

Jewish Funders Network

Guide to Jewish Values and
Disability Rights



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A message to our readers:

The great prophet Moses, unparalleled as an exemplar of Jewish leadership, famously had a speech impediment. Clearly, people with disabilities have played central roles in Jewish history. As inheritors of that history, Jews in general and Jewish philanthropists in particular have a deep stake in disability rights.

In fact, all philanthropists are already active in this area. It sounds impossible, but it's true: anyone who gives to any philanthropic cause whatsoever is already a funder in the area of disability rights. The only question is whether they're working actively to include people who have disabilities or whether they're unwittingly perpetuating exclusion.

Some funders may be doing both at once. But to do neither is impossible. The complex fabric of issues that the disability rights movement addresses are deeply interwoven into every other cause. Whatever your area of focus may be—education, engagement, arts and culture, human rights, connection with Israel, social justice—either you're working actively to include people with disabilities in the programs you fund, or you're inadvertently enabling programs to exclude many people in your target audience. Since these problems carry an inertia of their own, not helping is the same thing as harming.

Far too much of our physical, social, and cultural spaces are designed in ways that perpetuate patterns of harmful exclusion. These patterns are products of a subconscious assumption: that people with disabilities are someone else, someone other, someone “special,” but, most of all, someone out of my sight. So (in this assumption) whatever work I'm doing in the present moment doesn't need to take “them” into consideration.

But this assumption simply isn't true. People with disabilities are not “them.” We, the Jewish people, are one community that includes individuals with and without disabilities. Working toward an accessible and inclusive community is not some additional cause, separate from our regular commitments. Without working intentionally to ensure that everything we do for “the Jewish people” includes all of the Jewish people, our work must fail, by definition, before it even begins.

By bringing us into the space where Jewish tradition meets disability rights, this guide offers a chance to reflect on our communities, our values, and our philanthropy. As such, it is an enormously valuable introduction to the major issues at play for Jewish philanthropists and for the Jewish community at large. Grounded in Jewish texts and values, this guide sheds light on the myriad angles and elements of disability justice that some of us may never have considered before.

At JFN we believe in the power of a dynamic network of funders to make change far beyond what any one player can achieve. That's why we hope, above all, that this guide will spark new and urgent dialogue in the funder community. We can never predict how a complex and creative network will act, so the most important chapter in this guide is not yet published; it's the one you will write, together with your funder and nonprofit peers. By making awareness of disability rights and justice a more integral part of the full breadth of the Jewish community's philanthropic practice, you can write the next chapter.

Andrés Spokoiny

President and CEO, Jewish Funders Network

Jewish Funders Network

Guide to Jewish Values and Disability Rights

by Julia Watts Belser



Introduction

This book aims to inspire Jewish communities to more fully integrate disability into our conversations about Jewish values – and to affirm the potential for a powerful connection between Jewish tradition and movements for disability justice. By bringing Jewish texts and traditions into conversation with the principles that guide disability activists and human rights advocates, the book highlights the connections between Jewish values and the disability rights movement. It serves as a resource for Jewish leaders, educators, funders, and social activists who seek to integrate disability issues into discussions about Jewish values. It aims to spark conversations about how these values shape our lives as Jews – and how they can inspire us to build more inclusive communities. It suggests steps toward creating Jewish communities that are fully accessible to people with disabilities, welcoming Jews with disabilities into synagogues and Hebrew schools, and promoting equal access to Jewish life and learning. This book emerges out of the conviction that Jews with disabilities deserve access to the richness of Jewish culture—and that our Jewish communities become stronger and richer when they include people with disabilities.

Each chapter uses classic Jewish texts to illuminate Jewish justice principles, and joins those principles with concrete efforts to promote disability inclusion and disability rights:

- Chapter 1 explores how the core concept of ***B'tselem Elohim: The Infinite Value of the Individual*** affirms the fundamental equality of all people, regardless of disability status.
- Chapter 2 delves into the meaning of ***Areyvut: Communal Responsibility***. It shows that enabling people with disabilities to fully participate in Jewish life is a communal obligation and a collective responsibility.
- Chapter 3 examines ***Kavod: Respecting Agency, Promoting Dignity***. This chapter addresses ways Jewish communities can affirm the dignity of people with disabilities both by challenging stigma and shame, and by avoiding over-effusive praise.
- Finally, Chapter 4 discusses how commitments to ***Tzedek & Tikkun Olam: Pursuing Social Justice*** can inspire Jews to expand the boundaries of disability activism beyond Jewish institutions and become partners in the broader movement for disability rights and social change.

While this guide considers Jewish texts about disability, it does not offer a comprehensive overview of disability in Jewish thought. Nor does it argue for a particular approach to disability in Jewish law. Jewish texts and traditions have, at times, been used to marginalize people with disabilities. Yet Jewish tradition can be a strong advocate for disability rights

and disability inclusion. This guide aims to help Jews connect Jewish values with disability justice work. To help put these principles into practice, the chapters include ideas and best practices for integrating disability issues into Jewish life: whether Torah discussions, classroom conversations, synagogue life, or social activism. Sources and further resources are listed at the end of the book, in the hope that this guide will inspire you to further learning.

The Disability Rights Movement

People with disabilities are often described as the world's largest minority group. The World Health Organization estimates that nearly 1 billion people, 15 percent of the world's population, live with a disability that significantly affects their daily life. Whether through sudden accident or gradual aging, most people will experience some form of disability over the course of their life. As Rabbi Dov Linzer reminds us, "The world is not divided into those with disabilities and those without; it is divided into those with disabilities and those who do not yet have disabilities."

Disabilities affect us in diverse ways. Disabilities can shape how we perceive the world and access information, how we learn or how we think, and how our bodies move through the world. Disabilities may also affect a person's mental health and emotional landscape. Some disabilities are readily apparent, while others are hidden or invisible. Some disabilities are acquired at birth, while others come about suddenly, through trauma or accident. **Disability does not affect an individual in isolation.** It also shapes the experience of family, friends, partners, and children of people with disabilities.

Over the past forty years, the **disability rights movement** has brought about a profound transformation in the way society understands disability and treats people with disabilities. Building upon the civil rights movement and the struggle for racial justice, disability activists and parent advocates began organizing for an end to the institutionalization of people with disabilities, for equal access to education and employment, and for fully accessible public transportation and public spaces. Through protests, marches, and public demonstrations, they demanded that people with disabilities be recognized as full members of the community, as people with rights and dignity.

In 1990, after decades of disability activism, the United States passed the **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)**, which prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in all areas of public life. In 2006, the United Nations adopted the **Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD)**, the first international treaty devoted to global disability rights. Drafted in collaboration with disability activists around the world, the CRPD maintains that people with disabilities have a right to an adequate standard of living, to inclusive education, as well as "the opportunity to develop and utilize their creative, artistic, and intellectual potential." The United States signed the CRPD in 2009, but has thus far failed to ratify it in the Senate. Major Jewish organizations continue to partner with American disability rights groups to push for the ratification of CRPD.

Promoting Access and Equality

Disability rights activists have drawn public attention to disability discrimination. They work to challenge **ableism**, the complex set of social structures and cultural attitudes that privilege certain bodies or minds as normal and others as abnormal. Ableism affords the “able” the right to exercise power over those considered disabled. By contrast, the disability rights movement emphasizes the equality, dignity, and human rights of all people—regardless of disability status.

Disability rights activists emphasize that many of the difficulties associated with having a disability arise because our communities aren’t built for people with disabilities. Architecture, for instance, can act as a powerful form of exclusion. Stairs and tight spaces turn a wheelchair into a real liability. When communities are built with access in mind, wheels and walkers become just another way of moving through the world.

Building design is a tangible, concrete example of how the built environment can limit the dignity and full participation of people with disabilities. But access barriers aren’t just physical. Social attitudes and negative perceptions of disability also exclude and marginalize people with disabilities. **Making room for people with disabilities means going beyond the ramp.** It calls us to transform the ways we understand and embrace disability and difference.

Naming Disability: A Note on Language

Within disability communities, much attention has been given to the way people are identified and named. In this book, we generally make use of “person-first” language, describing individuals as “people with disabilities.” By emphasizing the person being addressed, such language underscores the humanity and dignity of people with disabilities.



IDENTITY-FIRST LANGUAGE IN AUTISTIC COMMUNITIES

The theory behind person-first language is that it puts the person before the disability or the condition, and emphasizes the value and worth of the individual by recognizing them as a person instead of a condition. And that’s a great idea. In fact, when discussing specific people, I have never once heard anyone – self-advocate, parent, teacher, or otherwise – refer to a person as anything except by his or her name. I can’t think of any teacher – at least any decent one – who would refer to a student as “that Autistic kid,” or “that kid with autism.” And I certainly can’t think of any parent who wouldn’t refer to his or her child by name.

But why are we self-advocates so opposed to this terminology? . . . When people say “person with autism,” it does have an attitudinal nuance. It suggests that the person can be separated from autism, which simply isn’t true. It is impossible to separate a person from autism, just as it is impossible to separate a person from the color of his or her skin. . . [Autism] is an edifying and meaningful component of a person’s identity, and it defines the ways in which an individual experiences and understands the world around him or her.

Lydia Brown, Autistic Self Advocacy Network¹

Lydia Brown is an Autistic activist, lecturer, and public policy advocate. Recognized by the White House as a 2013 Champion of Change, Brown is a policy analyst at the Autistic Self Advocacy Network and serves on the board of TASH New England.²



STRIKING THE TERM “SPECIAL”

The terms “special” and “special needs” do not serve our cause. . . We need to embrace the term “disability” as a fact of life in olam hazeh (this world). We want society at large to continue to increase its regard for us as “people with disabilities,” an identifiable and broad demographic, who can contribute to the destiny, well-being, and growth of klal Yisroel, if we’re provided the right accommodation.

Sharon Shapiro-Lacks, “‘Special’ Does Not a Disability Make.”³

Sharon Shapiro-Lacks is founder and executive director of Yad HaChazakah-The Jewish Disability Empowerment Center. An Orthodox Jewish woman with a disability, Shapiro-Lacks founded Yad HaChazakah to provide guidance, advocacy and support for Jews with disabilities and their families.⁴

My needs are not “special” just because they’re not met in ways identical to the needs of non-disabled people. I need a ramp; you need steps. Not special, just facts. I need a wheelchair; you walk. Not special, just facts. Moreover, the needs of non-disabled people certainly aren’t all met in the same ways. Just like every other living, breathing human being on this planet, I am a person who has needs that must be fulfilled in ways appropriate to my abilities.

Emily Ladau, “Four Disability Euphemisms that Need to Bite the Dust”⁵

Emily Ladau is a freelance writer, disability activist, and outreach specialist, as well as the founder of Social Justice Media Services.⁶



1 <http://autisticadvocacy.org/home/about-asan/identity-first-language/>

2 <http://autistichoya.net/bio/>

3 <http://www.yadempowers.org/yh-views/special-does-not-a-disability-make/>

4 <http://www.yadempowers.org/>

5 http://cdrnys.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=808:tdd-4-disability-euphemisms&catid=17:blogs-recent

6 <http://wordsiwheelby.com/>

Person-first language, now common among service providers and disability professionals, has become the most widely accepted way to refer to people with disabilities today. In some cases, however, disability activists have reclaimed “identity-first” language as a way of recognizing and affirming that disability is an essential dimension of their identity. Many Deaf people prefer identity-first language, as do many Autistic activists. While we primarily use person-first language in this book, we retain identity-first language when activists we quote use it to describe themselves.

Finally, this guidebook avoids euphemisms for disability, such as “special needs” or “differently abled.” Most people with disabilities regard these terms with derision and prefer a more straightforward approach to speaking about disability. Euphemisms signal a discomfort with disability, a sense that disability is shameful or distasteful, something that should not be discussed in polite society. The language of specialness, which often drips with saccharine sentimentality, is deemed particularly problematic. The notion that disability requires “special accommodations” reinforces the notion that accessible services are a favor or an act of benevolence rather than a fundamental obligation. People with disabilities do not seek special treatment, but equal access and inclusion in the community.

Disability in Jewish Tradition: Continuity and Transformation

People with disabilities have always been a part of Jewish communities. In keeping with a deep ethical commitment to protect those who could easily be marginalized, the Torah forbids insulting the Deaf or placing a stumbling block before the blind (Leviticus 19:14). Other texts on disability raise harder questions for some readers. Just two chapters later, the Torah excludes a priest with certain kinds of physical conditions from serving at the altar (Leviticus 21). In this book, we will look at these and other texts in more detail—and consider the rich traditions of Jewish interpretation that have developed around these passages.

Approaches to disability within Jewish law have changed over time. The status of Deaf Jews offers an instructive example. Classical sources limit the legal capacities of the *heresh*, a person who is both deaf and mute. Traditional Jewish culture is profoundly oral; it emphasizes speaking and hearing as the primary mode for teaching and learning Torah, as well as other forms of communication. Because the rabbis assumed that a person who could neither hear nor speak was unable to communicate, they exempted the *heresh* from virtually all Jewish rituals and obligations.

Yet this exemption does not encompass the full picture of rabbinic thought about deafness. Some rabbinic sources contest the claim that an inability to speak is tantamount to an inability to learn. The Babylonian Talmud reports that the mute sons of Rabbi Yonanan ben Gudgada sat and studied at the feet of the great authority Rabbi Judah the Patriarch and acquired expert knowledge of Jewish scripture and law (bHagigah 3a). Rabbinic sources also recognize that communication does not depend on speech. The Mishnah maintains that a *heresh* can transact business via sign language or by lip-reading (mGittin 5:7). It affirms that a person who is deaf may contract a marriage or divorce by means of gesture (mYevamot 14:1).

More recently, the revolution in Deaf education has transformed the place of Deaf people in Jewish thought. Recognizing that Deaf people can learn and communicate, influential Jewish legal authorities built on permissive precedents to affirm the ritual and legal competence of Deaf people and to regard them as fully bound by Jewish law (except for certain ritual practices that specifically require hearing).

In a recent legal responsum, Rabbi Benjamin Lau offers a detailed account of the history of Jewish approaches to deafness.⁷ He concludes with the words of Rabbi Yaakov Ariel, who emphasizes that Jewish communities have an obligation to recognize and protect the dignity of the Deaf person,

a fully legitimate Jew who stood at Mount Sinai with the rest of us and received the Torah as we did. And even if he did not hear, the verse states that “they saw the voices”; and even if he could not have said “we will hear,” he accepted “we will do” along with the rest of the congregation.

This is but a single potent example of the profound ways that Jewish tradition has responded to new understandings of disability. Just as advances in our understanding of Deaf education and Deaf experience have opened up greater opportunities for Deaf Jews, new insights could prompt Jewish communities to revisit assumptions about other forms of disability experience.

Today, many Deaf Jews celebrate their Jewishness—and their Deafness—as vital aspects of their identities. They affirm Deafness as a positive expression of difference, a minority culture that is as vivid and vibrant as hearing culture.



AFFIRMING DEAF CULTURE & JEWISH CULTURE: A HANUKKAH STORY

In 2013, at the first public Chanukah menorah-lighting ceremony at Gallaudet University in Washington DC, Chabad Rabbi Yehoshua Soudakoff led the Deaf community in a public recitation of the candle-lighting blessings in American Sign Language.

“The Jews were a minority,” Rabbi Soudakoff signed, “battling against a foreign culture that attempted to assimilate them. And yet, in the end, the Jews won the battle to retain their Jewish identity. Deaf people can relate to this, as we have struggled for years to strike the right balance between functioning in a hearing world, while being comfortable and even proud of our Deaf identity. Jewish Deaf people, of course, are a minority among minorities. And yet, we are here today, celebrating our Jewish Deaf identity as never before.”

Rabbi Yehoshua Soudakoff, Jewish Deaf Foundation⁸

Rabbi Yehoshua Soudakoff is a Deaf Chabad-Lubavitch rabbi. The founder and executive director of the Jewish Deaf Foundation, Rabbi Soudakoff creates Jewish programming for Deaf people in the United States and Russia and teaches online Torah classes in American Sign Language.⁹



⁷ <http://www.rudermanfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/IDI-Marriage-in-Sign-Language.pdf>

⁸ http://www.chabad.org/news/article_cdo/aid/2781313/jewish/Deaf-Rabbi-Busier-Than-Ever-With-Chanukah-Plans.htm

⁹ <http://jewishdeaffoundation.org/>

Even as Deaf Jews are claiming a place for themselves within the Jewish community, they continue to face barriers to full participation. Rabbi Rebecca Dubowe, a Deaf rabbi who serves the Reform Temple Adat Elohim in Thousand Oaks, California, emphasizes that many Deaf Jews are shut out of the hearing Jewish world. “Many Jewish Deaf people are not associated with the Jewish community,” she notes, “because of the lack of accessibility.”¹⁰

Creating access can open doors—and at the same time transform Jewish communities. Alexis Kashar, president of the Jewish Deaf Resource Center, observes: “When you serve one person who is Deaf or hard of hearing, there is a ripple effect. You are also serving and including his or her family and friends, who might not have come to a Jewish community event otherwise.” Concrete commitments to inclusivity reinvigorate our congregations—and allow our communities to put the best of our principles into practice.



INCLUSION ENSURES THE FUTURE OF JEWISH COMMUNAL LIFE

Leaving many members of our community on the outside, looking in, is not an option. The full inclusion of people with disabilities ensures the continuity and future of Jewish communal life.

Jay Ruderman, Ruderman Family Foundation¹¹

Jay Ruderman is president of the Ruderman Family Foundation, a foundation that advocates for the inclusion of people with disabilities throughout the Jewish community.¹²



Jewish texts and traditions can provide a powerful impetus to work for a more inclusive, accessible, and just world. We hope this book offers Jewish leaders, teachers, and communities a short, accessible, and welcoming guide for exploring how core Jewish values support the principles of disability inclusion and disability justice.

¹⁰ <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/139163/deaf-rabbi>

¹¹ <https://www.foundationsource.com/resource/among-peers/a-conversation-with-jay-ruderman/>

¹² <http://www.rudermanfoundation.org>

1

B'tselem Elohim: Equality & the Infinite Value of the Individual

**And God created the human in His image. In the image of God,
He created him; male and female He created them.**

יִבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם.

–Genesis 1:27

The conviction that all people have been fashioned in God's image frequently grounds Jewish efforts to work for the full inclusion of people with disabilities. *B'tselem Elohim* affirms a fundamental equality between people, a recognition that all human beings are equally worthy of respect and dignity. The value of *b'tselem Elohim* anchors a Jewish call to ensure that people with disabilities have the opportunity to learn and to teach, to pray and to participate, to celebrate and to mourn, to care and to be cared for. *B'tselem Elohim* reminds us to ensure that all people have equal access and equal opportunity.

Our Intrinsic Human Value

The principle of *b'tselem Elohim* underscores that all human beings mirror the Infinite and that there is an unbreakable link between being and worth. The Holy One who created us is expressed in and through our presence in this world. In Jewish terms, this affirmation calls us to recognize that our value is intrinsic to our being. It isn't linked to our capacities.

B'tselem Elohim aligns with a central value of the disability justice movement: a person is valued because of who they are, not because of what they can do or their capacity to earn money and be productive. Advanced degrees, Torah learning, or business acumen are common powerful markers of social standing and value. But the Jewish tradition teaches that human value resides

elsewhere. Pirke Avot, a collection of rabbinic ethical teachings, includes these words:

Ben Azzai taught: Despise no one and call nothing useless. For there is no person who does not have his hour—and no thing that does not have its place.

—Pirke Avot 4:3

Jewish tradition affirms that the measure of a person's worth does not rest upon what they can do, how much they produce, or how quickly they think. For all that our tradition praises right action, our fundamental value as people does not depend on our accomplishments or achievements; it is rooted in our very being. We all of us mirror the image of God.



JEWISH VOICES ON B'TSELEM ELOHIM

As Jews we are taught that every human is created b'tselem Elohim, in God's image. Every person is imbued with the divine spark, infinite in value and unique. Those words inspire us every day to respect and improve the lives of others, Jews and non-Jews alike.

Rabbi Lynne Landsberg¹³

Rabbi Lynne Landsberg is the Senior Advisor on Disability Issues, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism

The fact that we are all created in God's image both unifies us and is evidence that God loves diversity. . . No person is of greater value than another. None are more worthy or more significant than another. We are morally equivalent—different yet equal; the same yet distinct. The shape of our body and the sharpness of our minds are totally irrelevant. People with disabilities are equally valuable, equally important, equally entitled to share in the benefits of society.

Melinda Jones, "Judaism, Theology and the Human Rights of People with Disabilities"

Melinda Jones is a modern Orthodox feminist human-rights lawyer and disability advocate, as well as former director of the Australian Human Rights Centre at the University of New South Wales.

There is a midrash that reminds us that we are all created b'tselem Elohim, in the divine image. "A procession of angels pass before each person, and the heralds go before them saying, 'Make way for the image of God.'" (Deuteronomy Rabbah 4:4) As we open our hearts and our minds to every individual we meet, let us look upon them and know that they are preceded by angels. May we remember that each of us is created in the image of God.

Shelly Christensen, Jewish Community Guide to Inclusion of People with Disabilities

Shelly Christensen is the Executive Director of Inclusion Innovations and co-founder of the new Jewish Leadership Institute on Disabilities and Inclusion. She is a former Program Manager of the Minneapolis Jewish Community Inclusion Project for People with Disabilities.



¹³ <http://www.jta.org/2012/12/09/news-opinion/opinion/op-ed-rise-up-maccabean-style-for-rights-of-the-disabled>

Disability & Stigma

Yet *b'tselem Elohim*—and its affirmation of equality—can fall short as an organizing principle unless it is coupled with frameworks that confront the stigma, exclusion, and social marginalization experienced by people with disabilities. We need an ethical framework that helps us think critically about the social implications of difference—about the way certain people are often seen as more valuable than others.

Traditional Jewish texts repeatedly and powerfully affirm the dignity and full humanity of people with disabilities. But the Torah also gives striking voice to the role that stigma and exclusion have played in the treatment of people with disabilities. Consider Leviticus 21, which provides an extensive list of blemishes that disqualify a priest from offering sacrifices at the altar.

The Lord spoke further to Moses: Speak to Aaron and say: No man of your offspring throughout the ages who has a blemish (mum) shall be qualified to offer the food of his God. No one at all who has a blemish shall be qualified: no man who is blind, or lame, or has a limb too short or too long, no man who has a broken leg or a broken arm, or who is a hunchback, or a dwarf, or who has a growth in his eye, or who has a boil-scar, or scurvy, or crushed testes.

No man among the offspring of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall be qualified to offer the Lord's gift; having a blemish, he shall not be qualified to offer the food of his God. He may eat of the food of his God, of the most holy as well as of the holy, but he shall not enter behind the curtain or come near the altar, for he has a blemish. He shall not profane these places sacred to Me, for I the Lord have sanctified them. (Leviticus 21:16-23)

These verses form part of a broad set of instructions that structure the relationship between humans and the Holy. In Jewish tradition, human interactions with the sacred—especially within the Temple or the Tabernacle—are replete with limitations. Only the Kohanim (priests) have access to the holiest spaces within the sanctuary. The Levites must stay at a certain distance, while ordinary Israelites are farther removed.

Rabbi Elliot Dorff¹⁴ emphasizes that Leviticus 21 neither disbars blemished priests from the priesthood nor denies them their priestly portion. A priest with a *mum* has greater access to holiness and holy food than non-priestly Israelites. Yet Dorff also calls attention to the way that these verses emphasize the marginal status of priests with blemishes. Rather than serving in the honorable place of the Temple, they were “put to menial work such as cleaning the kindling wood from worms.”¹⁵

Read from this perspective, Leviticus 21 sheds light on the long legacy of stigma and exclusion that has shaped the lives of many people with disabilities. While these texts can make for uncomfortable reading, they invite us to confront the ways that social marginalization continues to affect people with disabilities.

¹⁴ <http://library.aju.edu/default.aspx?id=6285>

¹⁵ <http://www.uscj.org/JewishLivingandLearning/SocialAction/Accessibility/MishanehHaBriyyotANewJewishApproachtoDisabilities.aspx>



RABBI JACK RIEMER ON LEVITICUS 21

It is easy to pass judgment on the laws in the Torah and to claim that we are morally superior to it, but we can only do that if we first face up to our own practices. And so let me ask you these questions:

If Yitzchak Avinu, Father Isaac, who became legally blind in his old age, were to come into our synagogue and want to daven with us, would we have a large print prayer book available for him?

If Yaakov Avinu, Father Jacob, who was injured in an encounter with a mysterious stranger and limped for the rest of his life as a result, were to come into our synagogue and want an aliyah, would he be able to get up to the bimah here? And if not, if we don't have a ramp that makes the bimah accessible to the people with disabilities, what would we say to him?

If Moshe Rabeynu, Moses our teacher, who had a speech defect, were to come into our shul and want to read from the Torah that he gave us, could we handle it without becoming embarrassed if he were to stutter?

Rabbi Jack Riemer, "One of the Most Embarrassing Passages in the Whole Torah"¹⁶

Rabbi Jack Riemer is well-known author and speaker affiliated with the Conservative movement.



Countering Stigma with Familiarity: The Priestly Blemish in Jewish Law

Traditional Jewish texts interpret the verses in Leviticus 21 in ways that offer a potent insight about inclusive community. Some rabbinic texts rule that people with disabilities can indeed offer the priestly blessing to a congregation—as long as they are “familiar” in that community. According to the Mishnah:

**A priest whose hands are blemished may not lift up his hands.
Rabbi Yehudah says: Also one whose hands are stained by woad or
madder [plants that yield a blue and red dye respectively] may not
lift up his hands because the people might gaze at him.**

—Megillah 4:7

Although based on the prohibitions listed in Leviticus 21, the Mishnah legislates for a different social context. The Temple where the priests once offered sacrifices has been destroyed; now, priestly duties center upon the synagogue. Priests are charged with offering a blessing to the

¹⁶ <http://www.uscj.org/JewishLivingandLearning/SocialAction/Accessibility/OpeningtheGatesofPrayerSoThatAllMayWorship.aspx>

congregation, a blessing that requires them to “lift up their hands.” The hands are central to the symbolism of the ritual. The priest spreads his fingers in a particular gesture and lifts his hands to convey the blessing. Those who receive the blessing are forbidden from looking at the priests while they bless. Priests customarily draw their prayer shawls over their heads and hands, veiling themselves at this intimate moment.

The Mishnah prohibits a priest with blemishes on his hands from reciting the blessing, adding that a priest whose hands are discolored by dye from his work should not come before the congregation to bless. The last phrase is significant. By including these “working hands” in its prohibition, the Mishnah forces us to reconsider the common idea that the prohibition is based on a functional problem with the priest’s body. As the final line in the Mishnah makes plain, the hands are perfectly capable. These hands, after all, are a workman’s hands. The problem lies not in the priest’s capacity, but in the fact that his body is marked as different—the fact that people might stare. If the authors of our Mishnah were convinced that the people wouldn’t get distracted by the sight of a priest with unusual hands, then our priest would likely have full permission to bless. The Mishnah thus lays the groundwork for Jewish teachings that obligate the community to make people with disabilities a familiar presence within congregations—to treat people with disabilities as insiders, not outsiders.

Just such a scenario arises in the Babylonian Talmud, as later rabbis discuss this passage in the Mishnah. After expanding the rule to prohibit blessings performed by priests who have other blemishes on their hands, face, or feet, Megillah 24b acknowledges a series of situations that contradict its own ruling:

Rav Huna said: A man with bleary eyes shall not lift up his hands. But there was a man like this in Rav Huna’s neighborhood – and he spread his hands! He was familiar in his town. Likewise it was taught: A man with bleary eyes shall not lift up his hands, but if he is familiar in his town it is permitted.

Rabbi Yohanan said: A man who is blind in one eye may not lift up his hands. But there was a man like this in Rabbi Yohanan’s neighborhood – and he spread his hands! He was familiar in his town.

Likewise it was taught: A man who is blind in one eye may not lift up his hands, but if he is familiar in his town it is permitted. Rabbi Yehudah said: He whose hands have stains shall not lift up his hands. It was taught: If most of the people of the town work in that way, it is permitted.

In each of these cases, the Babylonian Talmud rules that a priest who is familiar in a particular town is not subject to the prohibition. Because he is well-known, or because his condition is commonplace, the Talmud has no worry that his disability will startle or disturb the community. The social problem of disability lies in the community’s tendency to be unfamiliar with disability, not in the body of the priest.

Jewish law invokes the principle of “familiarity” (*dash be’iro*) in modern rulings about whether priests with disabilities may recite the blessing. According to the Shulkhan Arukh, a widely-accepted code of Jewish law, it takes only thirty days in a place to become familiar, as long

the person intends to stay for a while. To put this principle into practice, the community has an obligation to see disability as commonplace and to recognize people with disabilities as a familiar presence in our midst.

People with Disabilities Strengthen Communities

Inclusive communities that cultivate a genuine place for people with disabilities are just communities. They are also stronger and more vibrant than communities that maintain rigid boundaries about acceptable bodies and acceptable minds.

Inclusive communities are places that welcome people with disabilities, places where our presence is valued, where we are missed if we are absent. In the *Jewish Community Guide to Inclusion of People with Disabilities*, Shelly Christensen teaches the importance of inclusion through the biblical example of Miriam, whose skin disease kept her out of the camp for seven days. Numbers 12:15 describes how the Israelites waited until Miriam returned to camp, before the entire community moved on together. So too, Christensen maintains, “like our ancestors, we cannot move on unless everyone is present. . . . We must learn to accept that when one member of our community is left behind, we are not whole.”



INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES ARE ABOUT EVERYONE

Inclusion isn't just about me, it is about everyone. I have seen the incredible stress my family has endured because of me, and being excluded from our Jewish community, or having to constantly fight to be accepted as part of it, has greatly magnified our stress. After ten years, we finally [found a synagogue] where people smile at me even if I am sometimes too loud or excited and no one stares at me like I am a piece of trash. The kids engage with me even when they are not getting community service credit for doing so.

I often wonder how many non-disabled families have the same experience of feeling ignored in their synagogue. The truth is that a shul that welcomes me is a synagogue where everyone can find a place and people will want to join and be engaged and involved.

Jacob Artson, "Mensch Blog"¹⁷

Jacob Artson writes regularly about his experiences growing up Autistic within the Jewish community, as well as his commitments to social activism. He is the son of Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, the dean of Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles.



¹⁷ http://www.boardofrabbis.org/files/Artson-Mensch_blog.pdf

Beyond the simple fact of our presence, Jews with disabilities offer perspectives on Torah and tradition that can have a powerful effect on their communities. Of course, people with disabilities needn't make contributions to Jewish life in order to justify our place within the Jewish community. And it's hardly the case that a disabled person's only interests emerge out of disability experience. Even so, Jews with disabilities often bring innovative perspectives and new insights into Jewish text and Jewish communal practice.

Consider the example of Rabbi Darby Leigh,¹⁸ a Deaf Reconstructionist rabbi whose adaptation of the Sh'ma into American Sign Language offers beautiful insights into the meaning of a central Jewish prayer.¹⁹ Rather than articulate the first word of the prayer with a sign that focuses on the ear, Leigh begins the Sh'ma with a sign that calls viewers to pay attention. The conventional sign for Israel denotes Israel as a place rather than a people, but Leigh's version of the prayer evokes "the gathering of all the people before me." His sign for God begins with "an expansive perception of God" that circles high, around signer's head, but which then comes down toward the chest and into the sign for "ours." For the final word of the prayer, which signals the Jewish commitment to recognizing the unity of God, he begins with the sign for "many" and then resolves the multitude into "one." By reinterpreting language that seems to exclude Deaf Jews from the heart of Jewish prayer, Leigh's teaching offers Deaf Jews a powerful point of entry into Jewish practice—and reveals how Deaf experience has the potential to revitalize the meaning of prayer for Deaf and hearing Jews alike.

Tips for Best Practice

LANGUAGE THAT CAN WOUND: AVOIDING DISABILITY METAPHORS

Religious language sometimes uses disability as a metaphor for spiritual weakness or sin. Blindness is commonly used to convey ignorance, deafness to connote a refusal to obey, and paralysis to evoke fear or uncertainty. While such language is rarely intended as an insult, it may well alienate people with disabilities and reinforce negative perceptions of disability.

- *Before using disability as a metaphor, ask yourself: Might this language insult or offend a person who lives with the condition in question? Does this phrase portray disability as a negative experience or as a character flaw?*
- *Rather than relying on figurative language to make your point, consider what you intend the metaphor to convey. Is there a more precise way to express what you wish to say?*
- *If you encounter passages that use disability as a negative metaphor, consider whether you can shift the language to be more sensitive to people with disabilities. Might you offer a different translation or raise alternative possibilities?*

¹⁸ http://keremshalom.org/?page_id=1507

¹⁹ <http://www.ritualwell.org/video/1467>

2

Areyvut: Communal Responsibility

All Jews are responsible for one another.

כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה.

–Babylonian Talmud, Shevuot 39a

Jewish tradition emphasizes mutual responsibility by articulating the principle of *areyvut*—the notion that Jews are a single people whose members have an obligation to care for one another. Beyond the bonds that link an individual family, *areyvut* recognizes a deep sense of responsibility for the welfare of the broader community. To be a people is to bear responsibility for the well-being of all members.

The Talmud’s teaching, “*kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh*,” holds each person responsible for

“The idea of being there “for one another” does not disconnect Jews from the rest of the world. Rather the opposite, by developing the concept of mutual responsibility, we extend this core idea to the rest of the world. Jews believe that all human beings are tied together in an inescapable network of mutuality wherein what happens to one happens to all.

Andrés Spokoiny, “Towards a Community of Purpose”²⁰

A long-time Jewish communal leader, Andrés Spokoiny is president and CEO of the Jewish Funders Network.

the misdeeds or shortcomings of others. In its legal sense, *areyvut* describes the practice of guaranteeing a loan, a formal act of bearing financial responsibility for another. Today, the value of communal responsibility has taken on a broader set of social meanings. But the original legal connotation of *areyvut* reminds us that mutual responsibility is not simply a matter of generous feeling, but a concrete commitment of resources and action.

”The Jewish value of *areyvut* calls us to recognize that disability is not merely a private struggle. All

²⁰ <http://ejewishphilanthropy.com/towards-a-community-of-purpose/>

too often, the burden of negotiating access needs or advocating for full inclusion falls upon people with disabilities or their families. *Areyvut* challenges the idea that disability issues are “individual” matters or “voluntary” acts of exemplary kindness. Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, emphasizes that Jewish communities must recognize accessibility as “a matter of *hiyuv*, not *hesed*”—not an act of charity, but a matter of obligation.²¹

Disability Justice and the Value of Interdependence

Jewish commitments to *areyvut* align with one of the most cherished values in the disability justice movement: **interdependence**. In contrast to more common notions of independence, disability activists champion interdependence to emphasize that people cannot and should not have to do everything alone.

Negative portrayals often equate disability with the indignities of dependence. First-wave disability rights movements fought hard for independence. Activists worked to secure more accessible public spaces, as well as disability accommodations and public policies that would allow more people to live independently. Maximizing independence remains a key goal for many people with disabilities. But if we push for independence alone, disability justice activists argue, we accede to an atomized notion of the individual that is profoundly ableist. Such logic implies that needing others makes us weak, less worthy, less whole.

By contrast, when disability justice activists emphasize interdependence, they affirm a model of community that values the way people tend to one another’s needs and foster each other’s well-being. Interdependence makes space for the recognition that not all people are able to live alone or make their own way in the world. Rather than silence these realities, proponents of interdependence invite us to recognize that human bonds of mutuality and care can enrich our lives. When we recognize interdependence, Mia Mingus writes, we are “inscribing community on our skin.”



MIA MINGUS ON INTERDEPENDENCE

With disability justice, we want to move away from the “myth of independence,” that everyone can and should be able to do everything on their own. I am not fighting for independence, as much of the disability rights movement rallies behind. I am fighting for an interdependence that embraces need and tells the truth: no one does it on their own and the myth of independence is just that, a myth.

Mia Mingus, “Changing the Framework: Disability Justice”²²

Mia Mingus is a writer, community educator, and organizer working for disability justice. A core member of the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective, her work centers on ending sexual violence and child sexual abuse.²³



²¹ <http://www.yct Torah.org/content/view/814/17/>

²² <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/02/12/changing-the-framework-disability-justice/>

²³ <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/>

Many Jewish communities already have structures in place to foster interdependence. In order to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *bikur holim* (visiting the sick), many synagogues and community centers have care committees that aid people in times of illness. Similarly, synagogues can organize to help provide on-going support to individuals with disabilities, or for parents and caregivers of those with disabilities. Of course, not everyone with a disability needs assistance with medical appointments or day-to-day tasks. But some individuals or families could benefit from offers of assistance or tangible acts of care.

Lifnei Iver: On Not Exploiting Vulnerabilities

“Do not insult the deaf, and do not put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God. I am the Lord.”

לֹא־תִקְלַל חֵרֵשׁ וּלְפָנַי עוֹר לֹא תִתֵּן מִכְשֵׁל וּיְרֹאת מֵאֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲנִי ה'.

–Leviticus 19:14

While the principle of *areyvut* offers a firm foundation for affirming disability justice as an expression of Jewish communal responsibility, other Jewish teachings offer concrete guidance for putting these commitments into practice. Jewish tradition articulates a strong ethical imperative to treat people with disabilities fairly and to avoid taking advantage of them. The Torah explicitly forbids the mistreatment of people with disabilities. Leviticus 19:14 singles out actions that target a person’s disability, and forbids cruelty that exploits a person’s vulnerabilities.

“ Jewish tradition teaches us of our obligation to ensure equal access for all people and to help facilitate the full participation of individuals with disabilities in our communities. As we read in Leviticus 19:14, “You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind.”

*The Jewish Disability Network & the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism*²⁴

” Traditional commentators read Leviticus 19:14 as a broad prohibition against taking advantage of any person’s vulnerabilities. Yet the verse also gives powerful voice to a Jewish commitment to disability rights. People with disabilities continue to face widespread barriers that prevent us from achieving economic, civic, and educational equality. Jewish tradition opposes such “stumbling blocks.”

But is it enough simply to avoid active exploitation? Rabbi Paul Kipnes²⁵ argues that “beyond refraining from placing blocks, we should actively remove stumbling blocks.” His synagogue, Congregation Or Ami in Calabascas, CA, welcomes adults with intellectual disabilities as members through a partnership with Chaverim, a Jewish Family Services program for adults

²⁴ <http://www.rac.org/jewish-values-and-disability-rights>

²⁵ <http://orami.org/about-us/our-clergy/rabbi-kipnes>

with developmental disabilities.²⁶ The synagogue offered participants full membership and provided each with two tickets to High Holiday Services, so each member could bring a driver or a guest. Chaverim participants pay a membership fee, at a level they can afford, to reflect their commitment to the synagogue. While the congregation occasionally holds a special service that recognizes members with intellectual disabilities, they don't otherwise single out Chaverim participants. Rabbi Kipnes concludes, "we let them just be Jews at services."²⁷

Accessibility is a Jewish Obligation

Synagogues and Jewish institutions are increasingly recognizing accessibility as an ethical obligation—and a fundamental expression of Jewish values in practice. Across the Jewish world, communities are investing substantial resources to transform inhospitable architecture or to provide inclusive education and services for people with disabilities. Such efforts reveal the tangible impact of Jewish convictions regarding the dignity of people with disabilities—and the importance of creating a community that is accessible to all.



PIONEERS IN ACCESSIBILITY

Thirty-five years ago, the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale in New York built a new synagogue with a ramp for every incline; a few years later, it added a ramp up to the bimah. Rabbi Avi Weiss explained the origins of the changes: "A young man in the community became a paraplegic. At my son's Bar Mitzvah, I asked him to come up for an aliyah. He could not come on his own to the bimah and refused to be lifted. He said, 'When I come to the Torah, I will come on my own, with dignity, or not at all.'"

In the mid-1980s, Congregation B'nai Yeshurun in Teaneck, New Jersey made its mikvah (ritual bath) accessible, after a woman in the community became disabled in a bicycle accident. Within six months, the congregation had raised the necessary funds to install a lift and renovate the facility. "I thought it was untenable that a woman who wants to observe the laws of taharat hamishpachah (family purity) wouldn't be able to do so," Rabbi Aryeh Weil explained. "I don't think we should be patted on the back," he said. "It was our obligation."

Adapted from Bayla Sheva Brenner, "The Power of Belonging: Welcoming Jews with Disabilities Into Jewish Communal Life."²⁸

Rabbi Avi Weiss is the founder of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah and senior rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

Rabbi Aryeh Weil served as the rabbi of Congregation B'nai Yeshurun in Teaneck, New Jersey and Adath Jeshurun Synagogue of Newport News, Virginia. He now lives and teaches in Jerusalem, where he serves as the rabbi of Kehilat Chibat Zion v'Yerushalayim.



²⁶ <http://www.jfsla.org/chav>

²⁷ <http://rabbipaul.blogspot.com/2011/02/welcoming-chaverim-for-developmentally.html>

²⁸ <http://ou.org.s3.amazonaws.com/pdf/ja/5766/fall66/WelcomingJewsDisab.pdf>

Inclusivity is a Communal Responsibility

For my house shall be a house of prayer for all people.

כי ביתי בית־תפלה יקרא לכל־העמים.

–Isaiah 56:5

Across the country and around the world, a growing number of Jewish schools and synagogues express strong commitments to accessibility and inclusion. At the end of this chapter, you will find a list of Jewish resources that share concrete suggestions and practical strategies for communities committed to putting inclusive welcome into practice.

While inclusivity is particularly valuable for people with disabilities and their families, an attitude of welcome and hospitality benefits many people. The values that undergird a Jewish commitment to inclusive welcome do not depend on formal diagnosis of a disability. As Jewish disability activist Matan Koch observes, “Identification of a disability should not be the prerequisite for being welcomed into our community, even for those who present differently than some norm.”



INCLUSION IS NOT A PROGRAM, IT'S A MINDSET

Inclusion is a mindset. Inclusion is a way of thinking. It is how we behave and treat one another. It is a philosophy that embraces the idea that everyone has something of value to contribute and that everyone has a right to belong. When we commit ourselves to making our programs accessible—not just in the physical sense, but by ensuring that each person’s participation is truly meaningful—then we can call ourselves inclusive. Then we can pat ourselves on the back and celebrate our success. But we are not there yet.

Lisa Friedman, “Jewish Special Needs Education: Removing the Stumbling Block”

Widely recognized for her work in the field of Jewish Special Education, Lisa Friedman is the Education Co-Director at Temple Beth-El in central New Jersey.²⁹



²⁹ <http://jewishspecialneeds.blogspot.com/>



BEYOND THE DIAGNOSIS: PRACTICING INCLUSIVE WELCOME

Isn't a community more inclusive if we simply accept that some children (and adults) are more comfortable rocking, whether or not they are identified as autistic? Isn't a community more inclusive if we accept that some people do better moving rather than sitting still, without predicating our acceptance on whether or not they have been diagnosed with an attention deficit or hyperactivity?

Matan Koch, "Welcomed Without Asking"³⁰

Matan Koch is a lawyer, disability activist, and public speaker. In addition to consulting with Jewish organizations and camps about disability access, Koch has served on city disability commissions and the National Council of Disability.³¹



The Dangers of Decorum

For some people with disabilities, the unwritten codes of propriety that govern many synagogues and Jewish institutions remain pernicious barriers to a sense of genuine, inclusive welcome. Implicit paradigms of decorum govern the spaces in which we live—ideas about how people should signal their respect, participate in public events, or demonstrate their spirituality. As disability studies scholar Margaret Price observes, these unstated codes of “appropriate” presence often serve to exclude and stigmatize people with disabilities, especially those with mental disabilities.



ACCESSIBLE SYNAGOGUES ARE BEAUTIFUL SYNAGOGUES

When God instructs Moses to build an altar, the Torah commands the people of Israel not to ascend the altar with steps (Exodus 20:23). While the commandment aims to prevent the immodest exposure of the priest's body as he ascends to the altar, Rabbi Avi Weiss suggests another important message: build with ramps, not with steps.

“The presence of ramps can be viewed as a symbol of accessibility,” he writes. “Once there is accessibility in the place of the spirit, either in the altar or in today's synagogue, it sends a message that all places should be open to [people with disabilities.] Not only do ramps send a message of welcome to the physically challenged, but they also send to one and all, even to those not in wheelchairs,

³⁰ <https://matankoch.wordpress.com/2015/01/18/welcomed-without-asking-making-our-communities-inclusive-to-all/>

³¹ <https://matankoch.wordpress.com/>

that everyone, regardless of affiliation, health or station in life is welcome.

For me, the ramps to the altar powerfully remind us what makes a synagogue beautiful. I have heard Jews with a passion for architecture debate this question at length. Some may advocate an ultra-modern structure with a skylight over the ark, while others may prefer a more traditional structure. Personally, the first items I look for in a shul are ramps. If the synagogue is accessible, it is beautiful.”

Rabbi Avi Weiss, “The Lessons of the Ramps to the Altar”³²

Rabbi Avi Weiss is the founder of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah and senior rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.



Many parents of children with disabilities report feeling unwelcome in synagogues because their child has difficulty sitting still, or has a tendency to sing when the congregation is expected to be quiet. They may hesitate to attend services, because they fear their child will be a disruptive presence. People with disabilities are all too familiar with disapproving stares and the silent ripples after services when no one comes over for friendly conversation.

Consider the story attributed to the Baal Shem Tov, the legendary eighteenth-century founder of Hasidism renowned for his love of simple souls and his appreciation for *all* Jews, regardless of their learning:

Every year, a Jewish villager used to pray in the synagogue of the Baal Shem Tov for Yom Kippur. His son had a disability and couldn't learn the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, much less the prayers and the blessings. When his son was old enough to fast, his father took him to synagogue, so he too could observe the Day of Atonement.

The young man had a flute that he loved to play. He used to play it all the time when he sat in the fields, looking after his father's sheep. He didn't actually play any tunes, but he loved to blow his flute to make sounds. One day, without his father's knowledge, he slipped his flute into his pocket to take to synagogue.

The young man sat through the Yom Kippur service, all through the evening and then the next morning. He wasn't able to recite the prayers, but he heard the prayers of the Baal Shem Tov and the rest of the community, and they stirred his heart. He felt a powerful urge to do something for God. He said to his father, “I brought my flute, and I want to blow it!” His father hushed him, afraid that his son would suddenly cause a disturbance in the middle of the prayers on this holy day. “Don't you dare,” he said. So the young man restrained himself.

³² <http://www.uscj.org/JewishLivingandLearning/SocialAction/Accessibility/TheLessonsoftheRampstotheAltar.aspx>

During the prayers that afternoon, he begged his father again, "Please let me blow my flute!" His father became angry and warned him sternly against it. Once again, he restrained himself. But in the final moments of the final prayer, when the gates are just about to close on the holiest day of the Jewish year, the young man could no longer hold back. He pulled out his flute and blew a long, powerful note.

The people in the congregation were startled. They cringed when they heard the discordant sound. They stared at the young man, casting disapproving looks at him and frowning at his father. But the Baal Shem Tov continued praying, undisturbed. When he concluded his prayers, his disciples asked him about the boy and the flute.

The Baal Shem Tov said, "That boy's flute raised all our prayers to heaven. The holy spark in his soul was burning within him like a fire. With all the power of his longing, he blew his flute from the depths of his heart, without any other motive but for God alone." For Jewish tradition teaches, "Above all else, God desires the heart."

*—Adapted from Yitzhak Buxbaum, *The Light and Fire of the Baal Shem Tov**

The members of the synagogue valued decorum above all. Even the young man's father feared that by "acting out" his son might disrupt the spiritual atmosphere of the day. But the Baal Shem Tov acknowledged that the boy's heartfelt contribution is the particular prayer that lifts the words and aspirations of this community to heaven.

Accessible Education

Like the boy in the Baal Shem Tov's tale, Jews who are unable to learn Hebrew, recite the prayers, or engage in the study of Jewish texts are often disenfranchised or marginalized from significant aspects of Jewish life. Jews are often called "the people of the book," and the study of Jewish texts has long been recognized as a central dimension of Jewish life. This strong emphasis on education can be particularly painful for people with intellectual disabilities or cognitive impairments, as well as for their parents.

Yet Jewish tradition emphasizes that learning is not only something afforded the brightest and most promising students, but a heritage to which all Jews are entitled. We are counseled to match education to a child's capacities:

Teach the child according to his way.

חנך לנער על-פי דרכו.

—Proverbs 22:6

Our tradition emphasizes that *all* Jews deserve access to a Jewish education—and that teachers and schools must strive to teach all people in a way that allows them to learn. Consider the

following tale from the Babylonian Talmud about a student who was slow to learn:

Rabbi Perida had a student. Whenever he taught him, he repeated the text four hundred times before he mastered it. One day, another rabbi asked Rabbi Perida to attend to a mitzvah. He went and taught his student as usual, but this time, his student was unable to learn. "What is the matter?" he asked.

The student answered, "From the moment I heard there was a mitzvah that required your attention, I couldn't concentrate. Every moment, I thought: My teacher will leave me now. My teacher will leave me now."

"Give me your attention," Rabbi Perida said. "I will teach you again." So he taught it to him another four hundred times, until he learned.

-Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 54b

By praising a sage who goes to such extraordinary lengths to teach the tradition to a student who finds learning difficult, the Talmud affirms the importance of teaching students with learning disabilities and intellectual disabilities. Rabbi Perida places his responsibilities as a teacher above his other religious obligations. He models not only a commitment to learning, but a practice of compassionate education that eases his student's anxieties. Through his tangible commitments of time and care, he affirms not only his student's capacity to learn, but his student's dignity and worth.

JEWISH RESOURCES ON DISABILITY, ACCESSIBILITY, AND INCLUSION

Many organizations and programs support Jewish communities in welcoming people with disabilities. The following resource guides provide concrete strategies for helping communities promote accessibility and inclusion and offer invaluable resources for putting Jewish values into action.

Shelly Christensen, Jewish Community Guide to Inclusion of People with Disabilities. (Jewish Family and Children's Service of Minneapolis, 2007)
<http://www.shellychristensen.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/inclusinguideorderform1.pdf>

Yachad/National Jewish Council for Disabilities and the Heneinu Initiative for an Inclusive Jewish World, Disability Inclusion Resource Guide for Rabbis
<https://www.njcd.org/content/uploads/2014/12/HENEINUguide.pdf>

Disabilities Inclusion Learning Center <http://disabilitiesinclusion.org/>

Gateways: Access to Jewish Education <http://www.jgateways.org/Resources>

Jewish Federations of North America, Jewish Disability Awareness Month Resource Guide
http://www.jewishfederations.org/local_includes/downloads/61299.pdf

3

Kavod: Respecting Agency, Promoting Dignity

Rabbi Eliezer says: Let other people's dignity be as precious to you as your own.

–Pirkei Avot 2:15

Jewish tradition regards human dignity as a reflection that all human beings are created in God's image. As the passage from Pirkei Avot suggests, Jewish values call us to preserve another person's dignity and to protect them from shame. Concern for human dignity shapes many Jewish laws and practices. It guides Jewish understandings of the proper relations between teachers and students, as well as parents and children. It shapes Jewish practices of generosity, mandating that charity be given in a way that preserves the dignity of the recipient. Even Jewish burial practices reflect a concern for protecting the dignity of the deceased.

“

Freedom and dignity are indivisible. Either they include all of us, or we are all of us in danger. Those who are judged by the color of their skin, by their gender, by their faith or their lack of faith, by their looks, by their orientation, by their abilities or by some people's perception of disability, need to remember—all of us—that we are already the way God would have us be, with one exception: God cannot force us to love ourselves or each other. We have to do that ourselves.

Rabbi Bradly Shavit Artson, "The Bible is a Book of Inclusion and Love."³³

Rabbi Bradly Shavit Artson is the Dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles, as well as the parent of an Autistic son.

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³³ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-bradley-shavit-artson/the-bible-inclusion-and-love_b_1566178.html

Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

Articulating one of the bedrock ethical teachings of the Jewish tradition, the Torah commands:

You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

ואהבת לרעך כמוך.

–Leviticus 19:18

Our tradition reminds us that loving our neighbor is not simply a matter of kind feelings, but a practice that demands action. We put this value into practice when we create inclusive Jewish communities committed to treating all people with love, dignity, and respect.

Preventing Shame

Traditional Jewish sources regard that humiliating a person or causing them public embarrassment as a signal ethical failing. Consider the following teaching:

A reciter taught before Rav Nahman bar Yitzhaq: “Whoever whitens the face of another in public, it is as if he sheds his blood.”

–Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metsia 58b

The Talmud likens public humiliation to murder; it regards shame as a form of social death that leaves a lasting mark on a person’s sense of self and damages their place within the community.

Many people with disabilities are the targets of social humiliation, public shame, social scorn, or belittlement. People with disabilities are also affected by indirect hate speech. Slurs like “retard” use disability itself as a form of insult, relying on the widespread assumption that having an intellectual disability makes a person worthless. “Spread the Word to End the Word,” a widespread media and action campaign spearheaded by Special Olympics and Best Buddies in partnership with many intellectual disability activists, calls upon people to show respect through their words and actions—and pledge to never use the R-word.

Jewish communities have rallied around the campaign to end this form of hate speech. Yachad Los Angeles, a chapter of the National Jewish Council for Disabilities and the Orthodox Union, created a video where young people with and without disabilities talk about how the R-word causes pain. Through powerful and personal testimony, they call Jews to pledge to stop using insulting speech.³⁴

³⁴ Link to video: <https://www.ou.org/life/inspiration/pledge-end-r-word/>



JOHN FRANKLIN STEPHENS ON THE WORD “RETARDED”

I’m a 30 year old man with Down syndrome who has struggled with the public’s perception that an intellectual disability means that I am dumb and shallow. I am not either of those things, but I do process information more slowly than the rest of you. In fact it has taken me all day to figure out how to respond to your use of the R-word last night.

I thought first of asking whether you meant to describe the President as someone who was bullied as a child by people like you, but rose above it to find a way to succeed in life as many of my fellow Special Olympians have.

Then I wondered if you meant to describe him as someone who has to struggle to be thoughtful about everything he says, as everyone else races from one snarky sound bite to the next.

Finally, I wondered if you meant to degrade him as someone who is likely to receive bad health care, live in low grade housing with very little income and still manages to see life as a wonderful gift. . .

After I saw your tweet, I realized you just wanted to belittle the President by linking him to people like me. You assumed that people would understand and accept that being linked to someone like me is an insult.

John Franklin Stephens, “An Open Letter to Ann Coulter”³⁵

John Franklin Stephens is a Special Olympics athlete. Within a few days, his letter had received support from over 3 million people through social media—and helped lead several networks to eliminate the use of the R-word.



Beware “Inspiration” Stories

While we often recognize the caustic effects of shame and hate speech, we frequently fail to recognize the problems generated by over-effusive praise. Popular culture frequently portrays people with disabilities as sources of inspiration, as stock characters in motivational posters that proclaim positive messages about “overcoming challenges” and “never giving up.”

Yet such “inspirational” stories and scenes objectify people with disabilities and trivialize our lives. When we treat people with disabilities as sources of inspiration, we send the message that disability is something extraordinary—or that disability is so inherently awful or tragic that any ordinary thing a person with a disability does should be held up as a source of pride and praise.

³⁵ <https://specialolympicsblog.wordpress.com/2012/10/23/an-open-letter-to-ann-coulter/>



STELLA YOUNG ON “I’M NOT YOUR INSPIRATION, THANK YOU VERY MUCH.”

We're objectifying disabled people for the benefit of nondisabled people. The purpose of these images is to inspire you, to motivate you, so that we can look at them and think, "Well, however bad my life is, it could be worse. I could be that person." But what if you are that person? I've lost count of the number of times that I've been approached by strangers wanting to tell me that they think I'm brave or inspirational.

Stella Young³⁶

A comedian and disability activist, Stella Young was active in Australian and international disability advocacy organizations. An award-winning comic and journalist, she hosted Australia's first disability culture program, No Limits.



People with Disabilities as Leaders and Teachers

A number of the greatest Jewish teachers and leaders were people with disabilities. From the great biblical ancestors Isaac, Jacob, and Moses to the Babylonian sages Rav Sheshet and Rav Yosef, the Torah and the Talmud preserve a robust place for people with disabilities—as patriarchs, matriarchs, prophets, teachers, and leaders.



BIBLICAL FIGURES WITH DISABILITIES

Almost all of the biblical heroes were disabled in some way. . . . Isaac and Jacob suffer from blindness in their old age, Jacob was lame for much of his life, and even the greatest biblical hero, Moses, suffered from a speech impediment . . . The more “manly” biblical models—Esau, Gideon, Samson, and even David—are all portrayed as flawed in character.

The heroes of Greek and Roman culture were all physically perfect, even extraordinary. American secular culture applauds those who overcome disabilities, along with those who triumph over any obstacles . . . The fact that so many biblical and rabbinic heroes were disabled in various ways speaks volumes about how our tradition from its very beginnings thought of this group of people:

³⁶ http://www.ted.com/talks/stella_young_i_m_not_your_inspiration_thank_you_very_much?language=en

in contrast to the Greek, Roman, and American cultures, in Jewish sources the disabled were to be construed like everyone else, and they were often leaders.

Rabbi Elliot Dorff, "Mishaneh Ha-Briyyot"³⁷

Rabbi Elliot Dorff is the Sol & Anne Dorff Distinguished Service Professor in Philosophy at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles. He serves as chair of the Conservative Movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards.



AVENUES TO INCLUSIVE PRAYER

Camp Ramah in Wisconsin runs summer programs for teens and college-age students with disabilities. Daniel Olson, 2012 Summer Program Director, describes a prayer service the students led for the entire camp:

Before Tyler began the early evening service, he covered his eyes with his prayer shawl and said the proper blessing. Many members of the kehilla may have questioned why he would need to cover his eyes. After all, Tyler is blind. As leader of the service, though, he knew his responsibilities and his respect for tradition was clear. Tyler is also deaf, and wears two cochlear implants, which allow him to hear. So while Tyler's tunes may have been unconventional, they were charged by a deep love and appreciation for Jewish ritual. As his index finger flew across the pages of his Braille prayer book, he demonstrated intense and meaningful kavana (focus and religious intention).

Members of the community could not contain their emotion when Tyler finished. Some were sure they felt the shekhina (divine presence) in the room. Others said they had not felt as close to G-d in a long time. One Israeli staff member wants to use Tyler's praying as an example at home, to show that Jews with disabilities can participate in religious life and take on leadership roles. . . . That Friday night service was one of the most meaningful religious moments those of us in camp had ever experienced.

"Unforgettable Summertime Shabbat: An Inclusive Prayer Service at Ramah"³⁸



Classical and contemporary commentators alike make mention of Moses as a man with a speech disability. When God first calls Moses to serve as prophet and leader to the Israelites, Moses demurs. "Please, O Lord," he says, "I have never been a man of words. . . . I am slow

³⁷ <http://www.uscj.org/JewishLivingandLearning/SocialAction/Accessibility/MishanehHaBriyyotANewJewishApproachtoDisabilities.aspx>

³⁸ <https://zehlezech.wordpress.com/2012/12/17/unforgettable-summertime-shabbat-an-inclusive-prayer-service-at-ramah/>

of speech and slow of tongue” (Exodus 4:10). Despite his protests, however, Moses delivers the most celebrated address in Jewish history: the book of Deuteronomy. A man who first protested his inability to speak eventually utters some of the most influential and enduring words of Jewish scripture.

Are the same opportunities open to Jews with disabilities in our communities today? All too often, Jewish communities still imagine people with disabilities only in the pews, not on the *bimah*. Yet as attitudes change and social barriers shift, Jews with disabilities are increasingly serving as rabbis, teachers, and leaders within the Jewish community.

Making Accommodations

To enhance access for people with disabilities, communities must often deploy certain accommodations—alternative approaches, techniques, or technologies that make it possible for people with disabilities to participate fully in communal life. Accommodations can take a variety of forms: sign language interpreters, assisted listening systems, large-print and Braille prayer-books, alternative education programs, guide dogs and emotional support animals, and many more.

RESOURCES FOR BLIND AND VISUALLY-IMPAIRED JEWS

Make sure your synagogue has resources available for blind and visually impaired Jews. The Jewish Braille Institute produces prayer-books, Jewish texts, and other materials of Jewish interest in audio, large print, and Braille formats.

When communities have Braille and large-print siddurim and humashim readily available for members or guests, they ensure people will have access to materials in a form they can read—and won't have to bring their own.³⁹

The practice of making accommodations has illustrious precedent in Jewish tradition. When Moses protests that his speech disability would make it difficult for him to lead the Israelites, God tells Moses to convey God's word to his brother Aaron, who will voice Moses' words before the people—an arrangement Bonnie Gracer describes as “the first reasonable accommodation in the Torah.”

Traditional texts also describe how communities have adapted custom and ritual practice in order to allow more inclusive participation. Consider the Mishnah's discussion of the first-fruits ritual. In its original form, each person who made pilgrimage to Jerusalem and offered the

³⁹ <http://www.jbibrary.org/>

basket of first fruits was expected to recite a lengthy passage. But over time, the practice was changed. Mishnah Bikkurim 3:7 reads:

In the beginning, everyone who knew how to read would read, while those who were unable to read would have someone else read it for them. But when people became hesitant to bring the offerings, the sages decreed that the words would be read for everyone—for those who know how to read and for those who do not.

Recognizing that not everyone was able to read and perform the full ritual, the Mishnah accommodates those who cannot do it themselves.

Many Jewish communities today recognize that rituals and celebrations can be a powerful opportunity to celebrate the presence of people with disabilities. A person with a disability might be invited up for an *aliyah* to the Torah or to help open the ark. Children with disabilities might be encouraged to celebrate *benei mitzvah*—with a ceremony adapted to fit their capacities and strengths. All of us deserve communities where we are treated with dignity and respect.



INCLUSIVE CELEBRATIONS

When my son Joel, who has autism, was around 10 years old, I confronted the question of whether or not to pursue a Bar Mitzvah for him. Because of his disability, Joel had only been speaking for a couple of years; why would I want to add the burden of learning prayers in another language as well as expecting him to “perform” before a sanctuary full of people? At that time, no one expected a child with a significant disability to have a Bar Mitzvah and very little Jewish special education existed. Nonetheless, I wanted a chance to declare Joel’s value and dignity before G-d. . .

In the past 12 years, I’ve been blessed with the opportunity to help dozens of Jewish families prepare their child who has special needs for his or her Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Together, we’ve all discovered the amazing degree of determination our children can exhibit—as well as the equally amazing degree of flexibility rabbis, cantors, and teachers can explore.

Becca Hornstein, “Jewish Life Cycle Events: Including Children with Developmental Difficulties”⁴⁰

A consultant on issues of special education and inclusion in the Jewish community, Becca Hornstein is the co-founder of the Council for Jews with Special Needs, as well as the founder of two Jewish group homes for adults with developmental disabilities



⁴⁰ <https://ici.umn.edu/products/impact/143/over09.html>

Tips for Best Practice

ACCESS STATEMENTS: PUBLICIZING YOUR COMMITMENT TO WELCOME

The value of b'tselem Elohim has led many Jewish communities to welcome people with disabilities. One of the best ways to publicize your welcome is to craft an access statement. Such statements communicate your commitment to being a welcoming congregation and provide concrete information about accessibility. Make sure potential members know what you offer!

- **Give a statement about accessibility a prominent place on your website.** *People with disabilities or parents of children with disabilities often look for access information in advance, as they decide whether to come to a synagogue or attend an event. Making this information easily available saves them time—and communicates clearly that you welcome their presence.*
- **A good access statement offers clear, specific information.** *Do you offer inclusive education? Are large-print and Braille prayer-books available? Is there an assisted listening system for people with hearing impairments? Is there ASL interpretation at services, or available by request? Is there a ramp or other barrier-free access into the building? What about barrier-free access to the bimah? Are your bathrooms wheelchair accessible?*
- **When you're advertising events, include access info—and list a contact person,** *for those who may have questions or access requests. After an event, consider reaching out to those who made requests to find out more about their experiences—and to invite them back to your community.*

4

Tsedek & Tikkun Olam: Pursuing Social Justice

Justice, justice shall you pursue...

צדק צדק תרדך

–Deuteronomy 16:18

With its passionate call to pursue justice, Deuteronomy 16:18 has long served as a rallying cry for socially-committed Jews. Not just once does the verse call us to pursue justice, but twice—a repetition that evokes the urgency of Jewish commitments to fashioning a more perfect world. Previous chapters have examined ways that Jewish values and texts lay a sturdy foundation for Jewish commitments to disability justice. In this final section, we examine how Jewish activists and Jewish communities can work in solidarity and partnership with disability activists on concrete justice priorities.

“My Jewish identity and the principle of “*tikkun olam*,” repairing the world, has always been at the core of my activism. I’ve always drawn a certain amount of inspiration from Jewish history in which people took control of their own destiny.

Ari Ne’eman, Winner of the 2014 Ruderman Prize in Inclusion⁴¹

Ari Ne’eman is president and co-founder of the Autistic Self Advocacy Network, an organization run by and for Autistic adults seeking to increase the representation of Autistic people across society. He serves on the National Council on Disability.

Tikkun olam, the conviction that Jews have a responsibility and obligation to work for the repair of the world, has been a powerful force in animating contemporary Jewish justice movements. The idea of *tikkun olam* has its roots in classical rabbinic texts and plays a prominent role in the mystical literature of kabbalah. In the modern period, *tikkun olam* has come to express Jewish commitments to social action—a recognition that Jewish values call for concrete efforts to work for a more just world.

41 <http://www.haaretz.com/life/science-medicine/1.638978>

Disability & Social Justice: Recognizing the Connections

Recognizing the connections between disability rights and social justice can inspire Jewish communities to incorporate disability issues into our social activism—and encourage us to see disability issues as part of a longstanding Jewish commitment to work for a more just and equitable world.

When Jews and Jewish organizations work on disability issues, it is critical to approach such efforts in terms of partnership and solidarity. People with disabilities are often subjects of other people’s charity, treated as passive consumers of other people’s benevolence, rather than engaged on our own terms. Though such efforts are often well-intentioned, they leave intact the prevailing power structures that position non-disabled people as leaders and decision-makers, with people with disabilities as the recipients of care. In disability activist circles, such tendencies have sparked a common refrain: “Nothing about us, without us.”



ERIC ROSENTHAL ON THE JEWISH VALUES THAT UNDERGIRD DISABILITY JUSTICE

The Jewish principle from the Torah – do not oppress the stranger, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt – is very powerful to me. As a people, we care deeply about family and community; and as a people we have particular responsibility to help ensure that people with disabilities grow up with families, are part of communities and are not marginalized, dehumanized and put away.⁴²

Eric Rosenthal

Eric Rosenthal, recipient of the Charles Bronfman Prize in 2013, is the founder and executive director of Disability Rights International. The organization trains human-rights and disability activists and works with governments and international development organizations to combat the institutionalization and segregation of children and adults with disabilities.



Every February, Jewish Federations of North America and the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism sponsor a Jewish Disability Advocacy Day in Washington, DC to mobilize Jewish advocates on behalf of disability policy concerns. In 2014, Jewish disability advocates helped support the passage of the ABLE act, which allows people with disabilities and their families to make contributions to tax-exempt savings accounts for medical expenses and long-term care without risking the loss of their government benefits. Jewish advocates and disability rights activists have also worked together to push for increased employment opportunities for people with disabilities and better accessible transportation services—which help ensure the independence and economic security of people with disabilities.

⁴² View a brief documentary about Eric Rosenthal’s work and the Jewish values that inspire him: <http://www.driadvocacy.org/about/staff-partners/eric-rosenthal/>

Advocating for the Right to Live in Community

Another important disability justice priority is independent, community-based housing. Most people with disabilities want the right to live in our own homes, in our own communities, rather than in an institution. Living within a vibrant, integrated community maximizes our ability to exercise autonomy and agency over our own lives and schedules.

In Israel, Bizchut, the Israel Human Rights Center for People with Disabilities, is urging the Israeli government to provide support for people with disabilities to live in the community, rather than in state institutions. Such opportunities, activists affirm, are critical to protecting the agency and dignity of people with disabilities.



Even with the steady erosion of the welfare state, Israel has in place a net of social services, and legally recognizes the right of people with intellectual disabilities to receive state support so they could leave their parents' home in their adult life. This policy, however, makes distinctions among people with various support needs.

So, for example, if I am someone who can pretty much live independently, I may be able to receive state support to cover my extra support needs and live in an apartment in the community. But if I cannot manage on my own, and need substantial support, even if I lived my first eighteen years with my family, within my community—if I want to leave my family's home, I can only receive support if I move to an institution. Maybe in Jerusalem, say, if that is where I grew up, but maybe not; maybe a three-hour bus-ride away to a secluded part of the Negev.

Whether in Jerusalem or the Negev, I suddenly have to dorm, not for a year, or two or three, but for life. Suddenly my world, which once included the neighborhood, the market, the library, the synagogue, my family, my neighbors, my hobbies, narrows to only ten, twenty, or a hundred people with disabilities and staff.

Suddenly I lose control of my life. I am part of a "system." I become someone who has to be managed, dressed, showered. I can no longer choose with whom to live, and where to work, and what to do with my afternoons, and whom to meet in the evening. I can no longer go to the supermarket, or decide what to have for dinner tonight. I can't drop by a next door neighbor except to see my roommate whom I see the whole day and every day. There is no significance to having a bank account, because there is nowhere to go.

Tirza Leibowitz, "Disability and Law"

Tirza Leibowitz is the associate director for legal advocacy with the Open Society Foundations' Human Rights Initiative. She has worked extensively with Bizchut: The Israel Human Rights Center for People with Disabilities.



Tips for Best Practice

MAKING THE CONNECTIONS: DISABILITY & SOCIAL JUSTICE

Disability is far from an isolated issue. Almost all social justice concerns have a disability dimension. People with disabilities are affected in disproportionate numbers by hunger, homelessness, violence, unemployment, and social isolation. In responding to all of these issues, disability justice activists work to ensure a more just and equitable world.

- *When you speak about social justice issues, ask yourself: How are people with disabilities affected by this issue? Even a brief acknowledgement of disability can help your audience make the connection.*
- *Make sure your language recognizes the agency, creativity, and resilience of people with disabilities. Consider acknowledging the work of disability activists, in order to help your community see people with disabilities as part of the solution.*
- *Invite people with disabilities to be involved in social justice projects that benefit your community. Such invitations send a powerful message that people with disabilities aren't just recipients of care and support, but also people who can make meaningful contributions to the task of tikkun olam.*

Conclusion:

Jewish Values & Disability Justice

Working in solidarity with disability activists offers Jews a potent opportunity to enact core Jewish values. Jewish tradition gives voice to spiritual principles that affirm the fundamental human rights of people with disabilities—the recognition that all people have infinite value and deserve to be treated with dignity. Throughout these pages, we have explored Jewish sources that resonate with the critical insights and political sensibilities of disability activists and advocates, underscoring the way that Jewish values can support and foster disability justice.

Disability justice calls us to honor the myriad ways human beings move through the world, to make space for differences of body and mind, of speech and sensory perception. It calls us to fashion a world where all people are safe and secure in their homes and on the streets of our cities, where bodies are not judged and found wanting. It calls us to create communities that value human dignity. Disability justice imagines a world that values people with disabilities, that acknowledges the ways it is enriched and enlivened by our presence—a world, as the Psalmist said, “where kindness and truth will meet, where justice and peace will kiss.”

How do we realize the vision in Psalms of joining justice with peace? When asked to teach the Torah while standing on one foot, the great sage Hillel famously remarked:

**What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor.
That is the entire Torah, all the rest is commentary.**

—Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a

Hillel’s teaching invites us to think anew about disability inclusion. While some communities may be tempted to design separate prayer services only for people with disabilities, Hillel’s words prompt us to ask: Would we want to pray apart from the community? Would anyone be comfortable using the accessible entrance, for example, or is it a substandard option that most people would prefer to avoid? Above all, Hillel’s counsel calls us to root our communal practices of inclusion and accommodation in the eminently Jewish values of dignity and respect.

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The Jewish Inclusion Project
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