

Tips to Increase Disabilities Inclusion at High Holy Day Services

Hi, I am Rabbi Edie Mencher, coordinator of the URJ Ruderman Disabilities Inclusion Initiative,

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We want to share some relatively easy to implement ideas about how to increase accessibility and inclusion at High Holy Day and other large worship services gained from our contact with people with disabilities and their families, disabilities advocates and congregational lay leaders and staff. Most of these ideas can be put into place even a few weeks before the service. Many of these ideas are applicable all year long.

The best way to make sure that everyone can participate is to ask people what will make this possible for them. Congregations can invite feedback through emails, registration, membership forms, in bulletins, and in handouts at services.

Be sure to mention available accommodations in your online and Shabbat bulletins in the weeks preceding the service even if you have already asked people to indicate the accommodations they need on invitations or on ticket request forms. Indicate whom to contact about a loop system for those with hearing impairment; large print or Braille prayer-books; iPads with assistive technology; reserved seating based on the congregant's needs including for family members to sit next to relatives in wheelchairs; fidgets, small tactile objects to help those who need them to keep focused and calm; volunteers to help worshippers who may need assistance entering or exiting the service or event at any time; reserved parking spaces closer to the building entrance. Let people know with whom they can meet so everyone at the congregation can know how to make it possible for them to feel comfortable and to participate—not every need can be included or anticipated in a checklist. It is important to remember that many disabilities are invisible or remitting. For example, a person may need easy access to the rest rooms due to a medical condition, may be experiencing pain or have limited mobility or may become distraught in new situations even it isn't evident.

Place kippot, prayerbooks, texts and any other literature being distributed at a level that can be reached by everyone.

Many adults and children find it very helpful to have an outline and picture schedule including the order of the service; a natural Jewish example is the listing

the steps of the seder at Passover, illustrated in most Haggadot. This can be distributed along with any other handouts.

Think creatively about how you might provide space in other rooms where people of all ages may go if they need a break from services because of sensory overload, allergy to fragrances; restlessness in situations of needing to be seated for long periods or emotional distress.

Be sure to announce page numbers and the name and color of books being used so that everyone can stay involved.

Be sure to include people with disabilities when you are giving out honors and roles in the service and make time for them to practice and be comfortable with their role and with the accommodations that will be provided.

If your bima is accessible make sure that the aisles leading up to it are clear; If your bima is not accessible consider providing a table at the same level as the pews and move the part of the service in which a person with disabilities is participating to that level.

You can help ushers and staff feel confidence as they facilitate entry and participation by people with disabilities by offering these guidelines in advance:

As people drive into the parking lot have volunteers available to direct them to reserved parking for people with disabilities (some congregations have even arranged for valet parking); allow people to pull up in front of the entrance before parking and give people adequate time and assistance to unload wheelchairs, walkers and to allow people with disabilities to exit vehicles and orient themselves.

Speak directly to the person with a disability rather than to a family member, aide or sign language interpreter whenever possible.

To avoid causing embarrassment, disorientation or a loss of balance that can lead to a fall be certain to ask if assistance is needed rather than physically guiding a person who is blind or using a walker or cane.

If your facility has safe available space within the Sanctuary or meeting room, do not automatically guide people with wheelchairs to the back of the sanctuary. Make sure there are seats for family members near space for people using wheelchairs.

When referring to people with disabilities in most cases it is preferable to use “people first language” i.e. this congregant is blind and uses a Braille prayer-book (or an iPad with audio) rather than the blind congregant needs the Braille prayer-book.

Use a normal tone and volume when speaking to people with disabilities and be prepared to repeat or rephrase the request or suggestion.

Because many people with hearing impairments utilize lip reading it is best to speak to everyone while facing them rather than while turning away.

Have volunteers available to help people who need assistance to get to the rest room, leave the Sanctuary for a time to feel more comfortable, or to respond to those who may need medical assistance.

If a congregant seems emotionally overwhelmed or is calling out in a way that might seem disruptive it is important to respond in ways that are respectful, supportive and allow the service to continue. Develop guidelines in advance in consultation with clergy, mental health professionals, medical experts and special educators and families and individuals who may know in advance what would be helpful to them or their family member.

When asking worshippers to rise many people with disabilities feel included if some mention is made that those in wheelchairs or with difficulty standing can show their respect from their seats; this is preferable to saying “Rise if you are able” because it suggests that those who need to remain seated cannot also participate in the actions and spirit of the service. It helps everyone feel they can fully participate if once during each service it is explained that the phrase to stand by or for someone or something means to show loyalty, support and honor and that people can symbolically join in offering this respect even if they are seated. If referring to disabilities in a sermon or in greetings offered by lay leaders, use the same people first language.

We hope that these tips will help create more meaningful and inclusive worship services for your congregation. Please be in touch with any questions you have. Thank you.