

We Are All Created In God's Image
Inclusion at the Conservative Synagogue Adath Israel of Riverdale
Rabbi Barry Dov Katz



After extensive work on our building, we unpacked a **new Torah reading table for our Beit Midrash**, the room where we hold daily services. When you open the doors to the base, there is a pull out table top, the right height for someone who is in a wheelchair or who cannot reach the higher table. Everyone can comfortably have an aliyah, read from the Torah, and lead services. This simple addition makes our table, already beautiful because of its fine Israeli craftsmanship, into something exquisite, a powerful symbol of the journey our congregation began many years ago. For over three decades, **inclusion of children with disabilities has been a part of our Hebrew School program. We have a special educator on staff and have provided shadows when needed.** We worked with many children with disabilities to prepare for their **bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies**, hosted a **social skills course** for kids on the autistic spectrum and **partnered with Matan** to create a self contained classroom parallel to our Hebrew School.

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Years ago, we built a **ramp to our bimah**. Still, we wanted to better understand how we could build inclusion of people with disabilities into the structure of our communal life, how we could be more intentional about our efforts. We applied for and were accepted into the UJA/Federation Synagogue Inclusion Project.

From the beginning, the program challenged us. Focus group conversations exposed different perspectives on inclusion, everything from “If we don’t do x or y then we cannot call ourselves inclusive,” to “Look at how we are doing compared to where we were and compared to other institutions!” We asked ourselves: Should we focus on our Hebrew school or our Shabbat morning programs for children? What about adults who are blind or who cannot navigate steps? How about people of any age who are deaf or have processing issues, the so-called invisible disabilities? When we talk about inclusion, are we talking about our building or our programs or our attitudes?

An excellent and thorough 360 degree survey of the congregation conducted by RespectAbility revealed illuminating information about how we perceived ourselves and the work we needed to do. There were two major take away lessons:

1. **Our members did not know the things we were already doing to increase accessibility.** We quietly made accommodations when we were approached but we were not being proactive by asking about disabilities on our membership and Hebrew School registration forms. We did not have language in our communications that invited people to share what they needed in order to participate fully. We needed to be more public about what we were already doing and about the goals we set for ourselves.

2. **Inclusion is not about making our shul welcoming to some theoretical “them.”** There are or will be times when each one of us encounters obstacles as we attempt to enter the community of meaning and joy that is our shul. For some it will be the steps; for others it will be print that is too small or sound that is not sufficiently amplified; and for others it will be teaching that does not consider the myriad ways people learn or a life circumstance that makes us feel like we are on the outside. We needed to think about inclusion as something we were doing for the whole community, a culture shift, not something we were doing for “them.”



In response, we established a committee of people who cared about this issue. The lay chair of the committee, Susannah Goldstein, did not just care, she was passionate. That made all the difference. We engaged our entire staff, devoted significant time to talking about inclusion in our shul and, along with a cohort of other synagogues, participated in trainings sponsored by the Synagogue Inclusion Project.

Thanks to the funding from UJA Federation along with matching funds from the congregation, we focused our attention on hosting an **Inclusion Shabbat** which featured remarkable sessions. Rabbi Dov Linzer shared a perspective on inclusion steeped in deep Jewish learning. Ruti Regan, a Jewish Theological Seminary rabbinical school student, founder of *Anachnu*, an organization led by Jews with disabilities promoting disability-informed Torah and inclusive community, taught us to be open when we see people on the autism spectrum acting in ways that we do not understand. A panel of our members shared moments of sadness when, despite what we thought were our good intentions, they felt marginalized or patronized by the community. A sign language interpreter made the program accessible. That weekend galvanized support for the program in the shul at large.



Over the course of the year we expanded our **Shabbat and Holiday Greeters program** to include more volunteers and to give the people who walk through our doors what they need to feel comfortable. This included where to find the **large print siddurim** (prayer books), the location of the **sensory sensitive spaces on Purim and at other times**, or **simply a smile** as they walk into a place where everyone else seems to know what they are doing!

As part of a capital campaign, we installed an **entrance ramp** to our downstairs level and an **elevator**. This work was celebrated with a large sign which announced to everyone who passed our building, ***“Pardon our appearance as we make ourselves accessible to people of all abilities: www.csair.org.”*** Next to these words was an image from the Accessible Icon Project, a “wheelchair in motion” (with the word Shalom added in!) During construction, we received many questions about what we were doing to make ourselves accessible, which provided wonderful opportunities to express our values of inclusion, share our successes and to talk about future plans with neighbors.



We discovered that this work created many **important internal conversations**. Our security committee is now in dialogue with our inclusion committee about how to insure safety along with accessibility. A working group dedicated to LGBTQ inclusion is considering how we can build on past efforts to welcome members of the LGBTQ community. Our lay leadership is talking about how to fund all of the things we want to do in the future. Our work with UJA left us with a long wish for future projects and areas of focus. All of these conversations are crucial to making inclusion a part of our synagogue culture in lasting ways.

Since the conclusion of the UJA/Federation Synagogue Inclusion Project, we have moved to deepen our work. From the beginning of the year we planned three events that would be signed by a **sign language interpreter** and advertised to the deaf community. We regularly advertise our new **contact person in the office who coordinates accessibility** for individuals. A 7th grader is preparing to teach her Hebrew School peers and their parents how to welcome and **support LGBTQ middle school students**. We are exploring a partnership with an agency that helps support people with disabilities in the workplace. We are planning on a second Inclusion Shabbat that will focus on **hidden disabilities** and creating a **culture of radical welcome** for everyone connected to our community.

Many times during the year, we thought about the Torah's message that we are all created in God's image. In response to the challenges facing us as a nation and around the globe as we enter a new year, we started a campaign to post signs in our windows and on our doors for the months of Elul and Tishrei with the words, "We Are All Created In God's Image." Our message, inspired by our work around inclusion in the broadest sense: Jews, Muslims, Christians, people of other faiths and no faith- we are all created in God's image. **People of different sexual and gender identities, races, and, people with disabilities, the youngest and the oldest among us- we are all created in God's image.** No matter who you are-you are created in God's image.

***We are all created
in God's image***

We hope that people will post the sign on Facebook and share it with friends and family along with their own thoughts about why it's important to assert that each of us is unique and therefore precious. During this holiday season, who knows which person will see the sign and feel like the scales have tipped a little bit in their favor, or in favor of a world that needs to be reminded of what we have in common- our humanity.

And so we continue our work around inclusion with deep thanks to the UJA Federation, Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi and Meagan Buren (RespectAbility), and our guide and source of so much information and encouragement, Shelley Richman Cohen (The Jewish Inclusion Project.)

Whoever you are – we hope you will come to learn, pray, and create an inclusive Jewish community with us.

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Study. Prayer. Community.

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