

# UJA-FEDERATION OF NEW YORK SYNAGOGUE INCLUSION PROJECT



## CASE STUDIES

### 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, included, and can fully participate in congregational life.

Six congregations participated in Cohort 1 of the Synagogue Inclusion Project:

1. Conservative Synagogue of Adath Israel Riverdale (Page 2)
2. Park Avenue Synagogue (Page 5)
3. Park Slope Jewish Center (Page 8)
4. Temple Beth Emeth (Page 11)
5. Union Temple (Page 14)
6. Westchester Reform Temple (Page 17)

These synagogues vary in membership size, have significantly different needs, and have access to a wide range of resources. It is significant to note that the main focus of this project for Cohort 1 was to increase inclusivity in the congregational school while also looking at inclusive efforts for the congregation as a whole (rather than a project focused entirely on congregation-wide inclusion).

Each synagogue's actual experiences in this project differed from one another due to several factors, including:

- What work the synagogue had previously done in the area of disability inclusion
- The results of initial 360° Assessments which identified current strengths and weaknesses within each congregation and revealed a range of starting points for each community
- The needs and wishes of those who participated in specific focus group discussions

It is interesting to note the common experiences of each congregation prior to joining the project. All of the congregations considered themselves to be warm, welcoming communities open to all people, including those with disabilities. The congregations had also all engaged in ad hoc activities to become more inclusive of members with disabilities as the need to do so was brought to them. None of the congregations, however, had considered how to become more inclusive of people with disabilities in a proactive, systematic manner.

It is also worth noting that most of the tasks undertaken as part of this project were neither significantly time-consuming nor expensive (the exception being, in most cases, some modifications to the exterior of buildings to make them wheelchair accessible), illustrating that becoming a more inclusive community is not an onerous process to be feared. Rather, there are often simple, cost-effective ways to increase accessibility which will, in turn, help to shape the culture of the community.

Finally, the importance of an Inclusion Committee as a standing committee cannot be overstated. These committees were instrumental in not only identifying, pushing forward, and managing the work necessary to become inclusive of people of all abilities in each congregation, but they will be instrumental to ensure the sustainability of these efforts over time.

# UJA-FEDERATION OF NEW YORK SYNAGOGUE INCLUSION PROJECT



## CASE STUDY #1

### CONSERVATIVE SYNAGOGUE OF ADATH ISRAEL RIVERDALE, BRONX, NEW YORK

#### Background:

Conservative Synagogue of Adath Israel Riverdale (CSAIR) was founded in 1954 and is located in the Riverdale section of the Bronx. CSAIR has approximately 450 member units and a religious school with approximately 87 students in kindergarten through seventh grade, with ten faculty members and one experienced staff member who serves as the special needs coordinator.

Before the start of this project, there were 15 – 17 identified students in the religious school receiving accommodations, and CSAIR believed it was likely that there were other families who had not come forward for help. Several students received direct instruction from the special needs coordinator, while several others worked within their classrooms to address their own needs. The synagogue provided a “shadow” for one student. The special needs coordinator advised and developed techniques with classroom teachers to help incorporate students with a variety of needs into mainstream classrooms. CSAIR was able to individualize b’nai mitzvah based on need.

There is no early childhood center at CSAIR.

Approximately 50 children regularly attend worship services. There are group sessions for three predetermined age groups held during Shabbat. Professionals run part of these sessions while other parts are run by volunteer adults/teenagers. During worship services, there is a sign language interpreter on special occasions and the bimah was made wheelchair-accessible during the congregation’s last renovation.

#### Identifying a Need and Getting Started:

As this project was launching, CSAIR had just completed a capital campaign that was focused on building renovations. CSAIR had already committed to installing an elevator, making their entrance accessible to people with limited mobility, and had augmented the sound system in the sanctuary.

CSAIR believed they had the desire and resources to become more inclusive and, as evidenced by previous efforts, had taken substantial steps to becoming inclusive of people of all abilities. They desired to be part of this project because they knew their limitations and believed they needed guidance in becoming fully inclusive.

When asked to describe what a fully inclusive synagogue would mean, CSAIR leaders responded, “[We envision] a kehilla (holy community) where congregants advocate for their needs in a receptive, warm environment — and one where the clergy and lay leaders have the training and tools they need to address those needs. More importantly, we want to see our kehilla as a proactive place where our vision and programs are in a constant state of evaluation and evolution to anticipate the needs of current membership and our community at large.”

While CSAIR had recently formed an Inclusion Committee, the community sought for it to gain more concrete direction through participation in this project. Prior to participation in this project, inclusion-specific activities were undertaken, but in an ad hoc manner. Project participation seemed congruent with the congregation’s commitment to their “long-standing commitment to embracing a diverse community, warmly welcoming individuals of all different ages, levels of religious background and observance, socio-economic levels, and intermarried families.”

#### Evaluating the Need to Be More Inclusive:

Both aspects of the 360° Assessment (the focus group and the Synagogue Inclusion Inventory) proved useful at the Conservative Synagogue of Adath Israel Riverdale.

#### Focus Group Findings

A single focus group was held that brought to light the areas in which members thought the synagogue was strong along with what they believed more could be done in terms of disability inclusion.

In identifying strengths, the focus group participants believed that the support from congregational leadership was important in the formation of the Inclusion Committee, and that there was already a strong group of volunteers committed to inclusion. There was a perceived willingness to do more. Recently, the congregation had noted the need for large-print *siddurim*, and the Sisterhood had allocated money to make such a purchase. Participants also believed that greeters were warm to everyone. One participant noted that the Torah is shared with people of limited mobility on the holiday of Simchat Torah.

Deficits in inclusion, however, were also noted. Decorum during services was brought up as a problem, noting the need to balance an inclusive environment with the ability to create an atmosphere conducive to prayer. People who live with disabilities mentioned feelings of isolation and a social environment that was not supportive of inclusion. While CSAIR was known as an inclusive community, it was not specifically known to be inclusive of people with disabilities.

As the focus group unfolded, participants offered a plethora of suggestions, including:

- Hosting a Yachad Shabbaton (a weekend retreat that provides parents and siblings with support groups, networking, and individual time with caring professionals who are leaders in the field)
- Offering a parent support group for the entire Riverdale community
- Offering a modified worship service for those who cannot sit through longer services
- Creating a sensory-friendly room
- Developing communal activities for senior citizens who may suffer from depression
- Offering transportation for those with mobility challenges

Synagogue Inclusion Inventory:

This inventory has four dimensions: exterior accessibility, interior accessibility, practices and policies, and awareness and attitudes.

#### **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 the inability of people with physical limitations to open exterior doors without assistance. While building entrances were not accessible to people using wheelchairs, plans were already in progress to change the main entrance to address this.

#### **Interior Accessibility:**

Of the 23 items on the interior accessibility section, CSAIR had some notable areas of strength. The inside of the building is accessible to wheelchair users and bathrooms are wheelchair-accessible throughout the building. Seating accommodations

in the sanctuary, classrooms, and social spaces can accommodate wheelchair users. There were a few limitations that included:

- *Mezuzot* and light switches were not low enough to be reached by people using wheelchairs and people of short stature
- Interior doors cannot be opened without assistance
- There were no accessible food preparation areas available in the kitchen
- There were no accommodations for people who cannot hold heavy books
- There were no assistive listening devices for those with hearing loss

#### **Practices and Policies:**

What is noteworthy is that CSAIR already provided accommodations to students with disabilities who wished to become b'nai mitzvah. They also provided some pull-out academic support in the religious school. Finally, there were some ad hoc practices in place to support the full inclusion of children with disabilities in the religious school.

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

- A need to include stronger language in CSAIR's mission statement about welcoming people with disabilities
- The membership application did not incorporate questions that ask about accommodations to facilitate inclusion
- There were not statements about inclusion on all program publicity
- Staff and lay leaders were not proactively reaching out to visitors or members with disabilities to solicit their feedback
- Leaders and congregants were not consistently using "person-first" language (i.e. putting individuals before their disabilities)
- Congregants were not invited to stand "as they are able" during services

#### **Awareness and Attitudes:**

Findings from this area of the Synagogue Inclusion Inventory were consistent with the findings of the CSAIR focus group. Staff and lay leaders needed training in disability awareness and inclusive behavior. Additionally, ushers could be taught appropriate ways to greet and accommodate people with a range of disabilities; ushers, worship leaders, and congregants could learn how to respond helpfully and without judgment to disruptive behavior; the synagogue could have an inclusion awareness Shabbat or workshop, and disability awareness could become part of the religious school curriculum.

## Developing and Implementing a Plan of Action:

The initial plan for making CSAIR more inclusive of people with disabilities included both short- and long-term opportunities. While they had just completed a capital campaign and accessibility renovations were planned, most had not yet been completed. Specific goals included improving overall awareness about disabilities, reducing stigma, and addressing each of the dimensions on the Synagogue Inclusion Inventory.

With regard to awareness and stigma reduction, the Rabbi delivered a sermon on inclusion. They also developed a plan to let the community know that everyone is welcome, specifically noting the inclusion of people with disabilities. They added to their website, noting who to contact for accommodations. CSAIR also planned to put inclusion updates in the weekly bulletin and encourage leaders and congregants to consistently use person-first language.

With regard to physical accessibility, some planned opportunities included:

- Creating welcoming, attractive, accessible entrances
- Installing wheelchair-accessible water fountains
- Adding a ramp to ensure the bimah is accessible to people who cannot use stairs
- Installing grab bars to the restrooms on the main level

In order to address policies and practices related to disability inclusion, a number of subcommittees were developed as part of the Inclusion Committee. They were designed to address the following:

- Training for greeters
- Communication about disability inclusion
- Programming related to disability inclusion
- Transportation for people with limited mobility
- Technology needs

Finally, some of the other activities undertaken by CSAIR to address disability inclusion were:

- Creating less stimulating sensory services for children on Simchat Torah
- Planning an Inclusion Shabbaton that incorporated religious school programming to kick off sensitivity training throughout the synagogue

## Evaluation:

Improvements were made in all dimensions of the Synagogue Inclusion Inventory that were initially assessed. For example, accessible parking spaces were made available for people with limited mobility and accessible entrances were created. Interior access to the building improved dramatically. An accessible table was purchased so that people in wheelchairs or of short stature could lead and/or read from the Torah during daily worship services. Significant gains also occurred in the area of policy and practices. The mission statement was edited to include language about welcoming people of all abilities, program publicity now routinely includes statements about inclusivity and the availability of accommodations, and the religious school application was updated to reflect and communicate their values and commitment to inclusion. The greatest gains may be in the area of awareness and attitudes. Prior to the start of the project, CSAIR responded negatively to almost all items, but by the conclusion of the project, four of the five tasks had been completed and the fifth was in progress.

When reflecting back on the process of participating in this project, synagogue leaders noted that small things can make a difference:

*The [360°] assessment was really helpful. We were stunned because we thought we were doing a lot — and we are — but the biggest issue [our consultants] identified [was] that we [weren't] ... letting people know. We've had an inclusion program for the past 4 years and found out that people in our own congregation didn't know about it. Even people who care about this and joined the committee didn't know! Also, our restrooms are accessible, but you couldn't tell from the signage.*

As a result of this project, synagogue leaders began thinking about disabilities differently. One person noted:

*We have an intern now with [Autism Spectrum Disorder] volunteering in the office. Before this project, I don't think we would have intentionally given him a leadership role.*

Finally, synagogue leadership realized that the conclusion of the formal Project was not going to be the end of their inclusion work. Participation in the Synagogue Inclusion Project “gives us work for the next several years!”

# UJA-FEDERATION OF NEW YORK SYNAGOGUE INCLUSION PROJECT



## CASE STUDY #2

### PARK AVENUE SYNAGOGUE NEW YORK, NEW YORK

#### Background:

The Park Avenue Synagogue (PAS) was founded in 1882 and is located on the Upper East Side of Manhattan (between Park and Madison on 87th Street). This Conservative congregation has approximately 1,500 member units.

Before the start of this project, PAS had a religious school of approximately 460 students in kindergarten through seventh grade with 55 part-time teachers, three full-time assistant directors, and one full-time director. There were also two classrooms dedicated to students with disabilities (one for those in grades kindergarten through second grade and another for grades four through six), learners with one-to-one support, assistant teachers, and in some cases, one-on-one tutoring. Children in the classes for students with disabilities were incorporated into the Tuesday afternoon mincha/maariv service along with neurotypical fifth and sixth grade learners. A few children in the classes for students with disabilities attended the Saturday Shabbat experience tefillah and program with staff supports.

Park Avenue Synagogue has an Early Childhood Center (ECC) with approximately 95 students at any given time. Many of the teachers in the ECC have both regular and special education training.

When describing the school environment, PAS initially described itself as a place that “embraces children with various learning needs.” However, they also noted that “It is not an institution that can handle extreme developmental or emotional challenges.”

Prior to the start of this project, PAS had an Inclusion Committee and had recently launched an Inclusion Task Force. They had a part-time inclusion coordinator and actively recruited people with disabilities. There were 15 – 18 members with known disabilities.

#### Identifying a Need and Getting Started:

Prior to participation in this project, Park Avenue Synagogue believed they were at a crossroads. They were ready to hire a new youth educator and wanted to reimagine what youth programming could look like.

Additionally, there was a desire to better serve members throughout their lifespan. In a sermon the rabbi stated, “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.”

Goals for participation in the project included:

- Improving the community’s attitude toward people with disabilities
- Offering more inclusive worship
- Engaging families of children with disabilities
- Adapting religious school curriculum to become more inclusive
- Improving b’nai mitzvah programming

Prior to participation in this project, there were perceived barriers to becoming more inclusive of families with disabilities. These included “cultural issues,” the costs associated with meeting children’s individual needs, and staff time. However, with planned additions to the synagogue’s professional staff, they believed the timing was right for embarking on the Synagogue Inclusion Project.

## Evaluating the Need to Be More Inclusive:

Both aspects of the 360° Assessment (focus group and the Synagogue Inclusion Inventory) proved useful at Park Avenue Synagogue.

### Focus Group Findings:

Two focus groups were held at the beginning of the Synagogue Inclusion Project. Attendees were community members identified as having a disability themselves, having a family member with a disability, or professionals working with people with disabilities.

During the focus groups, there was a sense of hopefulness that participation in the Project would be transformational. While the groups acknowledged that there were physical accessibility problems to address, the largest barrier to inclusion appeared to be attitudinal or a lack of awareness of people's needs. One participant 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?"*

Worship services, in general, were a clear concern for many. There was an expressed need to balance decorum with tolerance and acceptance. One parent of a child with a disability mentioned feeling judged by attitudes that seemed to convey, "Why can't you control your kid?"

A positive feeling that came out of the focus groups was that when people ask for accommodations they believe PAS tries hard to meet their needs; however, they have to explicitly ask. Therefore, disabilities are addressed on a case-by-case basis.

## Synagogue Inclusion Inventory:

This inventory has four dimensions: exterior accessibility, interior accessibility, practices and policies, and awareness and attitudes.

### Exterior Accessibility:

Of the seven items on the exterior accessibility section, one did not apply, and there were weaknesses in some areas such as not having accessible parking (which may not be entirely possible given PAS's location), not having 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, it is noteworthy that the vast majority of the building was accessible to people with mobility limitations. There were a few limitations that included:

- The Torah was not accessible to people with physical challenges or of short stature
- There was not consistent use of unscented/hypoallergenic products throughout the building

- There were no accommodations for people who cannot hold heavy books
- There were no comfortable places for people to retreat if sitting still or being quiet became difficult (although it is worth noting that there was live-streaming available for those who might not be able to get to the synagogue)
- *Mezuzot* were not low enough to be reached by people using wheelchairs and people of short stature
- There was not priority seating for people with mobility limitations, including no seating configurations to accommodate people using wheelchairs

### Practices and Policies:

In this area PAS had already begun becoming more inclusive of people with disabilities prior to embarking on the project; therefore, in many cases, there were some already-established policies (such as the religious school having a policy that supports full inclusion of children with disabilities) and some that were either informal or just getting started (including proactively reaching out to visitors or members with disabilities to solicit their feedback).

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

- There was no language in PAS's mission statement about welcoming people with disabilities
- There were not statements about inclusion on all program publicity
- Leaders and congregants were not consistently using "person-first" language (i.e. putting individuals before their disabilities)
- Congregants were not invited to stand "as they are able" during services.

### Awareness and Attitudes:

Findings from this area of the Synagogue Inclusion Inventory closely mirrored the findings of the PAS focus groups. While some school staff received training in disability awareness and inclusion, there was room for improvement on the other items in this area: ushers could be taught appropriate ways to greet and accommodate people with a range of disabilities; ushers, worship leaders, and congregants could learn how to respond helpfully and without judgment to disruptive behavior; the synagogue could have an inclusion awareness Shabbat or workshop; and disabilities awareness could become part of the religious school curriculum.

## Developing and Implementing a Plan of Action:

The initial plan for making Park Avenue Synagogue more inclusive of people with disabilities included both short- and long-term opportunities. PAS was beginning plans for major renovation of the physical plant, so a significant goal was to make the building completely accessible to those with limited mobility.

Other goals included improving overall awareness about disabilities, reducing stigma, and addressing each of the dimensions on the Synagogue Inclusion Inventory.

With specific regard to awareness and stigma reduction, the Rabbi delivered a sermon on inclusion during the yomim noraim (High Holy Days). 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 project were shared with the community during Jewish Disability Awareness and Inclusion Month (view this here <https://pasyn.org/our-community/jewish-disabilities-awareness-and-inclusion-month-pas-0>).

Staff and/or 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.

With regard to physical accessibility, some planned opportunities included:

- Providing clear signage to direct people to large-print and Braille *siddurim*
- Ensuring that *tallitot* and *kippot* are accessible to people with limited mobility
- Ensuring that the bimah is accessible to people with limited mobility

Examples of opportunities designed to address the policies and practices at PAS included:

- Creating a sensory room for children with disabilities that could be used during holidays and Shabbat
- Developing a formal inclusion policy to be a part of the website, synagogue application, and all printed materials

Finally, some other opportunities PAS engaged in to address disability inclusion were:

- Hosting a ritual ceremony to celebrate and publicize the installation of lower mezzuzot in the main sanctuary
- Formally publicizing available transportation to synagogue events for those unable to transport themselves
- Participating in Matan training for relevant staff (education-focused training program)
- Formally offering accommodations for students with disabilities to become b'nai mitzvah

## Evaluation:

Improvements were made in all dimensions of the Synagogue Inclusion Inventory that were initially assessed. For example, automatic doors and security guards enable people with physical limitations to open exterior doors without the assistance of others and signage indicates the location of wheelchair-accessible entrances. Interior access to the building improved dramatically. Prior to the start of the project, of the 23 items, PAS only answered positively to nine of them; however, at the second assessment, which was near the conclusion of the project, PAS answered positively to 21 of those items, with some tasks still in progress. Significant gains also took place in the area of policy and practices, with the most noticeable occurring in the religious school and during worship services. Finally, in the area of awareness and attitudes, prior to the start of the project, PAS responded negatively to almost all items, but by the conclusion of the project, four of the five tasks had been completed, and the fifth was in process.

One of the biggest changes at PAS as a result of this project was the expansion of the Inclusion Committee, and will, hopefully, help sustain these efforts over time. The Inclusion Committee now has five sub-committees that report directly to PAS's Steering Committee. These sub-committees address synagogue leadership, parent support, education and awareness, integrated programming, and physical space and ritual.

In gathering follow-up data from PAS, it was noticed that 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 project, were more comfortable identifying themselves.

PAS noted specific changes as a result of this project, most notably the addition of one-to-one support, as needed, in neurotypical classrooms and in Shabbat morning services attended by classes from the congregational school. In terms of programming for older children and teens, PAS has started a leadership training program and is offering support so that all who want to attend and participate are able. PAS has offered training to staff on disability inclusion and the membership manager is the go-to person to field inquiries about specific accommodations. The education team now has designated staff to work with the various inclusion sub-committees who are working in conjunction with lay leaders in this area.

# UJA-FEDERATION OF NEW YORK SYNAGOGUE INCLUSION PROJECT



## CASE STUDY #3

### PARK SLOPE JEWISH CENTER, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

#### Background:

The Park Slope Jewish Center (PSJC) is a Conservative synagogue located in the South Slope of Brooklyn since 1942. The synagogue has approximately 325 member units and a religious school with 131 students in kindergarten through seventh grade, 13 teachers, one specialist, and seven classroom assistants. During the school year, prior to the start of this project, PSJC hired an inclusion and learning specialist for the first time and piloted a new program to train some assistants to offer one-to-one support for students with various needs.

There is no early childhood center at PSJC.

Prior to the start of this project, the community identified at least two dozen members with hearing or vision impairments and a handful with mobility issues. Several adults in the community also had Autism Spectrum Disorder or a behavioral disorder. The religious school identified three students with significant hearing impairments and two students with vision impairments, one of whom is legally blind. There were also approximately a dozen students with identified learning needs or attention deficit disorder.

There are approximately 35 – 40 children who regularly attend Shabbat morning services.

#### Identifying a Need and Getting Started:

Park Slope Jewish Center prides itself on being an inclusive community that celebrates diverse people. They have historically made an effort to reach out to “children with special learning, behavioral, or socio-emotional needs.” In their own words, “We picture a place where members of our community on the autism spectrum can feel comfortable and included.”

As part of this project, PSJC set goals for themselves, including:

- Raising the consciousness and understanding about individuals with disabilities

- Increasing the participation of people with hearing and vision impairments
- Providing a more inclusive school curriculum
- Providing more inclusive holiday programming
- Forming an Inclusion Committee

#### Evaluating the Need to Be More Inclusive:

Both aspects of the 360° Assessment (focus group and the Synagogue Inclusion Inventory) proved useful at Park Slope Jewish Center.

#### Focus Group Findings:

A major concern of the focus group was that the congregation is not known for inclusion of people with disabilities, despite having moved much further in the area of general diversity, including around those in the LGBTQ community. While members felt their needs could be met, they believed they had to ask directly. One member of the group stated:

*I assumed that I could ask for accommodations; that if I reached out they would be provided.*

PSJC aims to be a place where all people are welcome, but not directly addressing disability inclusion may have a negative impact. Another participant shared:

*No one is being turned away, but I'm sure there are people who aren't coming. We haven't yet explored who we are not serving.*

Focus group participants also felt that there should be a process to build inclusion awareness through the congregation's website, email, and sermons. One person suggested modifying the membership application to include a question about the needs of new members to ensure their full participation. There was also a suggestion that ushers need training on how to greet and accommodate people with disabilities.



### **Synagogue Inclusion Inventory:**

This inventory has four dimensions: exterior accessibility, interior accessibility, practices and policies, and awareness and attitudes.

#### **Exterior Accessibility:**

Of the seven items on the exterior accessibility section, one did not apply, and there were weaknesses in some areas such as building entrances not being accessible to people using wheelchairs, no clear signage, and no accessible parking (which may not be entirely possible given PSJC's location). People with physical limitations could not open the building's door without assistance.

#### **Interior Accessibility:**

Of the 23 items on the interior accessibility section, it is noteworthy that, except for a balcony, every area of the building is accessible to people with limited mobility. There were some noted limitations, including:

- *Mezuzot* were not low enough to be reached by people using wheelchairs and people of short stature
- There was no priority seating for people with mobility limitations, which would include seating configurations to accommodate people using wheelchairs
- The lighting was not sufficiently bright for reading throughout the building

#### **Practices and Policies:**

What is noteworthy in this area are the accommodations PSJC already provided to students with disabilities who wished to become b'nai mitzvah, such as one-on-one coaching. In several other areas there were limitations to the full inclusion of people with disabilities. These included the following:

- The congregation's mission statement did not include a statement of inclusion
- The membership application did not incorporate questions that ask about accommodations needed to facilitate inclusion
- There were not statements about inclusion on all publicity materials
- There was not yet a school policy to support full inclusion of children with disabilities
- There was not yet an Inclusion Committee
- Leaders and congregants were not consistently using "person-first" language (i.e. putting individuals before their disabilities)

#### **Awareness and Attitudes:**

There had been some previous training of staff and lay leaders at PSJC. However, ushers needed training on how to greet and accommodate people with disabilities. There was also a need to include disability awareness in the religious school curriculum.

### **Developing and Implementing a Plan of Action:**

The initial plan for making Park Slope Jewish Center more inclusive of people of all abilities included both short- and long-term opportunities. PSJC had financial and logistical obstacles to overcome in order to become fully inclusive in the short term. They had had to work within legal restrictions to address the accessibility of their historic landmark building. And they were not able to raise enough money during their capital campaign to replace their chairlift with an elevator.

Awareness of the importance of disability inclusion became a key topic during the High Holidays and PSJC's Hanukkah rededication campaign.

The following is a partial list from PSJC's plan that was developed to improve inclusivity:

- Providing clear signage to direct people to large-print and Braille *siddurim*
- Identifying designated seating for people with mobility impairments
- Changing seating configurations (sanctuary, classroom, and social spaces) to accommodate people using wheelchairs
- Ensuring that light switches are low enough to be reachable by people using wheelchairs and people of short stature
- Making *tallitot* and *kippot* easily reachable for people using wheelchairs and walkers
- Helping ensure that people with physical limitations can open interior doors without assistance

Examples of opportunities designed to address the policies and practices at PSJC included:

- The creation of an Inclusion Committee
- Inviting congregants to stand "as they are able" during worship services
- Including a statement about inclusivity and information about available accommodations in all program publicity and on registration forms
- Staff and/or lay leaders reaching out proactively to visitors or members with disabilities to solicit their feedback

In terms of attitudes and awareness, the following were planned:

- Delivering a High Holiday sermon on disability inclusion
- Introducing and featuring members of the Inclusion Committee in weekly newsletters and emails
- Adding inclusive language to all synagogue materials (i.e. welcome packet, website, weekly emails)
- Providing a statement about inclusivity and information about available accommodations on all publicity materials

## Evaluation:

Improvements were made in all dimensions of the Synagogue Inclusion Inventory that were initially assessed. For example, the building entrances were made more accessible to people using wheelchairs. Inside improvements were made in the following areas:

- Seating priority is made for people with mobility limitations
- Large print and Braille *siddurim* are readily available
- Sign-language interpretation is provided at services and events
- Accommodations have been made for people who cannot hold heavy books
- Comfortable places have been set aside to serve as a retreat for people who cannot sit still or stay quiet during services

A great deal of progress was made in the area of practices and policies. The following improvements were made:

- The mission statement was amended to include language about inclusion
- The membership application now includes questions regarding needs for accommodations to facilitate inclusion
- All program publicity includes statements about disability inclusion
- The religious school added a policy to support the full inclusion of children with disabilities

- Transportation is now available to services for people who need it
- Person-first language (i.e. using terms like wheelchair user instead of wheelchair-bound) is more consistently used
- An Inclusion Committee was formed
- Programs and resources were developed to enhance the inclusion of children with disabilities in the classroom

In regard to awareness and attitudes, the staff and lay leaders have received training on disabilities and inclusive behavior, and ushers have been taught appropriate ways to greet and accommodate people with disabilities.

One of the biggest changes was the formation of an Inclusion Committee. The committee has become very active and has worked on the installation of handrails on the bimah. In an interview for the *New York Jewish Week*, professionals from PSJC commented on their process:

*What we are most proud of is that we know we are not done. We know this is a process that will continue as we grow the language, tools, and skills necessary to make changes at every level of PSJC.*

The entire article is available online at:

<http://jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/the-synagogue-inclusion-project-park-slope-jewish-center/>

# UJA-FEDERATION OF NEW YORK SYNAGOGUE INCLUSION PROJECT



## CASE STUDY #4

### TEMPLE BETH EMETH, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

#### Background:

Temple Beth Emeth is a Reform synagogue founded in 1911 that is located in Flatbush, Brooklyn. The congregation has approximately 110 member units and has a religious school with 40 students in pre-kindergarten through b'nai mitzvah, with four teachers and one rabbi. There is no early childhood center at Temple Beth Emeth. Children regularly attend services on Shabbat mornings, and child- and family-friendly programs are offered for various holidays.

Before the start of this project, there were about 15 members with known disabilities, four of whom were under age 13. The congregation makes a conscious effort to include everyone, regardless of ability, by modifying worship services to accommodate those who need it. The religious school individualizes the program for students as much as possible through their knowledge of the students and communication with parents.

#### Identifying a Need and Getting Started:

Temple Beth Emeth prides itself on being a welcoming community that is both friendly and respectful. Overall, the community provides an open and welcoming attitude felt and expressed by congregants with personal experiences with disabilities. In their own words:

*[Beth Emeth is] the kind of place where people don't care or think anything if it takes a long time to get up the stairs ... [for an honor] ... during services.*

#### Another congregant reflected:

*I came because it was a welcoming place for my family and kids.*

Beth Emeth is small and informal and because of this, inclusion occurs as needed — even if not in a proactive and organized way.

In advance of this project, they had recently installed a railing on the stairs to the bimah and had designated a ground-floor room for their oneq Shabbat, so stairs were not necessary.

As part of this project, Beth Emeth set goals for themselves, including:

- Making their mission statement/website language overtly inclusive of people with disabilities
- Calling all new, prospective, and even current members to welcome them and to ask if they might need any accommodations to fully participate
- Forming an Inclusion Committee
- Increasing training for teachers and rabbinic interns
- Adding accommodation questions to the membership application and explicitly asking what accommodations are needed as part of event publicity
- Enhancing the intake process for the religious school to include more formal questions about disability accommodation and coordinating meetings between teachers and parents of children with disabilities

#### Evaluating the Need to Be More Inclusive:

Both aspects of the 360° Assessment (focus group and the Synagogue Inclusion Inventory) proved useful at Temple Beth Emeth.

#### Focus Group Findings:

Congregants referred to Beth Emeth as the “world’s best-kept secret.” Nevertheless, there was a realization that their small size may be a barrier to increased funding for addressing physical accessibility and purchasing large-print or Braille *siddurim*. The group suggested providing video testimonial, an increased media presence, and advertising at schools for children with disabilities to attract more children. As a result of funding from the Sisterhood, progress had been made in the following areas:

- Access to the first-floor meeting space
- Removal of benches in the sanctuary for more open space and wider aisles
- Installing a railing on the stairs to the bimah

The following ideas, potentially within Beth Emeth's financial capacity, were suggested:

- Installing a ramp to the bimah
- Replacing the first-floor toilet seat with a higher one that would be accessible for wheelchair users
- Installing a better sound system/loop in the sanctuary
- Using a screen and projector in the sanctuary with large-print/voice recognition software to read along with the service
- Installing signage for accommodations and accessible bathrooms

#### **Synagogue Inclusion Inventory:**

This inventory has four dimensions: exterior accessibility, interior accessibility, practices and policies, and awareness and attitudes.

#### **Exterior Accessibility:**

Of the seven items on the exterior accessibility section, there were weaknesses in some areas such as not having accessible parking, no clear signage for people using wheelchairs, and the inability for people with physical limitations to open the door without assistance.

#### **Interior Accessibility:**

Of the 23 items on the interior accessibility section, it is noteworthy that the sanctuary can accommodate people with wheelchairs and the halls and doorways are wide enough to accommodate wheelchairs. There were some noted limitations including:

- People with physical limitations cannot open interior doors
- Some areas of the interior are not accessible to people who cannot walk
- There are no wheelchair-accessible water fountains
- There is no priority seating for people with mobility limitations
- The lighting is not sufficient for people with visual impairments
- The light switches cannot be reached by people using wheelchairs and people of short stature
- The bimah is not accessible to people who cannot use stairs
- The Torah is not accessible to people with physical challenges or of short stature
- Assisted-listening devices are not available
- Braille and large-print *siddurim* are not available
- Sign language interpretation is not available

- There are no accommodations for people who cannot hold heavy books
- There are no comfortable places for people to retreat if sitting still or being quiet becomes difficult

#### **Practices and Policies:**

What is noteworthy in this area are the accommodations Beth Emeth already provides for students with disabilities who wish to become b'nai mitzvah, such as one-on-one coaching. The religious school also has a statement that supports the inclusion of children with disabilities. In several other areas, there were limitations to the full inclusion of people with disabilities. These included the following:

- The congregation's mission statement did not include a statement of inclusion
- The membership application did not incorporate questions that ask about accommodations to facilitate inclusion
- There were not statements about inclusion on all publicity materials
- There was not yet an Inclusion Committee
- Leaders and congregants were not consistently using "person-first" language (i.e. putting individuals before their disabilities)

#### **Awareness and Attitudes:**

Findings from this area of the Synagogue Inclusion Inventory were consistent with the findings of the Temple Beth Emeth focus group. It was noted that there was room for improvement in a number of areas: ushers could be taught appropriate ways to greet and accommodate people with a range of disabilities, and introducing and featuring the Inclusion Committee in newsletters/emails could help raise awareness about the congregation's efforts as could including inclusive language in all synagogue materials (i.e. welcome packet, website, weekly emails).

#### **Developing and Implementing a Plan of Action:**

The initial plan for making Temple Beth Emeth more inclusive of people with disabilities included short- and long-term opportunities. Beth Emeth encountered both financial and logistic obstacles to becoming fully inclusive in the short term. With regard to attitudes and awareness, there was a plan for a sermon for Kol Nidre on inclusion as well as an article in their newsletter, *The Truth*. Both short- and long-term plans were made to improve access such as:

- Upgrading the sound system in the sanctuary
- Providing adequate lighting at the podium on the bimah to facilitate lip-reading
- Installing wheelchair-accessible water fountains reached easily from any area in the building
- Designating priority seating for people with mobility limitations

- Making sure that lighting is even, glare free, and sufficiently bright for reading throughout the building
- Installing light switches that are low enough to be reachable by people using wheelchairs and people of short stature
- Installing *mezuzot* that are low enough to be reached by people using wheelchairs and people of short stature
- Making sure the bimah is accessible to people who cannot use the stairs
- Making sure the Torah is accessible or is made accessible to people with physical challenges or of short stature
- Providing assistive listening devices for all who need them at services, special events, and educational programs

Examples of opportunities designed to address the policies and practices at Beth Emeth included:

- Creating an Inclusion Committee
- Inviting congregants to stand “as they are able” during worship services
- Including a statement about inclusivity and information about available accommodations in all publicity materials and on registration forms
- Asking staff and/or lay leaders to reach out proactively to visitors or members with disabilities to solicit their feedback

In terms of attitudes and awareness, the following were planned:

- Delivering a High Holiday sermon on disability inclusion
- Introducing and featuring the Inclusion Committee in newsletters/emails
- Including inclusive language in all synagogue materials (i.e. welcome packet, website, weekly emails)
- Providing a statement about inclusivity and information about available accommodations on all program publicity

## Evaluation:

Improvements were made in all dimensions of the Synagogue Inclusion Inventory that were initially assessed. For example, people with physical limitations can now open doors without assistance. Many other improvements were made to the interior in the following areas:

- Priority seating is reserved for people with mobility limitations
- Accommodations have been made for people who cannot hold heavy books
- The mezuzot are now low enough to be reached by people using wheelchairs and people of short stature
- Most of the light switches are low enough to be reached by people using wheelchairs and people of short stature
- The Torah was made accessible to people with physical challenges or of short stature

A great deal of progress was made in the area of practices and policies.

The following improvements were made:

- The mission statement was amended to include language about inclusion
- The membership application now includes questions regarding needs for accommodations to facilitate inclusion
- All program publicity includes statements about disability inclusion
- The religious school added a policy to support the full inclusion of children with disabilities
- Beth Emeth now offers transportation to services for people who need rides
- Lay leaders now reach out to members with disabilities to solicit feedback
- Congregants are now invited to stand “as they are able” during services

In regard to awareness and attitudes, the staff and lay leaders have received training on disabilities and inclusive behavior, ushers have been taught appropriate ways to greet and accommodate people with disabilities, and disability awareness has been integrated into the religious school curriculum.

Additional information about Beth Emeth can be found online at: <http://www.bethemeth.net>

# UJA-FEDERATION OF NEW YORK SYNAGOGUE INCLUSION PROJECT



## CASE STUDY #5

### UNION TEMPLE, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

#### Background:

Union Temple is a Reform synagogue founded in 1848 and located in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn. There are approximately 176 member units and the religious school has 50 students in kindergarten through seventh grade, along with five teachers, a music specialist, and an art specialist. There is also an Early Childhood Center (ECC) at the synagogue with 66 children.

There was not enough information available to the synagogue to report the number of people who had known disabilities. In the year prior to this project commencing, Union Temple held events to increase inclusion, engage families and youth, and help meet the needs of those with challenges take full advantage of temple life. The religious school tried to accommodate every student's need, and allowed each child to learn at his or her own pace.

Union Temple did a great deal to accommodate their ECC students and had developed a reputation for accepting students that other schools would not. In addition, the ECC consulted with the Department of Education when a child with special needs was identified, and Special Education Itinerant Teachers came to work at Union Temple. They included therapies for those with need (i.e. speech therapy), held workshops for teachers to become more adept at helping those with disabilities, and held small social groups for students so they could build stronger social skills.

Approximately 15 children attend services on the first Friday of every month. Union Temple occasionally rents its space out to various organizations, including the American Cancer Society, adoption groups, parent groups, etc.

#### Identifying a Need and Getting Started:

As one of the oldest temples in Brooklyn, Union Temple prided itself on being a warm and egalitarian community. They wanted to create an environment that encouraged children and adults to have a positive sense about themselves and Judaism. In order to accomplish this, they set out to learn more about inclusion.

As part of this project, Union Temple set goals for itself, including:

- Understanding what is needed to be an inclusive synagogue
- Setting up a process to be more accommodating to people with disabilities
- Getting approval and acceptance from lay leaders
- Raising the consciousness and understanding about individuals with disabilities

#### Evaluating the Need to Be More Inclusive:

Both aspects of the 360° Assessment (focus group and the Synagogue Inclusion Inventory) proved useful at Union Temple.

#### Focus Group Findings:

Overall attitudes about Union Temple were positive. However, some members were concerned that their community was not fully welcoming. One member commented:

*People with disabilities are welcomed if they come, but no one is looking for them.*

Some congregants mentioned that events that were more informal, such as Friday night services, tended to be more welcoming. During more formal services they do not feel completely accepted. For example, members expressed the following thoughts:

*We can hear people whispering ...*

*People say: Those kids are running wild.*

*There are a good number of people who are tolerant, but not really accepting.*

*My son doesn't like to come to adult services; he doesn't feel accepted.*

The need for alternative b'nai mitzvah experiences was expressed in the following comments:

*My child said – I don't want people from the temple to come to my bar mitzvah, I just want my family to come.*

*My child felt belittled because he couldn't read from the Torah.*

Overall, members believed there was a lot of enthusiasm for change. However, there was a lack of training and understanding of what inclusion really entails. Members suggested that the temple take advantage of events/opportunities when people are already present to be more inclusive, such as Friday Night Potluck Dinners, Sunday mornings at the beginning of religious school, and during High Holiday services. It was also suggested that the temple offer opportunities for children and people with disabilities to participate in worship services.

### **Synagogue Inclusion Inventory:**

This inventory has four dimensions: exterior accessibility, interior accessibility, practices and policies, and awareness and attitudes.

#### **Exterior Accessibility:**

Of the seven items on the exterior accessibility section, there were weaknesses in some areas such as: people with physical limitations could not open the door without assistance and there was no clear signage for people using wheelchairs. The building entrances, however, were accessible to people using wheelchairs.

#### **Interior Accessibility:**

Of the 23 items on the interior accessibility section, it is noteworthy that almost every area of the building is accessible to people who cannot use stairs; the sanctuary can accommodate wheelchairs; and the halls and doorways are wide enough to accommodate wheelchairs. There were some noted limitations, including:

- People with physical limitations were not able to easily open interior doors
- There was no priority seating for people with mobility limitations
- The bimah was not accessible to people who could not use stairs
- Braille and large-print *siddurim* were not available
- Assisted-listening devices were not available
- Sign language interpretation was not available
- There was not adequate lighting at the podium to accommodate lip reading
- There was no comfortable place for people to retreat to if sitting still or being quiet became difficult

### **Practices and Policies:**

What is noteworthy in this area is that the religious school had a statement that supported the inclusion of children with disabilities, and congregants were already invited to stand "as they are able" during services. In several other areas, there were limitations to the full inclusion of people with disabilities. These included the following:

- The congregation's mission statement did not include a statement of inclusion
- The membership application did not incorporate questions that ask about accommodations to facilitate inclusion
- There were not statements about inclusion on all publicity materials
- Leaders and congregants were not consistently using "person-first" language (i.e. putting individuals before their disabilities)
- There was not yet an Inclusion Committee
- Staff and lay leaders were not formally reaching out proactively to members with disabilities to facilitate feedback

### **Awareness and Attitudes:**

In terms of attitudes and awareness, it was noted that there was room for improvement in a number of areas: disability awareness and inclusion training for staff and lay leaders is needed, disability and inclusion awareness could become part of the religious school curriculum, and the congregation could sponsor an inclusion awareness Shabbat or workshop.

### **Developing and Implementing a Plan of Action:**

The initial plan for making Union Temple more inclusive of people with disabilities included both short- and long-term opportunities. The following is a partial list from Union Temple's plan that was developed to increase inclusivity:

- Employ a contractor to fix accessibility issues in new wing
- Create clear signage and a designated space for Braille and large-print *siddurim*
- Ensure that the Torah is accessible or made accessible to people with physical challenges or of short stature
- Ensure that there are accommodations available for people who cannot hold heavy books (i.e. sections provided with lightweight copies)

Examples of activities designed to address the policies and practices at Union Temple included:

- Train a Welcoming Committee
- Form an Inclusion Committee
- Offer a storyboard with visual cues during worship

A number of projects were being planned for the long term that included:

- Ensuring that sidewalks and exterior spaces, such as patios, are navigable by people with mobility limitations
- Providing exterior signage that clearly indicates the location of wheelchair-accessible entrances
- Adding *mezuzot* low enough to be reached by people using wheelchairs and people of short stature
- Adding priority seating that is reserved for people with mobility limitations
- Purchasing large-print and Braille *siddurim* and making sure they are readily available for those who need them

## Evaluation

Improvements were made in all dimensions of the Synagogue Inclusion Inventory that were initially assessed. For example, the building entrances were made more accessible to people using wheelchairs and signage was added to indicate this. Interior improvements were made in the following areas:

- People with physical limitations can now open interior doors easily and without assistance
- Wheelchair accessible restrooms can be reached easily from any area of the building
- Priority seating is now reserved for people with mobility issues
- Lighting is even and glare-free and sufficiently bright for reading throughout the building

In regard to practices and policies, there was a great deal of improvement. The following are some examples:

- The mission statement and written descriptions now include language about welcoming people with disabilities
- The membership application asks questions regarding needs for accommodations to facilitate full inclusion
- A standing Inclusion Committee was formed
- Person-first language (i.e. putting people before their disabilities) is more consistently used

The following are examples of improvement in the area of awareness and attitudes:

- Staff and lay leaders received training on disability awareness
- Ushers have been taught appropriate ways to greet and accommodate people with disabilities
- The temple sponsored an inclusion awareness Shabbat

In an interview for the *New York Jewish Week*, professionals from Union Temple commented on their process:

*This process has been eye-opening for the community. It showed us what we need to do, but more importantly what we are capable of, and we want to be an inclusive congregation to all people.*

The entire article is available online at:  
<http://jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/the-synagogue-inclusion-project-union-temple/>



# UJA-FEDERATION OF NEW YORK SYNAGOGUE INCLUSION PROJECT



## CASE STUDY #6

### WESTCHESTER REFORM TEMPLE, WESTCHESTER, NEW YORK

#### Background:

Westchester Reform Temple (WRT) is a Reform synagogue founded in 1953 and located in Westchester County, New York. There are approximately 1281 member units and the religious school has 700 students, 60 classes, and 38 faculty members.

While the number of children in the religious school who needed accommodations was unknown, WRT considered itself to be a diverse community consisting of individuals with a wide range of abilities. There had been many steps taken prior to joining the project to promote inclusion within the WRT community. Examples included facilitating discussions around inclusion, offering sign language interpreters upon request, and educating younger congregants about bullying and the importance of including others.

As needed, students would be pulled out of religious school classes for short periods of one-on-one assistance with a teacher, and a new program had been launched for weekly one-on-one or two-on-one support in Hebrew language. Consistent communication between the school and parents ensured proper class placement. B'nai mitzvah experiences were individualized as needed.

A few dozen children typically attended grade level Shabbat programs.

WRT also has an Early Childhood Center (ECC), which had 160 students prior to the beginning of the project. In the ECC, there were occupational and physical therapists to help students with specific needs, as well as a social worker to evaluate children having learning/social difficulties.

#### Identifying a Need and Getting Started:

Westchester Reform Temple prided itself on being a welcoming community. Although disability inclusion was valued at WRT, the temple was not proactive about ensuring it happened. It generally occurred as a result of the advocacy of families who have members with disabilities.

As part of this Project, WRT set goals for themselves, including:

- Making the congregation's mission statement/website language overtly inclusive of people with disabilities
- Calling all new, prospective, and even current members to welcome them and to ask if they or others might need any accommodations to fully participate
- Enhancing the intake process for the religious school to include more formal questions about disability accommodation and establishing meetings between teachers and parents of children with disabilities

#### Evaluating the Need to Be More Inclusive:

Both aspects of the 360° Assessment (focus group and the Synagogue Inclusion Inventory) proved useful at Westchester Reform Temple.

#### Focus Group Findings:

During the focus group, it was noted that people with disabilities were absent from the group. The concern was that without the presence of individuals with disabilities, it would be difficult to sensitize the congregation to inclusion, thus potentially perpetuating the notion of "nothing about us without us."

Synagogue worship services were one area of concern. The group felt that there was a need to balance decorum with acceptance. It was felt that a large part of the solution should come from the rabbis, who must lead by example. It was also suggested that ushers, greeters, and staff should receive sensitivity training and learn ways to help people of all abilities feel welcome.

The Early Childhood Center is a key entry point into membership at WRT. The school was seen as less inclusive in comparison to other areas of WRT. For example, the playground is physically inaccessible to children with disabilities and there is a sense that there is a lack of respect for existing accessible parking spots.

### **Synagogue Inclusion Inventory:**

This inventory has four dimensions: exterior accessibility, interior accessibility, practices and policies, and awareness and attitudes.

#### **Exterior Accessibility:**

Of the seven items on the exterior accessibility section, there were weaknesses in some areas such as people with physical limitations could not open the door without assistance and there was no clear signage for people using wheelchairs.

#### **Interior Accessibility:**

Of the 23 items on the interior accessibility section, it is noteworthy that the sanctuary can accommodate people with wheelchairs, the bimah is accessible to people who cannot use stairs, the halls and doorways are wide enough to accommodate wheelchairs, and overall lighting is good. There were some noted limitations including:

- *Mezuzot* were not low enough to be reached by people using wheelchairs and people of short stature
- There was not enough priority seating for people with mobility limitations
- The Torah was not accessible to people with physical challenges or of short stature
- There were no accommodations for people who cannot hold heavy books
- There were no comfortable places for people to retreat to if sitting still or being quiet became difficult

#### **Practices and Policies:**

What is noteworthy in this area is that WRT already had an existing Inclusion Committee. In addition, there were accommodations already being provided to students with disabilities that wished to become b'nai mitzvah, including one-on-one coaching. The religious school had a statement that supports the inclusion of children with disabilities. In several other areas, there were limitations to the full inclusion of people with disabilities. These included the following:

- The congregation's mission statement did not include a statement of inclusion
- There were not statements about inclusion on all publicity materials
- Leaders and congregants were not consistently using "person-first" language (i.e. putting individuals before their disabilities)
- Staff and lay leaders were not yet formally reaching out proactively to members with disabilities to facilitate feedback
- Congregants were not invited to stand "as they are able" during services

### **Awareness and Attitudes:**

It is noteworthy that WRT sponsored an inclusion awareness Shabbat and disability awareness was already a part of the religious school curriculum. One area of growth would be to provide more training for ushers in appropriate ways to greet and accommodate people with a range of abilities.

### **Developing and Implementing a Plan of Action:**

The initial plan for making WRT more inclusive of people of with disabilities included both short- and long-term opportunities. The following is a partial list from WRT's plan that was developed to increase inclusivity:

- Install independent door openers
- Create clear signage for accessible entrances and bathrooms
- Obtain large-print and Braille *siddurim* and chumashim
- Create accessible playgrounds and outdoor paths
- Designate seating for people with mobility impairments
- Edit all temple materials, including the welcome packet, website, and weekly newsletters to incorporate inclusive language
- Create a Transportation Committee
- Provide inclusion training for all staff including maintenance and security workers
- Have disability inclusion be a topic for a High Holiday sermon

In regard to awareness and attitudes in the religious school, the following steps were planned:

- Provide teacher training for the ECC and religious school faculty on autism spectrum disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, classroom management, and differentiated instruction
- Provide teacher training on communicating and working with parents
- Provide parent training on how to advocate for children so professionals will listen

In terms of policies and practices, the following steps were planned:

- Congregants will be invited to stand "as they are able" during worship services
- Ensure all publicity and registration forms include a statement about inclusivity and information about available accommodations
- Update the synagogue's mission statement and written description to include language about welcoming people with disabilities

## Evaluation:

Improvements were made in all areas of the Synagogue Inclusion Inventory that were initially assessed including:

- Building entrances were made more accessible to people using wheelchairs
- There is now clear signage for accessible entrances
- Wheelchair-accessible restrooms can now be accessed easily from any area of the synagogue
- *Tallitot* and *kippot* are easily reachable by people using wheelchairs and walkers
- The Torah is now accessible to people with physical challenges or of short stature

A great deal of progress was made in the area of practices and policies, including:

- There is now seating priority for people with mobility limitations
- All program publicity now includes statements about disability inclusion

- All community members are encouraged to consistently use “person-first” language (i.e. putting individuals before their disabilities)
- Congregants are invited to stand “as they are able” during services

In regard to awareness and attitudes:

- The staff and lay leaders have received training in disabilities and inclusive behavior
- Ushers have been taught appropriate ways to greet and accommodate people with disabilities
- Leadership adopted a more proactive stance on inclusivity
- There was a sermon during the high holidays devoted to inclusion where it was specifically noted that reserved parking for people with mobility issues not be misused