

Kol Ehad: JRF Committee on Inclusion of People with Disabilities

Kol Ehad [Everyone] works toward full participation of all Jewish people, their families and life partners, in JRF congregations and havurot. Formed by the JRF board in January 1994, it consists of three Task Forces: one on inclusion for people with disabilities, one on inclusion of gays and lesbians, and one on inclusion of intermarried people. This document concerns the Task Force for Inclusion of People with Disabilities. The Task Force is made up of people with and without disabilities who have personal and/or professional knowledge about special needs.

[Note: The Task Force credits That All May Worship: An interfaith Welcome to People With Disabilities by Ann Rose Davie and Ginny Thornburgh, National Organization on Disability, 1992, for much of the information, language and ideas that appear in this report.]

Task Force Members:

Shelly Rosenberg, chairperson

Marlene Craven

Esther Miller

Esther Newman

Fran Abramson

Rabbi Joshua Lesser

Rabbi Rachel Esserman

Joyce Dolcourt

Richard Hamowitz

Background Information

Who are People with Disabilities?

A person with a disability is a person who has physical, sensory, emotional or intellectual impairment that substantially limits one or more of his/her life activities. These are activities that a person without a disability can perform with little or no difficulty. Examples include walking, speaking, breathing, seeing, hearing, reading, writing, learning, working, performing manual tasks, managing self care and participating in recreational activities.

People with Disabilities and the Synagogue

In the past, synagogues have made few efforts to include people with disabilities. In fact, in some cases, they have been excluded in order to conform with halachah that indicates that only people with certain characteristics are eligible to lead prayers. Often, people with disabilities have been “cared for” or “prayed for” by their communities in a way which is paternalistic and unempowering. Unconsciously, when architectural planning has been undertaken, little effort has been made to see that people with disabilities are considered. When programs have been planned, few efforts have been made to consider how people with disabilities could participate.

Jewish Values Supporting Inclusion of People with Disabilities

Judaism is clear that God's House should be open to all, not only those who can walk into the building, hear the prayers, see the Torah, or discourse learnedly on its deepest meanings. This is taught throughout Jewish tradition.

In Genesis 1:27, we read that Adam, and by extension, all people, was created in "the image of God." This teaches us that there is holiness in all people, regardless of their physical, sensory, emotional or intellectual abilities. Everyone, therefore is entitled to be treated with dignity and respect.

All Jews can contribute to the community and the world. Pirke Avot 4:3 says: "Do not despise any person, and do not disparage any object. For there is none who does not have his/her hour and there is no object that does not have its place." Sometimes, we simply need to look more carefully to identify that contribution.

We must provide opportunities for the realization of each person's contributions and not hinder them in any way. It is our responsibility to remove or mitigate obstacles, as Leviticus 19:14 warns, "Do not curse a person who is deaf and do not place a stumbling block in front of a person who is blind." Few people would deliberately inhibit someone's access to a synagogue/havurah, but all too often, people fail to recognize and remove stumbling blocks that exist.

Deuteronomy 24:17 and 27:19, and Jeremiah 22:3 teaches us "not to oppress the stranger, the orphan and the widow." These three are offered as examples of the weakest, least well-protected members of society. The Torah repeatedly delineates that protection and help must be afforded such members of the group. It also implies that the moral measure of a society can be gauged by how it treats its weakest members. Later Jewish law emphasizes that they are to be given emotional, as well as financial support.

Proverbs 22:6 says: "Teach a child according to his way." This indicates that we are to educate every child so that he/she can learn, that is, according to his/her needs and abilities.

"All your children shall be taught of the Lord. For my house shall be a house of prayer for all peoples," says Isaiah (56:7). "All Israel is responsible for one another," is taught in Mishnah Sanhedrin. "All" is the key. The synagogue/havurah and Jewish school should be accessible to all Jews not just some. Responsibility implies taking action, doing what needs to be done, so that all are included.

How can this be accomplished? The Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 153:6 provides an answer. "We may sell a synagogue, and, similarly, all holy objects – even a Sefer Torah – in order to provide for Torah students and orphans." We must not be inhibited in our efforts by money, but must find some way to make our communities available to those who want to participate in them.

Reconstructionist Values Supporting Inclusion of People with Disabilities

Reconstructionist values supporting inclusion were discussed eloquently in our movement's policy paper on Homosexuality and Judaism. Many of these values are of primary importance in shaping our thinking about the role of people with disabilities in our congregations/havurot.

We quote from and paraphrase that documents here.

Human Dignity and Integrity: We have already stated that Jewish tradition sees human beings as having been created in the "image of God" and, therefore, that each person is to be treated with dignity and respect. In the words of Mordecai Kaplan, "All human beings are entitled to experience the dignity of selfhood or personality, the moral character of society and the reality of God."

Holiness: The Jewish people have been commanded to "be holy, as God is holy," to make holiness manifest throughout the world. We understand holiness as that which gives life moral and spiritual significance. One aspect of holiness consists of acts of caring about the people in our world. When we care about those with disabilities, recognizing their abilities and the holiness in them, in enhances the holiness in us/.

Equality: The Torah teaches that the entire human race descended from a single person. We understand this to refer to the equality of all people and respect for human differences. Kaplan said that, "every individual must be able to feel that the society in which he lives ... recognizes him as an end in himself." He also insisted that people can be said to have equal rights only when these include the right to worship in their community. "By discouraging any honest effort of men to commune with God ... we deny them equality of spiritual status." Equality implies not only equal participation, but equal opportunity for leadership of the community.

Inclusive Community: One of the basic tenets of Reconstructionism is the importance of community. It is through life in the community that people find support, protection and companionship. We strive to make our congregations/havurot into "caring communities," and to include all who wish to participate in them. We believe in reaching out to those who have been, or felt, excluded from the community. Caring communities show regard for the concerns of the individual, and individuals should also show regard for the concerns of his/her community.

Jewish Continuity: The future growth and enrichment of Jewish life are goals of Reconstructionism. Our approach to Judaism teaches that for Judaism to remain authentic and compelling, it must adapt to the world without abdicating its fundamental values and teaching. We believe that the community's continued health and vitality can only be strengthened by being open to Jews with disabilities, even when that necessitates accommodation to new technology and/or new ideas. This creates possibilities where none previously existed.

Democracy: The idea that every person should have a voice and a vote on matters affecting his/her life is a fundamental principle of Reconstructionism. Thus, lay members

of congregations/havurot – including those with disabilities – must have a voice in deciding key issues facing the community – including how to make that community accessible to all who wish to participate in it.

Pursuit of Justice: Reconstructionism affirms that the improvement of conditions under which humans live is a central concern. Justice for vulnerable members of a society is a test of that society's values. We, as a people, have been vulnerable many times in our history. This, the Jewish people have a special concern for the just and fair treatment of all people.

The Americans with Disabilities Act: The Letter and The Spirit of the Law

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law by President George H.W. Bush on July 26, 1990. It is a groundbreaking civil rights legislation for people with disabilities. It guarantees that individuals with disabilities will not be denied employment or promotion – either by private or government employer – because of those disabilities, if they are otherwise qualified. It also promises accessibility to transportation and public accommodations, such as restaurants, schools, offices, hotels, stores, libraries, and museums. The American commitment to equal opportunity for all people is heightened and enhanced by this legislation.

Although synagogues/havurot are legally exempted from the ADA, the spirit of laws regarding equal rights for all people are morally and ethically in accordance with Reconstructionist values and the way in which we worship in and govern Reconstructionist communities. Since there is no legal obligation, statements in support of inclusion do not establish a contract. These are not duties; they are goals toward which we should willingly work.

The question is not, or should not be, whether a given congregation/havurah has any members with disabilities currently attending. A disabling condition can occur to anyone at any time. Some 17% of the American Jewish community has a disability which prevents participation in religious life. Often, people have not felt welcome and included and have become “invisible.” People can be made to feel uncomfortable or unwelcome in many, often subtle ways. Sometimes, people who are not disabled are not even aware of their own, deeply embedded, fears and prejudices and how they communicate them.

We need to make a concerted effort to welcome all people into our congregations. Clearly, it is impossible to legislate an individual person’s actions or reactions. However, it is possible to set a tone for a community that speaks to everyone of the recognition that all people are created in the image of God, and it is the community’s responsibility intention and desire to welcome all people. Making this statement, a priori, and then taking the actions to implement it, creates a very different atmosphere than forcing people to request special treatment and wonder what response they will receive. The atmosphere of inclusion created benefits the entire community.

Goals of the Task Force

The overall goal of the Task Force is to encourage Reconstructionist communities, at the national, regional and local levels, to be accessible to Jews with physical, sensory, intellectual and emotional disabilities, their families and life partners, for religious services, social and educational programming and all aspects of synagogue/havurah life.

In order to do this, the specific goals of the Task Force are:

1. To create awareness of and educate and sensitize members of the community to:
 - A. The physical or architectural barriers which make it difficult or impossible for people with disabilities to enter or use the facilities with comfort and dignity.
 - B. The barriers to receiving and participating in communication.
 - C. The attitudinal barriers which make people with disabilities feel unwelcome.
2. To work with the Reconstructionist community to overcome, as much as possible, physical and communication barriers.
3. To create an atmosphere in the Reconstructionist community in which attitudinal barriers no longer exist.

In order to carry out these goals, the Task Force will:

1. Urge the national Board of Directors of JRF, regional councils, and all JF affiliated congregations/havurot to adopt the following statement of principles:

In keeping with the principles of Torah and in light of our understanding of Reconstructionist values, we will make every reasonable effort to welcome and actively include people with disabilities in all aspects of our Reconstructionist communities.

2. Urge congregations/havurot to establish a committee or task force on inclusion which will evaluate the community's needs and the services it is providing.
3. Serve as a resource and consultative service for JRF, congregations/havurot, the RRC and the RRA as they work toward inclusion.
4. Work with the Education Commission on materials, programs, etc. which will enable our schools to better include children with disabilities.
5. Work on a movement-wide level to create an atmosphere that is sensitive to and supportive of inclusion of people with disabilities.

Appendices

Appendix I – The Americans with Disabilities Act & The Religious Community

For an overview of the ADA, see “Facts about the Americans with Disabilities Act” which follows. The Discussion below is a synopsis of material from Loving Justice: The ADA and the Religious Community, edited by Ginny Thornburgh and published by the National Organization on Disability, which specifically pertains to religious organizations. This is, by no means, a complete discussion on the matter. To get more complete information, read the book, talk to a lawyer who specializes in disabilities law, or consult an organization for people with disabilities.

Because our government honors the separation of church and state, synagogues and other religious organizations or entities controlled by religious organizations are exempt from the ADA, except for certain aspects of the employment provisions. Religious institutions may be subject to the employment provisions of the law if they have more than fifteen employees, and if they operate residential housing, daycare, health care or formal educational programs that provide services to the community. There may also be compliance concerns if the group operates a program that receives federal, state or local funds. The rabbi is not covered under this law.

Appendix II: Areas to Consider in Accessibility

An accessible congregation has overcome three barriers:

1. Physical/architectural barriers which make it difficult for people with disabilities to enter and use the facilities with comfort and dignity.
2. Barriers to receiving and participating in communication.
3. Attitudinal barriers which make people with disabilities feel unwelcome.

As a community works to overcome these barriers, it is making progress toward becoming accessible and, therefore, welcoming. Below are the kinds of things that need to be considered in order to make synagogues/havurot accessible. However, each facility needs to be considered on an individual basis. For information on how to best make your specific building accessible, contact organizations for people with disabilities.

Architectural or Physical Barriers

- Parking
- Level entrance ways
- Sidewalks
- Curb cuts
- Changes in grade
- Signage

Communication Barriers

- Lighting
- Printed and auditory materials
- Amplification system
- Telecommunications
- Sign language

Attitudinal Barriers: Questions for Discussion

1. Do any people with disabilities come to services or activities
2. If they come once, do they come back? If not, do we know why?
3. Do people with disabilities participate in the religious or political leadership of the congregation?
4. What does the congregation do to encourage the participation and recognize the contributions of people with disabilities?
5. Is there a plan for including children with disabilities in our religious school?
6. Can and do people with disabilities celebrate life cycle events in the congregation? If not, do we know why?
7. Is there a way for people with disabilities to offer suggestions and expertise on reducing barriers in the congregation without feeling like they are complaining or imposing?
8. Are all events and meetings automatically scheduled in an accessible location?
9. Do we use people-first language in our speech, newsletter, etc.? [This is language that refers to the person first, the disability second. For example, person with paraplegia, instead of paraplegic.]
10. Do we have a way to teach ourselves and our children about people with disabilities?
11. Do we reach out to members of the congregation who can't get to the building? Does someone offer to drive? Do we offer to hold a service or class at their home?
12. Do we reach out to and acknowledge the needs of family members and life partners of people with disabilities?
13. Is the rabbi a role model for creating a welcoming attitude?
14. Does the synagogue/havurah have a board-level committee or task force on inclusion of people with disabilities?
15. Has the congregation/havurah adopted a statement on inclusion?
16. Does the congregation indicate a willingness to raise money for and/or think creatively about ways to be accessible and welcoming?

[Sections of this checklist have been adapted from That All May Worship: An Interfaith Welcome to People with Disabilities by AnnRose Davie and Ginny Thornburgh, National Organization on Disability, 1992 and Who Makes People Different: Jewish Perspectives on the Disabled by Carl Astor, United Synagogue of America Department of Youth Activities.]

Appendix III: Guidelines for Communicating About People with Disabilities

1. Do not refer at all to a disability unless it is crucial
2. Do not sensationalize a disability by saying “victim of,” “afflicted with,” and so on. Instead say, “person who has multiple sclerosis,” “people who had polio.”
3. Avoid using emotional descriptions. Say, “uses a wheelchair,” rather than “confined to a wheelchair,” “walks with crutches,” rather than, “is crippled.”
4. Avoid labeling people into groups