

Temple Sinai's Path to Access and Inclusion

By Denise Jacobson

Introduction

In the Fall of 1992, our family (my husband Neil, myself, and our first-grader David) joined the Temple Sinai congregation. Neil and I had been transplanted New Yorkers who settled 3,000 miles away in Oakland, California a number of years earlier. We were both raised as secular, High Holiday Jews, haphazardly celebrating major Jewish holidays by gathering with friends at our home or at theirs. However, like many Jewish parents of young school-age children, we decided it was important for David to learn about our cultural and religious heritage, especially since our relatives lived so far away.

Although Neil had his Bar Mitzvah at thirteen, I didn't have any formal Jewish education. I would have to say, if pressed to pin down our Jewish familial background, Neil and I came from a blend of the Orthodox-Conservative arm of Judaism. I remember the few times the term "Reform Jew" was mentioned in the homes of my relatives, eyes rolled and voices scoffed, "They pass around the hat for donations on shabbos!" and "They play the organ in shul!" If you were Reform, you weren't really practicing Judaism, but since I'd never learned Hebrew and knew nothing about the prayers or the service, Reform Judaism seemed the least intimidating. I had been to a few services and could follow along because much of it was in English. As for the organ, I suspected I could get to a point where I could, at least, tolerate it!

During first grade, David became friendly with a classmate in elementary school who's family were members of Temple Sinai. The following Fall, when it was just the beginning of the religious school year, we decided to tag along with them and enroll David. Temple Sinai was the oldest congregation in Oakland, a 900+ family urban synagogue, only about a seven minute drive from where we lived. Most importantly, the Sanctuary and social hall were, for the most part, wheelchair accessible. Neil and I have cerebral palsy and are motorized wheelchair users. The religious and temple offices, at the time, were undergoing renovations which were to be completed by the time school started. Everything would be ramped. There would also be an installation of an elevator to the small chapel on the second floor that before then was only reachable via a spiral staircase—I was told that elevator had been a deal-breaker at the insistence of the newly hired senior rabbi (Steven Chester) just five years earlier. Hearing that story made me like him even before I met him! I was also impressed that the congregation had displayed a conscious intent in making the synagogue mobility friendly to everyone. And I felt even more welcomed when the religious school secretary showed no hesitation in asking us very casually if we needed assistance to fill out the registration

forms.

We became familiar faces around the temple as our family started attending religious school events and Shabbat services more often. In general people were congenial to us, but there were barriers to forming in-depth friendships. Neil and I both have speech impairments due to our cerebral palsy, which made it difficult to chat with temple members at an oneg—it was hard to be heard among the din of other voices in the social hall especially when people towered above our heads. I felt a reluctance from congregants in reaching out and trying to get to know us better. Many committee meetings and activities were held in people's homes that weren't wheelchair accessible. And though I'm sure if either Neil or I had mentioned that we wanted to attend an event that the location would have been changed, neither of us felt comfortable enough, at the time, to make that request. We still felt like strangers; we didn't want to impose. And ironically, though we'd both been disability activists and educators for most of our adult lives in the secular world (raising disability consciousness for people working in helping and healthcare professions), we were hesitant to expose our vulnerabilities to our new Jewish community.

The deliberate shift for Temple Sinai toward becoming more welcoming and inclusive to people and families touched by disability issues came during one of the High Holiday Services in 1998. From the bimah, our new assistant rabbi, Andrea Fisher (now Berlin) spoke so eloquently about marginalization within the Jewish community as she told of growing up with a brother with a developmental disability and her family's struggle to find a welcoming synagogue. After quite a bit of searching and a few negative experiences, they knew they found their home, she said, when the rabbi assigned her brother the job of turning the lights off and then on for the Havdalah service.

As I listened to the rabbi's D'rash, I was flooded with emotion. My feelings of loneliness, isolation, and segregation that I'd been experiencing within my Jewish community—mostly unintentional—now had a name: marginalization. It was a relief to have it identified. A few weeks later, when I met with her to raise the question of how to deal with the phenomenon of being marginalized, I learned I hadn't been the only one to ask that question. Like the sounding of the Shofar, the rabbi's sermon had sparked a call to take notice!

A consciousness began evolving within the congregation led by the Social Action Committee hosting a Disability Awareness Panel at our annual Social Action Shabbat. I was asked to speak along with a member of the committee who lived with mental illness. As time went on, Neil and I, as well as other congregants with various types of visible and hidden disabilities became more active in temple life and more vocal about how to improve both physical and attitudinal access in our synagogue. There was buy-in

from staff, clergy, and lay-leadership. The Access Committee was born in January, 2003. The Access Report was approved and accepted by the Temple Sinai Board of Trustees on May 19, 2004.

Most of the physical barriers highlighted in the report have been resolved, but the physical barriers are, in many ways, the easiest barriers to overcome. As the years have progressed, our congregation, which has grown in size to almost 1000 family units, proves exemplar in valuing the diversity of its congregants and in accommodating the needs of all its members, whether it's a child with a learning disability or an adult who requires reading material printed in a large font. Through the work of the access Committee, congregants also have begun to recognize that the issues faced by people with disabilities throughout the world are truly social justice issues—poverty, unemployment, abuse (to name a few). Temple Sinai's vision is not just to create an inclusive and welcoming congregation but to work toward a more inclusive world.

I'd be remiss if I didn't mention that I no longer consider myself a secular Jew. Temple Sinai has become a very central part of my life. I've served on several committees, attended adult education classes, formed meaningful friendships, became a B'nei Mitzvah, traveled to Israel along with my fellow congregants, and participate in Shabbat services from time to time (including chanting Torah). As for the organ, well, it seems to have just blended with everything else going on, just as I have, adding to the enrichment of our synagogue.