

Opening the Gates of Torah

Jewish Disabilities Awareness

50+ Programming and Action Ideas

The following list is a starting point of ways in which your congregation might participate in Jewish Disabilities Awareness Month and act throughout the year to make your community accessible to all Jews.

Programmatic Accessibility

- ▶ Assess existing programs and evaluate their accessibility.
- ▶ Hold religious school, nursery school and/or family education programs to raise awareness and sensitivity to people with disabilities in the Jewish community.
- ▶ Designate nursery school and religious school *tzedakah* during Jewish Disabilities Awareness Month for the congregation's accessibility fund or to pay for an accommodation that will enhance the accessibility of your congregation. Put a *tzedakah* box in the congregation lobby and inside the school entrance during the week so that everyone can participate.
- ▶ Ensure that people with disabilities are included in regular congregation activities –Sisterhood, Men's Club/Brotherhood, youth groups, fundraising, social action, *minyanim*, adult and children's education, volunteer activities, *aliyot*, etc.—and provide accommodations to facilitate their participation.
- ▶ Provide regular transportation for those who are elderly, homebound or have disabilities to services and other congregation activities.
- ▶ Plan adult education modules, sermons, or newsletter articles to discuss non-architectural barriers to inclusiveness.
- ▶ Take advantage of educational opportunities in the community concerning disabilities and disability-related issues.
- ▶ Welcome members of the Jewish deaf community by publicizing interpreted services and hire a qualified Judaic interpreter to make those services accessible.

- ▶ Contribute to, and make use of, the newly established Community Interpreter Fund to make sign language interpreters available at your events.
- ▶ Encourage congregants to celebrate *Shabbat* and holidays with people with disabilities in the community.
- ▶ Invite a speaker—for example, an expert in the field, a person with a disability, or a parent of a child with a disability.
- ▶ Have teens and pre-teens serve as big brothers and sisters/buddies to youngsters with disabilities in the congregation.

Ritual Accessibility

- ▶ Invite people with disabilities to participate in services.
- ▶ Provide large print *Siddurim* and *Chumashim* and other materials in Braille.
- ▶ Make print and taped versions of sermons and other materials available.
- ▶ Place a portable or permanent reading table on the sanctuary floor so that people with physical disabilities have greater access for *Torah* reading and honors.
- ▶ Dedicate a *Kiddush* or *Oneg Shabbat* in honor of Jewish Disabilities Awareness Month.
- ▶ Include special prayers or readings at each *Shabbat* service during Jewish Disabilities Awareness Month.
- ▶ Add a relevant quote to each *Shabbat* bulletin during Jewish Disabilities Awareness Month.
- ▶ Have a nursery school or religious school class lead and sign a prayer that they have learned with the help of a qualified interpreter at a *Shabbat* service.
- ▶ In the context of *Torah* study or, perhaps, a sermon, explore the difference between “healing” and “cure.”

- ▶ Educate ushers, greeters, receptionists and others who welcome and guide visitors about the various accessibility features offered by your congregation.
- ▶ Lower your box of *kippot* and basket of women's headcovers so that they can be reached by everyone, including people in wheelchairs.
- ▶ Provide plastic magnifying sheets for use with *Siddurim* and *Chumashim*. They can be sewn into book covers in such a way as to overlay the pages of the book.
- ▶ After *Shabbat*, deliver *bimah* flowers and extra copies of service bulletins to those who are sick or shut-in.

Policies and Language to Reflect Accessibility

- ▶ Establish an accessibility committee in your congregation to address the needs of people with disabilities on an ongoing basis. Include people with disabilities and family members of people with disabilities on the committee.
- ▶ Evaluate your "policies" of inclusion for all Jews, reviewing attitudes conveyed by written policies and unwritten codes of conduct toward people who look or act differently from others.
- ▶ Involve people with disabilities and parents of children with special needs in the development of policies and programs that will include all Jews.
- ▶ If your congregation hasn't already done so, join the National Organization on Disability's Accessible Congregations Campaign (information available at www.NOD.org).
- ▶ Use people first language in all congregation publications and other communications.
- ▶ Maintain regular communication with people who have disabilities and their families so that they continue to feel part of the congregation.
- ▶ Encourage and make people with disabilities comfortable to request accommodations they may need to make the congregation accessible to them.
- ▶ Develop a bulletin board to display information and materials about your congregation's accessibility and inclusion efforts.

- ▶ Make a commitment to identify and work to break down structural, communicational and attitudinal obstacles to worship and study.

Physical Accessibility

- ▶ Survey the physical surroundings of your congregation and evaluate their accessibility for people with disabilities that affect mobility, sight, hearing and development.
- ▶ Do not limit your survey to space used for worship, but extend it to include space used by congregation staff and volunteers.
- ▶ Clear space in different parts of the sanctuary for people who use wheelchairs.
- ▶ Consider replacing fixed pews with flexible seating that can be rearranged to accommodate a variety of needs.
- ▶ Install signage in Braille or raised letters for those who are blind or have severe visual impairments.
- ▶ Place second *mezuzot* at wheelchair height on doorways throughout the congregation.
- ▶ Post appropriate signage indicating the location of accessible entrances, paths of travel and restrooms.
- ▶ Install long-handled door hardware that is easier for everyone, especially those with impaired hand function, to use.
- ▶ Improve your congregation's air quality by dusting woodwork, brass and other fixtures in the sanctuary, vacuuming with a HEPA filter and cleaning heating ducts and air conditioning filters on a regular basis.
- ▶ Remove snow and ice promptly from all sidewalks and parking lots.
- ▶ Mount a cup dispenser next to your water fountain if funds are not available to purchase a new, accessible one. Make sure the dispenser is mounted at a convenient height for those in wheelchairs, and also make sure that cups are always maintained in the dispenser.
- ▶ Raise the height of work surfaces such as desks and tables so that volunteers and staff who use wheelchairs can sit comfortably.

- ▶ Survey your microphone and sound system to make sure it meets the needs of those with high frequency sound loss.
- ▶ Make sure that carpeted stairs and risers contrast in color so as to make each step clearly visible.
- ▶ Apply brightly colored, textured strips at the tops of stairs to indicate that stairs are being approached.
- ▶ Visit accessible congregations and other houses of worship in your area to get ideas for your own congregation.
- ▶ Make your facility available for use to organizations that serve people who have disabilities or are homebound.
- ▶ Educate congregation members and staff about environmental illnesses/allergies.

Educational Resources

- ▶ Provide educational resources concerning Judaism and disabilities in your congregation library.
- ▶ Devote a section of your library to resources and texts addressing disability concerns.
- ▶ Wherever there are shelves or baskets of books for children in classrooms, sanctuaries or libraries, include age-appropriate books on special needs and disabilities.

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