclusion Committee was built up with five subcommittees that report directly to PAS’s Steering Committee. These subcommittees address synagogue leadership, parent support, education and awareness, integrated programming, and physical space and ritual.

PAS also offered training to staff on disability inclusion and identified the membership manager as the go-to person to field inquiries about specific accommodations. The education team designated individual staff members to work with the various inclusion subcommittees on each area of focus.

Following these initial efforts, the number of students enrolled in the religious school grew and the number of known people with disabilities also grew. It is not clear whether these people were new to the synagogue or, as a result of this work, were more comfortable identifying themselves. Nonetheless, this development served as proof of concept and inspired PAS to continue growing its inclusion efforts.


PAS wanted to shift its focus from implementing specific practices/policies to inspiring larger cultural change within the congregation. For example, while the synagogue continues to host speakers and film screenings for JDAIM, one rabbi noted, “We realized that

inclusion isn't just a month, it's always. We could host a single speaker event and get 350 attendees but that doesn't reflect larger cultural change for the community.”

PAS rabbis saw cultural change as the most impactful but most challenging step toward creating a more inclusive community. This would have to be developed on a peer-to-peer basis, not just through staff leadership. A slow shift in culture relied on sending small positive messages: before a congregant turns around and gets angry at someone behaving differently in services, perhaps they will try smiling and acknowledging that different people express their spirituality in different ways.

PAS says that it is committed to the long game when it comes to slowly shifting culture: “We want to change our approach and habits with how we interact with people different from ourselves.” One rabbi emphasized the importance of shared vocabulary and expectations. Cultural change cannot happen top-down; it needs to be taken on communally with shared input and responsibility.

For example, the rabbi who serves as director of congregational education created an inclusion checklist for planning all events the synagogue holds, asking a number of simple questions to ensure that all events are being planned with inclusion in mind before, during, and after. He emphasized that the document is meant to be organic; he collects regular feedback from the staff members who use it to implement programs and updates the checklist accordingly. One rabbi likened having a standardized series of accommodations shared amongst all staff in all departments to having a “north star” for inclusion work, with everyone moving in the same direction toward a common goal.



**LISTENING AND
RESPONDING TO
THE NEEDS
OF AFFECTED
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THE CRUCIAL
FIRST STEP.**

Most recently, they have developed a partnership for inclusive prayer with the nearby reform Congregation Rodeph Sholom. Rodeph Sholom organizes four inclusion services each year for major holidays, and the rabbis and cantors at PAS collaborated with the leaders of those services to develop similar opportunities for additional holidays, hosted at PAS. This functions as a fully reciprocal partnership — each community is welcome at the other's services (as well as other guests, members or not), leading to a growing community and enhanced spiritual experience for anyone with disabilities who wants to participate.

Amidst all the positive progress, though, PAS leaders know that inclusion is not a finite process but rather an ongoing commitment. They recently employed interns through the Marlene Meyerson JCC Manhattan's Adaptations program, which helps participants gain vocational independence, providing work-readiness opportunities and development of job skills. PAS is hoping to open their future hiring processes and recruit candidates with special needs. One rabbi explained that he sees this opportunity not as a token or symbol, but because staff roles should be filled in ways that reflect the diversity of the community they serve.

PAS also hopes to hire a full-time person overseeing inclusion. While the program checklist was a starting point, PAS emphasized that they need to be thinking about inclusion questions all the time, beyond the checklist, stating, "We want someone who is empowered to constantly ask inclusion-focused questions."

Reflecting on the long journey from the beginning of their inclusion work to where they are today, PAS rabbis shared a few of their takeaways. One rabbi shared that for him, the most revealing step of the process was "sitting with parents who poured their hearts out. Hearing their needs and shortcomings, hearing their stories and pain, and understanding the growth to be had." For any synagogue, large or small, listening and responding to the needs of affected individuals is the crucial first step toward developing a more inclusive community.

Along the road, another rabbi emphasized, the key is patience and looking at the long game. "We want people to know that we're their home, they're welcome, and we accept them." Any synagogue working toward inclusion must remember this as their ultimate goal; along the inclusion journey, every small step brings the community closer to that aspiration of welcoming and acceptance.

PLAINVIEW JEWISH CENTER

PLAINVIEW, NEW YORK



Background

Plainview Jewish Center (PJC) is a Conservative synagogue founded in 1953. This suburban congregation is located in Plainview, New York. PJC has approximately 400 member units with a religious school for kindergarten through grade 12.

Staff at PJC is composed of a full-time rabbi along with a part-time cantor, educational director, family education director, and youth coordinator.

In applying to participate in the Synagogue Inclusion Project, PJC shared the following insights:

Why does your synagogue want to participate in this program?

We pride ourselves on being a warm and welcoming congregation. However, we have come to understand that to really fulfill this part of our mission we need more education, more sensitivity, and more accommodations for those whose participation in our community might otherwise be limited. We know from personal experience that many families and individuals encounter barriers to participation in our worship services and activities. Our efforts so far have been well-intentioned but piecemeal. It is time for us to take the next step.

What strides have you made in the past five years to advance your vision of disability inclusion?

We have provided large-print siddurim and assistive devices for the hearing impaired. We installed a chairlift to our bimah and made our restrooms more accessible. In addition, we engaged a trained special-needs teacher to help us become more responsive to the needs of children with both learning and social-emotional challenges. These efforts have made a difference, but also underscored for us the need to do much more to become a truly inclusive congregation.

Starting with Why: A Vision for Inclusion

When asked to describe what a fully inclusive synagogue would mean for PJC, leaders responded, “Our vision for our synagogue is to be inclusive of all demographics in our synagogue, from children to seniors, regardless of their physical challenges or special needs. We recognize that within our community, the needs of individuals vary. We want to be more understanding and respectful of this variety of needs and to take concrete steps to actively welcome all community members. We want to make a special effort to include not only our congregants, but also those who visit our synagogue as guests participating in simchas or other special events, so that everyone can participate as fully as possible in the life of our congregation.”

PJC had recently formed an Inclusion Committee with active synagogue members who were eager to lead their synagogue in this work.

Synagogue Inclusion Inventory (360° Assessment)

A congregation seeking to become more inclusive must identify barriers to the full participation of people with disabilities that exist in their community. The Synagogue Inclusion Inventory is a comprehensive tool for conducting an initial assessment. In addition to helping a congregation assess where they are and what work needs to be done, an initial evaluation provides a means to assess the effectiveness of changes made to improve inclusiveness over time.

This inventory has five dimensions: exterior accessibility, interior accessibility, practices and policies, awareness and attitudes, and safety and security.

Exterior Accessibility

Of the six items on the exterior accessibility section, one did not apply, and there were weaknesses in some areas such as a lack of signage indicating the location of wheelchair-accessible entrances and no way for people with physical limitations to open exterior doors without assistance.

Interior Accessibility

Of the 23 items on the interior accessibility section, PJC had some notable areas of strength. The main floor of the building is accessible to those with mobility issues, and seating arrangements in the sanctuary and social spaces can accommodate wheelchair users. In addition, lighting is adequate in the sanctuary and throughout the building, making it possible for people to both read and lip read easily. Noted limitations included:

- Bathrooms are not fully accessible.
- The synagogue's second floor, where religious school classrooms and offices are located, can only be accessed by navigating a flight of stairs.
- Mezuzot are not low enough to be reached by people using wheelchairs or by people of short stature.
- Interior doors cannot be opened without assistance.
- There are no accommodations for people who cannot hold heavy books during worship.
- Assistive listening devices for those with hearing loss exist, but are not readily accessible.

Practices and Policies

PJC was already providing accommodations to students with disabilities to become b'nai mitzvah as necessary. Congregants are invited to stand "as they are able" during worship services. The word "inclusion" is in their mission statement, although many on the Inclusion Committee believed this was intended to be spiritual, LGBTQ, and/or interfaith inclusion.

In several other areas there were limitations to the full inclusion of people with disabilities. These included:

- Membership application does not incorporate questions about accommodations to facilitate inclusion.

- Program publicity lacks statements about inclusion.
- Staff and lay leaders are not proactively reaching out to visitors or members with disabilities to solicit feedback.
- Leaders and congregants are not consistently using "person-first" or other intentional language (i.e. putting individuals before their disabilities).

Awareness and Attitudes

This is an area where significant growth was needed for PJC. Opportunities include helping ushers learn appropriate ways to greet and accommodate people with a range of disabilities; teaching ushers, worship leaders, and congregants how to respond helpfully and without judgment to disruptive behavior; and offering a speaker or an inclusion-awareness Shabbat or workshop.

Safety and Security

This four-question section seeks to determine if the community has a formal plan for safety and security. If yes, additional questions explore whether people with disabilities were considered in developing the plan and if people with disabilities have been a part of practicing the plan. PJC had not yet developed a formal plan for safety and security.

Developing and Implementing an Action Plan

PJC's Action Plan to become more inclusive of people with disabilities included items considered to be low-hanging fruit (those items that could be quickly and easily accomplished in order to build positive momentum) as well as both short- and long-term opportunities. Goals of PJC's Action Plan included improving overall awareness about disabilities within the culture of the community, reducing stigma, and addressing a variety of dimensions on the Synagogue Inclusion Inventory.

Items considered by PJC to be low-hanging fruit:

- Securing a donation of seven additional mezuzot, which were added to doorways at a lower level than the existing ones.
- Establishing a fund for disability inclusion for congregants and guests to support ongoing efforts through monetary donations.

In the area of raising awareness and reducing stigma:

- The chair of the Inclusion Committee delivered a sermon on inclusion.
- The synagogue hosted a disability advocate as a guest speaker on a Shabbat morning.

In the area of increasing physical accessibility:

- The existing accessible bathroom was made gender-neutral with appropriate, clear signage.
- Signage was added to the interior and exterior of the building to both help people identify accessible spaces and build awareness.
- The Inclusion Committee created a “break room” in their existing bridal room with appropriate sensory-friendly items for those who might get overwhelmed during services or other programs and need a break.
- A chairlift to the second floor, where all religious school classrooms and offices are located, was installed.

Impact and Next Steps

The effort to increase accessibility and inclusion at PJC is almost entirely lay-led. A small group of committed volunteers, with limited resources, has made significant change in a short amount of time.

Interior access to the building improved significantly over the course of this project. Installation of a chair lift to the second floor makes PJC’s religious school accessible for all students at all times. In addition, they are now thinking about how this second floor access can further benefit their community through increased opportunities for adult education and the potential for employment of individuals with disabilities. It is worth noting that PJC dedicated the chairlift in memory of a community member who had to stop working for the religious school when issues of disability prevented her from getting up the stairs. Her spouse serves as a member of PJC’s Inclusion Committee.



**THE WAY TO ENSURE
SUSTAINABLE CHANGE
IS TO MAKE SMALL,
INCREMENTAL
CHANGES.**

PJC's establishment of a dedicated inclusion fund is an example of a no-cost change that increased visibility of their inclusive efforts while generating resources for future projects.

Notable gains also occurred in the area of policy and practices. The mission statement is being discussed to include specific language about welcoming people of all abilities. In addition, they are exploring ways to make religious school classrooms and programs more inclusive now that they have significantly increased access.

When reflecting on their participation in this project, synagogue leaders noted that inclusion has become a lens through which they view everything they do:

We set out to help our congregation recognize the need for creating a more inclusive atmosphere in our synagogue. We also wanted to make tangible improvements to our accessibility to assist those in our congregation and community who need various types of support to participate in our activities. Our goals remained consistent over the two-year period. Our commitment to education and making tangible improvements to benefit those in need became firmer over this time period as we began to see concrete results.

PJC firmly understands what advocates in disability inclusion aim to teach: that the way to ensure sustainable change is to make small, incremental changes and share them with the community at large in meaningful ways.

Finally, PJC's leaders recognize that the conclusion of the formal Synagogue Inclusion Project is not the end of their inclusion work; rather it will continue to evolve over time and must be consistently re-evaluated. PJC has a number of additional projects already in progress and they plan to cultivate new leadership who will be passionate about disability inclusion.



Background

Romemu is a community founded in 2008 that self-identifies as part of the Jewish Renewal Movement. This urban congregation is located on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, renting space from the West End Presbyterian Church. They have recently expanded into a building that they own across the street from the church. Romemu has approximately 585 member units and a Seekers Holistic Hebrew School for children through b'nai mitzvah.

Staff at Romemu is composed of a full-time rabbi, executive director, and Jewish Emergent Network rabbinic fellow. There is additional part-time support staff.

In applying to participate in the Synagogue Inclusion Project, Romemu shared the following insights:

Why does your synagogue want to participate in this program for the inclusion of all abilities?

We want to live up to our ideals as a truly inclusive community. While we recognize that we cannot fix all of the barriers to inclusion at once, there is a lot we can be doing right now. We seek guidance to determine our next steps. We don't know how to systematically tackle these issues. There are assumptions about how much things cost, but we don't have all of the facts. We want to build a plan for the next 5 to 10 years and work toward sustainable inclusion.

What strides have you made in the past five years to advance your vision of disability inclusion?

We are currently based out of the West End Presbyterian Church (WEPC), a large, mostly inaccessible, early-20th-century building on 105th and Amsterdam. In the past five years, we have moved our High Holiday services (and last summer, all of our services) to an ADA-compliant building. At WEPC, we have moved events to the ground-floor chapel and sanctuary, when

the church's schedule has permitted. We have creative, alternative b'nai mitzvah rituals with children who have different learning needs. We published our own Friday night siddur and offer a large-print edition. We have raised consciousness within our community from the pulpit. An inspiring young woman gave her bat mitzvah d'var Torah in sign language. Romemu's founder and senior rabbi, David Ingber, and other rabbis of the community have given d'vrei Torah raising the issue of inclusivity and accessibility within our community.

Starting with Why: A Vision for Inclusion

When asked to describe what a fully inclusive synagogue would mean, Romemu leaders responded, "An inclusive community would welcome not only those of diverse religious backgrounds, people of all different races, ethnicities, and sexual orientations, but also people of all different abilities. We believe that Romemu has broken down so many barriers to entry and has become a home for countless folks who never imagined they would find a home within a synagogue community. And yet, accessibility is one significant barrier around which we still have significant work to do."

Prior to participation in this project, some inclusion-specific activities were undertaken, but in an ad hoc manner. Project participation is congruent with Romemu's commitment to embracing a diverse community.

Synagogue Inclusion Inventory (360° Assessment)

A congregation seeking to become more inclusive must identify barriers to the full participation of people with disabilities that exist in their community. The Synagogue Inclusion Inventory is a comprehensive tool for conducting an initial assessment. In addition to helping a congregation assess where they are and what work needs to be done, an initial evaluation provides a means to assess the effectiveness of changes made to improve inclusiveness over time.

This inventory has five dimensions: exterior accessibility, interior accessibility, practices and policies, awareness and attitudes, and safety and security.

Exterior Accessibility

Romemu currently rents space from the West End Presbyterian Church. As such, a number of areas of physical accessibility are not within their control to adapt or change. Of the six items on the exterior accessibility section, none were answered affirmatively. This survey opened a two-fold conversation for Romemu: 1. to potentially strengthen their relationship with their rental partners in dialogue around making the current space more accessible for both communities, and 2. to raise for consideration the many elements of physical accessibility as the community moves forward with plans for their own space.

Interior Accessibility

In accordance with Romemu's rental agreement with the church, most of the 23 items on the interior accessibility section are not within their control to change; however, as noted in the exterior accessibility section above, participation in this survey has given them significant food for thought, especially as they envision moving forward into a space of their own. There are a few areas of noted strength in the current facility:

- The current pew configuration within the sanctuary has flexible seating, providing ample room for people using walkers, wheelchairs, or other adaptive equipment.
- The bimah is located at floor level within the sanctuary and is fully accessible.
- All people entering the sanctuary have access to the Torah in the highly experiential, celebratory Renewal Movement service.
- They use lighter-weight paperback siddurim for their Shabbat morning services.

Practices and Policies

This section and the next one are fully within Romemu's control and therefore were acknowledged as areas of greater focus on this survey and the work to follow. Romemu already provided accommodations to students

with disabilities to become b'nai mitzvah. They had recently begun to use language that invites congregants to stand "as they are able" during worship services. Romemu's introduction and mission is highly inclusive of all people. While their mission statement does not explicitly include language about welcoming people with disabilities, they are a community committed to welcoming all who wish to participate.

In several other areas there were limitations to the full inclusion of people with disabilities. These included:

- Membership application does not incorporate questions about accommodations to facilitate inclusion.
- Program publicity lacks statements about inclusion.
- Leaders and congregants are not consistently using "person-first" or other intentional language (i.e. putting individuals before their disabilities).

Awareness and Attitudes

As this section is also within Romemu's control, it is worth noting areas for growth and focus. Staff and lay leaders needed training in disability awareness and inclusive behavior. Opportunities include helping ushers learn appropriate ways to greet and accommodate people with a range of disabilities; teaching ushers, worship leaders, and congregants how to respond helpfully and without judgment to disruptive behavior; and offering a speaker for an inclusion-awareness Shabbat or workshop.

Safety and Security

This four-question section seeks to determine if the community has a formal plan for safety and security. If yes, additional questions explore whether people with disabilities were considered in developing the plan and if people with disabilities have been a part of practicing the plan. Romemu had not yet developed a formal plan for safety and security.

Developing and Implementing an Action Plan

Romemu's Action Plan to become more inclusive of people with disabilities included items considered to be low-hanging fruit (those items that could be quickly and easily accomplished in order to build positive momentum) as well as both short- and long-term

opportunities. Goals of Romemu's Action Plan included improving overall awareness about disabilities, reducing stigma, and addressing a variety of dimensions on the Synagogue Inclusion Inventory.

Items considered by Romemu to be low-hanging fruit:

- Ensuring that *tallitot* and *kippot* are easily accessible to service-goers.
- Shifting language in both written and online communications.

In the area of raising awareness and reducing stigma:

- They offered a training session for all staff in disability awareness and inclusive behavior.
- They developed a new model where staff will alternate in leading greeters (Romemu's terminology for ushers) across experiences.
- They provided specific training offered to all greeters.

In the area of increasing physical accessibility:

- Romemu installed a portable room loop for the sanctuary to enable those with hearing loss to receive amplified sound to their hearing aids by magnetic signal in partnership with the West End Presbyterian Church.

Impact and Next Steps

The most significant outcome of this project for Romemu was the ability to engage in meaningful conversations within their own community as well as with their partners at the West End Presbyterian Church around disability inclusion.



**INCLUSION RELIES
ON RELATIONSHIPS.**

It is significant to note that even though Romemu rents space and a number of items in the Synagogue Inclusion Inventory are outside their control, there are many ways to make a congregation more inclusive that do not involve physical space and structural change. In addition, they are eager to incorporate all that they have learned about physical accessibility as they move forward into their own space.

Notable changes that occurred due to participation in this project include an increased awareness of physical conditions in the sanctuary and the designation of a member of the staff to survey the space prior to each service. They also installed a water cooler on the first floor as permanent water fountains are not fully accessible, increased signage around a gender-neutral accessible bathroom, and increased signage noting accessible entrances.

Each of these low-cost changes served to both increase accessibility as well as to increase awareness of accessibility, thereby shifting the culture of the community to become even more inclusive.

When reflecting on their participation in this project, synagogue leaders noted:

Inclusion relies on relationships. This work cannot happen without ongoing, meaningful dialogue with partners.

Finally, synagogue leadership recognize that the conclusion of the formal Synagogue Inclusion Project is not the end of their inclusion work. Plans for their new home, to be called The Romemu Center, include a firm commitment to inclusion and full accessibility. They also plan to continue to work in partnership with West End Presbyterian Church to ensure that the sanctuary becomes a fully accessible worship space.

TEMPLE CHAVERIM

PLAINVIEW, NEW YORK



Temple Chaverim is a Reform synagogue founded in 1981 and located in Plainview, New York, with approximately 476 member units. They have a religious school for children in kindergarten through grade 12, and there is no early childhood center.

Temple Chaverim was encouraged by a few lay leaders to address the issue of disability inclusion more deeply. Prior to participation in this project, some inclusion-specific activities were undertaken, but in an ad hoc manner. Temple Chaverim already provided accommodations to students with disabilities in the religious school and for b'nai mitzvah on a case-by-case basis. Staff and leadership occasionally reached out to members with disabilities for feedback, but there was no official policy to do this consistently. Project participation seemed congruent with the congregation's commitment to welcoming a diverse community. Temple Chaverim wanted to be part of this project because they knew they needed guidance in becoming inclusive of people with disabilities.

During the first few months of this project, Temple Chaverim's senior rabbi of 25 years announced he was moving to a new position. They hired an interim rabbi, and while he did not actively push the agenda of inclusion forward, neither did he hinder progress of the project.

Like other congregations in the Synagogue Inclusion Project, an initial 360° Assessment (Synagogue Inclusion Inventory) demonstrated areas of strength and challenge for Temple Chaverim. The interior of the building is accessible to those with mobility issues. In addition, the bimah is accessible and there is a special table that can be used to read Torah at a lower height. Noted limitations included mezuzot not low enough to be reached by people using wheelchairs and those of short stature; interior doors too heavy to be opened without assistance; no accommodations for people who cannot hold heavy books; and, while assistive listening devices for those with hearing impairments exist, they

were not readily accessible and there was no signage indicating their availability.

In several other areas there were limitations to the full inclusion of people with disabilities. These included a lack of language in the mission statement to explicitly welcome people with disabilities, the need to incorporate questions into the membership application about accommodations to facilitate inclusion, no statements about inclusion on program publicity, and leaders and congregants not consistently using "person-first" or other intentional language (i.e. putting individuals before their disabilities). Further, staff and lay leaders needed training in disability awareness and inclusive behavior.

As Temple Chaverim was creating an action plan for making their congregation more inclusive of people with disabilities, they simultaneously searched for a senior rabbi who would actively carry this work forward.

When they hired their new senior rabbi, Temple Chaverim made inclusion a priority of her onboarding experience. The Temple president made clear that inclusion is a significant value of the community. As a result of the project, not only did Temple Chaverim create a Congregation Relations Committee to address what it means to be inclusive, they also approved this committee in their bylaws, enabling the chair to sit on the congregational board and bring an inclusive lens to all board decisions.

After her onboarding, Temple Chaverim's new rabbi began using the following as her Shabbat welcome:

We'd like to welcome everyone here to Temple Chaverim. If you've never worshipped with us before, please know that we give page numbers throughout the service so that you can follow along. As is our custom, we also ask our congregation to rise during particular moments and particular prayers. If you are able to rise, we ask that you do so, but if not, we are okay with that, too. We welcome everyone from different

backgrounds and abilities, and we ask that you worship in the style that is most comfortable for you.

This Shabbat welcome is reflective of a significant gain for Temple Chaverim in the area of awareness and attitudes. Training for all clergy, staff, and religious school faculty helped to change perceptions and language use, and broaden expectations. Interior building access improved with the addition of signage. In addition, they removed the saddle from the entryway of a bathroom and installed hydraulic opening mechanisms to ensure that a fully accessible bathroom is both close to the sanctuary and is easily accessed from social spaces. They anticipate that the visibility of the bathroom project will additionally increase awareness.

When reflecting on their participation in this project, synagogue leaders noted that creating a culture of inclusion is an ongoing process and that little things make a big difference: “Not only did we make great accomplishments as a part of this project, but we are also continuing to plan for the future. As Temple Chaverim is making concrete changes to our building, we must continue to change our culture to truly become a welcoming and inclusive congregation.”

One way that Temple Chaverim has continued their journey beyond this project is by offering their synagogue as an intern site for local teens who are transitioning out of the school district’s special education program. Participants develop work and social skills to gain meaningful experience and become more independent.

Temple Chaverim has noted that the conclusion of the formal Synagogue Inclusion Project is not going to be the end of their inclusion work. There are a number of additional projects already in progress, and they have a goal of continued conversations around the issue of disability inclusion to continue to remove barriers. They are committed to engaging current and potential congregants in this dialogue. They believe that if you start a conversation and listen, hear, and understand, most stumbling blocks can be removed.



**EVERY INDIVIDUAL
IS VALUED AND
HAS A PLACE IN
THE COMMUNITY.**

TEMPLE BETH EL OF NORTHERN WESTCHESTER

CHAPPAQUA, NEW YORK



Background

Temple Beth El of Northern Westchester (TBE) is a Reform synagogue founded in 1949. This suburban congregation is located in Chappaqua, New York. TBE has approximately 540 member units with a religious school for children in kindergarten through grade twelve and a vibrant early childhood center.

Staff at Temple Beth El is composed of a full-time rabbi, cantor, rabbi educator serving as education director, early childhood director, and executive director. In addition, they have the following part-time staff positions: social worker for the early childhood center, program coordinator, and bookkeeper.

In applying to participate in the Synagogue Inclusion Project, Temple Beth El shared the following insights:

Why does your synagogue want to participate in this program for the inclusion of all abilities?

Temple Beth El believes that the small group support, coaching, and funding provided by UJA-Federation of New York will enable us to more fully achieve our vision of inclusiveness. We would greatly benefit from an outside professional assessment of our congregation as we have fully utilized the expertise within our own system, including our professional staff and congregants. We are also interested in professional mentoring and long-term strategic planning for our community and inclusion committee.

What strides have you made in the past five years to advance your vision of disability inclusion?

We have undertaken a variety of steps to achieve our vision including the establishment of an Inclusion Committee, extensive building renovations to improve accessibility, and making our programs more inclusive after participation in a specific training institute for school professionals.

The role of our Inclusion Committee is to define key success factors, strategies, and resources needed to become a truly inclusive community in all areas of temple life. Under the guidance of this committee, we developed a congregation-wide Inclusion Month.

Recent building renovations (via a significant capital campaign) improved accessibility through such means as an additional elevator, a ramp and rail onto the bimah, accessible bathrooms on the sanctuary level, same level sanctuary/social hall, enhanced sound system, new devices to assist those with hearing impairments, large-print prayer books, and livestreaming for congregants unable to get to services.

Starting with Why: A Vision for Inclusion

Temple Beth El has already engaged in significant work in the area of disability inclusion and sought the Synagogue Inclusion Project as a means to further deepen their work.

When asked to describe what a fully inclusive synagogue would mean, TBE leaders shared, “We picture a welcoming, accessible, and supportive community where everyone feels comfortable. We strive to create an environment that is fully inclusive to allow everyone to participate, including worship and all education and community-building programs. Our vision includes not only providing loving, accessible, and adaptive programs and services, but working proactively with our membership to create and adapt programs to meet each person’s individual needs.”

Temple Beth El already had a fully functioning Inclusion Committee and they sought to gain more guidance and resources from sources outside their community through participation in this project.

Synagogue Inclusion Inventory (360° Assessment)

A congregation seeking to become more inclusive must identify barriers to the full participation of people with disabilities that exist in their community. The Synagogue Inclusion Inventory is a comprehensive tool for conducting an initial assessment. In addition to helping a congregation assess where they are and what work needs to be done, an initial evaluation provides a means to assess the effectiveness of changes made to improve inclusiveness over time.

This inventory has five dimensions: exterior accessibility, interior accessibility, practices and policies, awareness and attitudes, and safety and security.

Exterior Accessibility:

Of the seven items on the exterior accessibility section, one did not apply, and there were weaknesses in some areas such as a lack of signage indicating the location of wheelchair-accessible entrances and no ability for people with physical limitations to open exterior doors without assistance.

Interior Accessibility:

Of the 23 items on the interior accessibility section, TBE had numerous areas of strength. The inside of the building is accessible to those with mobility issues and seating arrangements in the sanctuary, classrooms, and social spaces are flexible to accommodate wheelchair users. In addition, the bimah is accessible via a ramp and there is a lightweight Torah for those who might need such an accommodation. Noted limitations included:

- There are no accommodations for people who cannot hold heavy books during worship.
- There is not priority seating for those with mobility issues even though sanctuary seating is flexible.
- Cleaning products and soaps, while environmentally friendly, do have scents.

Practices and Policies:

Temple Beth El was already providing accommodations to students with disabilities to become b'nai mitzvah

and were making an array of accommodations within the school as a result of education-specific training. Congregants are invited to stand “as they are able” during worship services. Further, staff and/or lay leaders reach out proactively to visitors and members with disabilities to solicit their feedback as fostering inclusion is highly valued by this community.

Limitations to the full inclusion of people with disabilities in this area included:

- Mission statement does not specifically mention people with disabilities, although other groups are specifically mentioned.
- Membership application does not incorporate questions about accommodations to facilitate inclusion.
- Program publicity invites need-sharing for accommodation, yet there are not broad statements about inclusion on all program publicity.
- Leaders and congregants are not consistently using “person-first” or other intentional language (i.e. putting individuals before their disabilities).

Awareness and Attitudes:

Staff and lay leaders received some training in disability awareness and inclusive behavior. There was also a “no shush” policy in place for worship and ushers were trained in implementing this. Additionally, ushers were made aware of the importance of welcoming all guests with kindness and respect. Opportunities include a more formal usher training and teaching ushers, worship leaders, and congregants how to respond helpfully and without judgment to disruptive behavior.

Safety and Security

This four-question section seeks to determine if the community has a formal plan for safety and security. If yes, additional questions explore whether people with disabilities were considered in developing the plan and if people with disabilities have been a part of practicing the plan. Temple Beth El had evacuation plans for the schools and fire safety plans for the community at large, but had not yet developed a formal safety and security plan for the congregation.

Developing and Implementing an Action Plan

Temple Beth El's Action Plan to become more inclusive of people with disabilities included items considered to be low-hanging fruit (those items that could be quickly and easily accomplished in order to build positive momentum) as well as both short and long-term opportunities. Goals of TBE's Action Plan included improving overall awareness about disabilities, reducing stigma, and addressing a variety of dimensions on the Synagogue Inclusion Inventory.

Items considered by TBE to be low-hanging fruit:

- Compiling a list of available accommodations.
- Sharing this list of accommodations in prominent locations throughout the temple.

In the area of raising awareness and reducing stigma:

- TBE widened the reach of their inclusion efforts through a training session for all board members.
- They designated their first Inclusion Committee Chairperson.
- They created a new mission statement for the temple including a specific statement of inclusion.

In the area of increasing physical accessibility:

- Temple Beth El painted accessible parking spots.
- They created and demarcated accessible seating in the sanctuary.
- They created emergency evacuation plans for people using wheelchairs.
- They installed sensory-friendly lighting in two religious school classrooms, including their media classroom.



**INCLUSION
IS A MINDSET.**

Impact and Next Steps

Improvements were made in all dimensions of the Synagogue Inclusion Inventory that were initially assessed.

Access within the sanctuary noticeably improved. The congregation now offers designated priority seating for people with mobility limitations. A newly designed message stating available accommodations located outside the sanctuary invites worshippers to ask ushers to lead them to this priority seating.

Notable gains also occurred in the area of policy and practices. Temple Beth El has thoughtfully revised their mission statement and the written description of their community to be welcoming and inclusive. This mission statement can be found at the bottom of their accommodations list posted throughout the building as well as on their website.

In regard to change in the area of awareness and attitudes, Temple Beth El capitalized on the Synagogue Inclusion learning sessions and brought content back to their community to train and educate others. It is worth noting that TBE had done significant work in the area of disability inclusion prior to project participation, illustrating the point that increasing capacity in the area of disability inclusion is an ongoing process.

When reflecting on their participation in this project, synagogue leaders noted that while they believed everyone was on board for inclusion work, most people in leadership didn't know what that actually meant until it was formally brought to them. Further:

Inclusion is a core value of our congregation and is a part of all areas of our programming and community life. Inclusion is a mindset. Accessibility and inclusion is a lens we now use when planning every program. We want to build community; not just welcome, but build relationships where everyone can truly feel part of our community.

Finally, synagogue leadership understands that the conclusion of the formal Synagogue Inclusion Project would not be the end of their inclusion work. This is clearly evidenced by their willingness to consistently avail themselves of opportunities to grow in this area. Additional projects and conversations are already in progress and they have a goal to develop and mentor new leadership with an inclusive mindset.

THE VILLAGE TEMPLE

MANHATTAN, NEW YORK



Background

The Village Temple is a Reform synagogue founded in 1948. This urban congregation is located in Greenwich Village in New York City. They have approximately 210 member units with a religious school for children in pre-kindergarten through grade twelve.

Staff at The Village Temple is composed of a full-time rabbi, director of education, and executive director. They also have a part-time cantor and director of engagement.

In applying to participate in the Synagogue Inclusion Project, The Village Temple shared the following insights:

Why does your synagogue want to participate in this program for the inclusion of all abilities?

We are committed to being a welcoming Jewish home for all who enter. Members and guests should see The Village Temple as another home, and every single person who comes through our door should be comfortable and able to utilize our facility, fully participating in events and programs.

What strides have you made in the past five years to advance your vision of disability inclusion?

We have hired new staff to work on programs and community engagement, led membership drives to increase attendance, celebrated Disability Awareness Shabbat, and are creatively reinventing our image within the downtown NYC Jewish community. We also have blueprints and plans to remodel our bathrooms to make them fully accessible and gender neutral.

Starting with Why: A Vision for Inclusion

When asked to describe what a fully inclusive synagogue would mean, Village Temple leaders responded, “We envision welcoming members and guests of all faiths, genders, sexual orientation, races, ages, and abilities.”

Prior to the start of the Project, Village Temple did not have an Inclusion Committee. Some inclusion-specific activities were undertaken, but in an ad hoc manner, and the community sought to gain more concrete direction through participation in this Project.

Synagogue Inclusion Inventory (360° Assessment)

A congregation seeking to become more inclusive must identify barriers to the full participation of people with disabilities that exist in their community. The Synagogue Inclusion Inventory is a comprehensive tool for conducting an initial assessment. In addition to helping a congregation assess where they are and what work needs to be done, an initial evaluation provides a means to assess the effectiveness of changes made to improve inclusiveness over time.

Synagogue Inclusion Inventory

This inventory has five dimensions: exterior accessibility, interior accessibility, practices and policies, awareness and attitudes and safety and security.

Exterior Accessibility:

Of the seven items on the exterior accessibility section, one did not apply, and there were weaknesses noted in some areas such as a lack of signage indicating the location of wheelchair-accessible entrances and no ability for people with physical limitations to open exterior doors without assistance.

Interior Accessibility:

Of the 23 items on the interior accessibility section, The Village Temple had some notable areas of strength. The inside of the building is accessible to those with mobility issues and interior doors can be opened without assistance. In addition, *tallitot* and *kippot* were easily accessible for everyone and assistive hearing devices were readily available. Noted limitations included:

- Seating arrangements in the sanctuary, classrooms, and social spaces cannot consistently accommodate wheelchair users.
- Mezuzot are not low enough to be reached by people using wheelchairs and people of short stature.
- Dim lighting in the sanctuary can be a challenge for those with vision impairments and/or those who might lip read.
- There are no accommodations for people who cannot hold heavy books during worship.
- The bimah is not accessible to those using wheelchairs or with other mobility impairments.

Practices and Policies:

The Village Temple already provided accommodations to students with disabilities to become b'nai mitzvah. Congregants are invited to stand “as they are able” during worship services. Most notably, current clergy, congregational lay leaders, and professional staff emphasize their collective outreach efforts to visitors or members with disabilities to solicit their feedback. As such, they became aware of difficulties with access to the first floor bathroom which prompted participation in this project to further advance their inclusion goals.

In several other areas, there were limitations to the full inclusion of people with disabilities. These included:

- Membership application does not incorporate questions about accommodations to facilitate inclusion.
- Program publicity lacks statements about inclusion.
- Leaders and congregants are not consistently using “person-first” or other intentional language (i.e. putting individuals before their disabilities).

Awareness and Attitudes:

Of significant note is the fact that The Village Temple had already been guiding their ushers in supporting those most vulnerable, including those with mental health challenges. However, staff and lay leaders had not yet received any specific training in disability awareness and inclusive behavior. Opportunities include disability awareness and inclusion training for ushers, bringing disability awareness and inclusion into the religious school curriculum, and offering

additional speakers for an inclusion awareness Shabbat or workshop.

Safety and Security

This four-question section seeks to determine if the community has a formal plan for safety and security. If yes, additional questions explore whether people with disabilities were considered in developing the plan and if people with disabilities have been a part of practicing the plan. Village Temple had not yet developed a formal plan for safety and security.

Developing and Implementing an Action Plan

Village Temple's Action Plan to become more inclusive of people with disabilities included items considered to be low-hanging fruit (those items that could be quickly and easily accomplished in order to build positive momentum) as well as both short and long-term opportunities. Goals of The Village Temple's Action Plan included improving overall awareness about disabilities, reducing stigma, and addressing a variety of dimensions on the Synagogue Inclusion Inventory.

Items considered by The Village Temple to be low-hanging fruit:

- Removing a metal partition in the first-floor men's restroom and designating it as gender-neutral, making it fully accessible.
- Loading their prayer book onto an iPad so that it can be enlarged for those with vision impairments and/or held more easily by those who find the prayer book too heavy.

In the area of raising awareness and reducing stigma:

- They brought in an American Sign Language interpreter.
- The Junior and Senior youth groups actively prepared and presented disability awareness workshops on the topics of ableism, sign language, and appreciating differences.

In the area of increasing physical accessibility:

- They added appropriate signage to their gender-neutral, fully accessible bathroom.
- They lowered the mezuzah at the entrance to the sanctuary.

- They reactivated assistive listening devices in the sanctuary.
- They replaced pews with flexible seating in the sanctuary to accommodate those in wheelchairs anywhere in the space (rather than designating specific wheelchair accessible sections).

Impact and Next Steps

Improvements were made in all dimensions of the Synagogue Inclusion Inventory that were initially assessed.

Access within the sanctuary improved significantly. Along with the addition of flexible seating to accommodate members in any number of seating configurations, The Village Temple also made changes to improve access for those with hearing impairments, visual impairments, and other physical issues.

Notable gains also occurred in the area of policy and practices. The mission statement and program materials will include language about welcoming people of all abilities to coincide with a rabbinic transition in 2020.

The Village Temple capitalized on the Synagogue Inclusion learning sessions and brought content back to the community to train and educate others.

When reflecting on their participation in this project, synagogue leaders noted that inclusion has become a lens through which they view everything they do:

We started off not sure where we were going, and of course things changed along the way. We were expecting a significant donation to assist with the sanctuary and that fell through, so we rethought our initial plan. (Project) learning sessions were very interesting — each speaker was so impressive in such different areas — and we learned so much each time. We know this is only the beginning.

Finally, synagogue leadership understands that the conclusion of the formal Synagogue Inclusion Project does not signal the end of their inclusion work. There are a number of additional projects already in progress and they have a goal to integrate what they have learned and accomplished as they transition to new rabbinic leadership in 2020.



**INCLUSION IS
A PROCESS,
NOT A DESTINATION.**



APPENDIX

SYNAGOGUE INCLUSION INVENTORY

“FOR MY HOUSE SHALL BE A HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL PEOPLE” — ISAIAH 56:5

A congregation planning to be more inclusive of people with disabilities needs to identify any barriers to the full participation of people with disabilities that exist in their community. The congregation should assess the degree to which they are strong and identify where improvement is needed in different areas of inclusion. One advantage to conducting such an initial evaluation is that it provides a means to assess the effectiveness of any changes made to improve inclusiveness over time. The initial assessment provides a baseline to which changes in inclusiveness can be compared.

The Synagogue Inclusion Inventory is a helpful tool for congregations conducting an initial assessment. This inventory aids congregations in assessing where they currently stand in the following areas: Physical Accessibility, Practices and Policies, Awareness and Attitudes and Security and Safety.

This Inventory is simple to use as each item on the instrument can be responded to with one of three possible responses, Yes, Some, or No. There is also space provided to expand upon the three. Completing the evaluation is most effective when two (or more) individuals in different roles walk around the outside and inside of the facility and actually observe the space, particularly for the Physical Accessibility portion of the assessment. Having two (or more) individuals involved in the walk-around provides the opportunity for discussion about observations. The give-and-take process will increase the accuracy of the findings. The other two portions of the Inventory should also be completed by the same individuals, who have knowledge about the inner workings of the synagogue and have access to documents, such as policies and procedures, and knowledge of how the congregation operates.

Using this Inventory, congregations can assess where they are and what work needs to be done, and can begin to develop an action plan for achieving their inclusion goals.

Please use the following checklist to evaluate a wide range of physical characteristics, practices, and attitudes that can make your synagogue community a welcoming place for people with disabilities and support their full inclusion in synagogue life. We strongly urge you to include members with disabilities and parents/caregivers of people with disabilities in the process of completing this inventory.

Rather than a simple yes or no, your answers to some questions will likely be qualified. Please take time to note exceptions, concerns, or observations relating to each question.

PART 1: PHYSICAL ACCESSIBILITY

Does our physical environment welcome people with disabilities?

Does our environment say “We want you here — you belong?”

EXTERIOR	YES	SOME	NO	NOTES (exceptions, descriptions, challenges)
1. Are mezuzot low enough to be reached by people using wheelchairs and people of short stature?				
2. Can people with physical limitations open interior doors without assistance?				
3. Can wheelchair-accessible restrooms be accessed easily from any area in the synagogue?				
4. Can wheelchair-accessible water fountains be reached easily from any area in the building?				
5. Is every area of the building accessible to people who cannot use stairs?				
6. Are floors free of potential tripping hazards or barriers for people using walkers or wheelchairs (e.g. raised thresholds, deep carpet, or abrupt changes in flooring surface)?				

INTERIOR	YES	SOME	NO	NOTES (exceptions, descriptions, challenges)
7. Are halls and doorways of sufficient width to allow wheelchair access?				
8. Is lighting even, glare-free, and sufficiently bright for reading throughout the building?				
9. Are light switches low enough to be reachable by people of short stature or using wheelchairs?				
10. Are there work surfaces in the kitchen that can be used by people who use wheelchairs or who need to sit while preparing food?				
11. Are <i>tallitot</i> and <i>kippot</i> easily reachable for people using wheelchairs and/or walkers?				
12. Are large-print and Braille siddurim readily available for those who need them?				
13. Are assistive listening devices provided for all who need them at services, special events, and educational programs?				
14. Is sign-language interpretation provided at services and events?				
15. Is the bimah accessible to people who cannot use stairs?				

INTERIOR	YES	SOME	NO	NOTES (exceptions, descriptions, challenges)
16. Is the Torah accessible or made accessible to people with physical challenges or of short stature?				
17. Do seating configurations (in the sanctuary, classrooms, and social spaces) accommodate people using wheelchairs?				
18. Is priority seating reserved for people with mobility limitations?				
19. Is there adequate lighting at the podium to facilitate lip reading?				
20. Are unscented/ hypoallergenic cleaning products, candles, soaps, and air fresheners used throughout the building?				
21. Are there accommodations for people who cannot hold heavy books (e.g. sections provided in lightweight copies, ledges to rest books)?				
22. Are there comfortable places to which people can easily retreat during services if sitting still or staying quiet becomes difficult? Is the service piped in to facilitate uninterrupted inclusion in worship?				

PART 2: PRACTICES AND POLICIES

Do our synagogue's practices and policies welcome people with disabilities?

Do written materials affirm our synagogue's commitment to inclusiveness?

	YES	SOME	NO	NOTES (exceptions, descriptions, challenges)
1. Do the synagogue's mission statement and written descriptions include language about welcoming people with disabilities?				
2. Does the membership application ask questions regarding needs for accommodation to facilitate full inclusion in synagogue activities?				
3. Does all program publicity include a statement about inclusivity and offer information about available accommodations?				
4. Does the religious school have a policy that supports full inclusion of students with disabilities?				
5. Does the synagogue have specific programs and resources to support inclusion of children with disabilities in classrooms and other activities?				
6. Does the synagogue provide accommodations for students with disabilities who wish to become b'nai mitzvah?				

	YES	SOME	NO	NOTES (exceptions, descriptions, challenges)
7. Does the synagogue have an inclusion committee?				
8. Do leaders and congregants use appropriate disability aware language? (person-first, identity-first, etc.)				
9. Does the synagogue offer transportation to services and/or programs for people who need rides?				
10. Do staff and/or lay leaders reach out proactively to visitors or members with disabilities to solicit their feedback? (Do they feel welcome, comfortable, included? If not, why not?)				
11. Are congregants invited to stand "as they are able" (or				

PART 3: AWARENESS AND ATTITUDES

*Are our members comfortable including people with a range of disabilities in all aspects of synagogue life?
Are people with disabilities welcomed with understanding and respect in worship, study, and social settings?*

	YES	SOME	NO	NOTES (exceptions, descriptions, challenges)
1. Do staff and lay leaders receive training in disabilities awareness and inclusive behavior?				
2. Are ushers taught appropriate ways to greet and accommodate people with a range of disabilities?				
3. Are ushers, worship leaders, and congregants prepared to respond helpfully and without judgment to disruptive behavior during worship, study, or social activities?				
4. Has the synagogue sponsored an inclusion awareness Shabbat or workshop?				
5. Is disabilities awareness and inclusion part of the religious school curriculum?				

PART 4: SAFETY AND SECURITY

Are we prepared to protect and support all our members in the event of an emergency?

	YES	SOME	NO	NOTES (exceptions, descriptions, challenges)
1. Has your congregation developed a safety plan?				
2. Does your congregation safety plan include communicating about an emergency to individuals with disabilities including vision or hearing loss?				
3. Does your congregation safety plan include ways to safely assist and evacuate people with disabilities during an emergency?				
4. Has your congregation practiced your safety plan with members of your congregation including individuals with disabilities?				

BIOGRAPHIES

Elisa Blank is an experienced synagogue educator and has spent the past four years at UJA-Federation of New York, managing the Synagogue Inclusion Project, as well as serving as the Long Island regional manager for SYNERGY. She is currently UJA's Long Island community mobilizer. She previously served as director of education at Temple B'nai Torah in Wantagh.

Lisa Friedman is an independent consultant who serves as the project manager of UJA-Federation of New York's Synagogue Inclusion Project. As an expert in Jewish disability inclusion, she consults with congregations, organizations, and camps that wish to become more inclusive through dialogue, interactive workshops, and awareness training for staff, clergy, and families. In addition to her role with the Synagogue Inclusion Project, Lisa is an education director at Temple Beth-El in central New Jersey where she develops and oversees the congregation's inclusive efforts.



**AN INCLUSIVE
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Congregation B'nai Yisrael – Armonk, NY
Conservative Synagogue Adath Israel of Riverdale – Bronx, NY
East End Temple – Manhattan, NY
Fort Tryon Jewish Center – Washington Heights, NY*
Hillcrest Jewish Center – Flushing, NY
Huntington Jewish Center – Huntington, NY
Park Avenue Synagogue – Manhattan, NY*
Park Slope Jewish Center – Brooklyn, NY
Plainview Jewish Center – Plainview, NY*
Romemu – Manhattan, NY*
Temple Beth-El of Great Neck – Great Neck, NY
Temple Beth El of Northern Westchester – Chappaqua, NY*
Temple Beth Sholom – Roslyn, NY
Temple Chaverim – Plainview, NY*
Temple Sinai of Roslyn – Roslyn, NY
Union Temple of Brooklyn – Brooklyn, NY
The Village Temple – Manhattan, NY*
Westchester Reform Temple – Scarsdale, NY

*Congregation highlighted in this report

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