

**Kol Ehad: Jewish Reconstructionist Federation Committee on
Inclusion of People with Disabilities**



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.]

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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, it 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 that 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 that 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. that 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 that 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 Ann Rose 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, as in “the disabled,” “a paraplegic.” Instead, say, “people with disabilities,” “a man who has paraplegia.” (Note especially that the word “disabled” is an adjective, not a noun.)
5. Avoid portraying people with disabilities who succeed as remarkable or superhuman. This implies that it is unusual for people with disabilities to have talents or skills.
6. Avoid using the word “special” in regards to disability, as in “special entrance” or “special transportation.” Instead say “accessible entrance” and “lift-equipped busses.” The word “special” serves only to segregate rather than to integrate people with disabilities.
7. Avoid putting disability issues into a medical context. The overwhelming majority of people with disabilities are not sick. Words like “patient,” “case,” and “invalid” should not be used. Most current disabilities issues concern civil rights, education, accessibility, etc.
8. Avoid using an over-familiar tone in referring to people with disabilities. A person with a disability deserves the same courtesy of address and reference as a non-disabled person.

Acceptable Terminology
(if a disability must be referred to)

Offensive Terminology

Disabled	NOT	Crippled, Deformed, Handicapped
Nondisabled	NOT	Able-bodied, Normal, Healthy
People with disabilities	NOT	The Disabled, The Handicapped
Uses a wheelchair	NOT	Wheelchair bound, confined to
Woman who has cerebral palsy	NOT	Cerebral palsy victim
Man who had polio	NOT	Man who suffers from polio
Has a specific learning disability	NOT	Is learning-disabled
People who are blind/deaf	NOT	The blind/deaf
People with Epilepsy	NOT	Epileptic

[Taken from a brochure produced by the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.
Pennsylvania Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities, 2001 N. Front St., Harrisburg, PA
17102, (717) 238-0172 / (800) 432-3060]

Appendix IV: Resource Guide

Consultation:

National Organization on Disability
Religion and Disability Program
Ginny Thornburgh, Director
910 16th St. NW, Suite 600
Washington, DC 20006
(202) 293-5960; (202) 293-5968 TDD; (202) 293-7999 Fax

Jewish Reconstructionist Federation
101 Greenwood Avenue
Beit Devora, Suite 430
Jenkintown, PA 19046
(215) 885-5601; (215) 885-5603 Fax
<http://www.jrf.org>

Council of Jewish Federations
Committee on Community Planning
730 Broadway
New York, NY 10003
(212) 475-5000

Union of Reform Judaism
Lehiyot Advisory Committee
Department for Religious Education
838 Fifth Ave.
New York, NY 10021-7064
(212) 249-0100

Books and Pamphlets:

Abrams, Rabbi Judith A. "Synagogue Access," from Mitzvah, by Danny Siegel.

Astor, Carl. Who Makes People Different: Jewish Perspectives on the Disabled. New York: United Synagogue of America Department of Youth Activities, 1985. This book examines the traditional Jewish attitudes towards those with special needs. The author discusses legal and Midrashic views, theological implications, and services in the Jewish community.

Davie, Ann Rose and Thornburgh, Ginny. That All May Worship: An Interfaith Welcome to People with Disabilities. Washington, D.C.: National Organization on Disability, 1992. A practical interfaith manual for how to include people with a wide variety of special needs in all aspects of religious life.

Granick, Abraham. Diagnostic Testing for the Hebrew Curriculum. New York: Board of Jewish Education, Inc., 1990. Manual for teachers on diagnostic procedures and specific techniques for diagnosing problems in Hebrew decoding, spelling and handwriting.

Greene, Phyllis and Simon, Sara. The Resource Program Guide for a Congregational School. Rockville, MD: Board of Jewish Education of Greater Washington, 1990. A manual with specific practical suggestions for implementing a resource room.

Greene, Phyllis and Heavenrich, Elaine. A Question in Search of an Answer. New York: UAHC, 1981. A book on learning disabilities as it applies to Jewish education. The first part includes theories and terminology about learning disabilities, the second gives specific suggestions for teaching children with learning disabilities in Jewish schools.

Hammer, Reuven. The Other Child in Jewish Education. New York: United Synagogue Commission on Jewish Education, 1979. This book addresses the effects of learning disabilities in Jewish schools, gives practical suggestions for teaching, materials and curriculum planning.

Kaplan, Sharon. Learning Disabilities: A Handbook for Jewish Educators. New York: Board of Jewish Education, 1985. A manual for educators, administrators and parents that is an overview of the field.

Layman, Robert. Organizing Classes for Jewish Special Children. New York: United Synagogue of America, 1984. A pamphlet that details the steps to organizing Jewish education classes for children with special needs.

Layman, Robert. A Rabbi's Guide to the Special Person. New York: United Synagogue Commission on Jewish Education. A pamphlet for the Rabbi who wants to include people with special needs.

Richman, Hasia and Margolis, Daniel. Diagnosis and Remediation Hebrew Reading Test Packet. Boston: Bureau of Jewish Education of Greater Boston, 1982. An individual diagnostic test for evaluating Hebrew decoding skill. Suggestions for remediation.

Ruthen, Gerald. Daniel and the Silver Flute. New York: United Synagogue Commission on Jewish Education, 1986. Book for children ages 8 to 10 about the many ways to express religious feelings. An excellent introduction to special needs. Can be read to younger children.

Schein, Jerome and Waldman, Lester. The Deaf Jew in the Modern World. New York: KTAV, 1986. A compilation of papers presented at a conference.

Shuart, Adele Kronick. Signs in Judaism: A Resource Book for the Jewish Deaf Community. New York: Bloch Publishing, 1986. Illustrates and defines signing symbols in various Jewish categories.

Thornburgh, Ginny. Loving Justice: The ADA and the Religious Community. Washington, D.C.: National Organization on Disability, 1994. A look at the portions of the ADA and related laws that apply to the religious community.

Kits:

Al Pi Darco: According to Their Ways. Union of Reform Judaism Department of Family Concerns. A special needs educational resource manual to help religious schools and families provide Jewish learning for students with disabilities.

Dignity and Disability: A Jewish Discovery Kit, Board of Jewish Education of Greater Washington, Rockville, MD. An introduction of special needs for Jewish schools.

Justice, Justice for All. Bureau of Jewish Education of Greater Los Angeles. A disability awareness program for Jewish schools.

Lehiyot: Access to Judaism – Guidelines for Congregational Certification. Union of Reform Judaism Department of Family Concerns. Provides guidelines to transform Reform synagogues and other Reform structures into an environment in which all Jews can experience Judaism with equality.

Jewish Values & People with Disabilities – Appreciating the Variety of Life

Compiled by Rabbi Micah Becker-Klein

Genesis 1:27

God created the human in God's own image ... male and female, God created them ...

Exodus 4:10

But Moses said to the Lord, "Please O Lord, I have never been a person of words, either in time past or now that you have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue. And the Lord said to him: "Who gives a person speech? Who makes one unable to speak or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go, and I will be with you ..."

Leviticus 19:14

You shall not insult the deaf or place a stumbling block before the blind. You shall have awe for God. I am the Lord.

Proverbs 31:8

Speak up for those who cannot speak, for the rights of the unfortunate. Speak up, judge righteously, and champion the poor and needy.

Pirkei Avot 4:3

Ben Azzai taught: Do not disdain any person; do not underestimate the importance of anything. For there is no person who does not have an hour, and there is not a thing without its place.

Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

An individual person was created to show the greatness of God. While a person stamps many coins from a single cast, and they are all alike, God has stamped every person with the cast of the first human, yet none of them are alike.

Jerusalem Talmud

Rabbi Yochanan said: Each of the 40 days that Moses was on Mount Sinai, God taught him entire Torah. And each night, Moses forgot what he had learned. Finally, God gave it to him as a gift. If so, why did God not give the Torah to him as a gift on the first day? In order to encourage the teachers of those who learn in a non-traditional manner.

Talmud Sanhedrin 4:5

Human beings were created as a single individual to teach you that anyone who destroys a single life is as though that person has destroyed an entire world, and anyone who preserves a single life is as though an entire world has been preserved. The creation of an individual human being was done also for the sake of peace among humanity, so that no person could say to another, "My parent is greater than your parent."

Mishneh Torah based on Talmud Brachot 58b

One who sees ... people whose physical nature is distinct recites the blessing, “Blessed are you, God, Sovereign of all worlds who creates variety in life.” (... *mishaneh et habriot*).