

Mount Zion Congregation

Accessibility And Inclusion:

The Jewish Ethics Of Inclusion

“The Pew Research Center’s recent study, ‘A Portrait of Jewish Americans’ has rocked our Jewish boats. According to Pew, our ‘affiliated’ numbers are shrinking. While we are looking for innovative ways to make Jewish life and Jewish living more attractive and attainable to our population, there is an opportunity to open our doors even wider and make a more robust effort to welcome and include Jews with disabilities (as well as their families).”

...“As a person with disabilities, I would have loved to have seen the folks at Pew delve more deeply. Our sages teach, ‘Do not separate yourself from the community.’ However, Jews with disabilities are too often separated from the community through no fault of their own. There are Jews out there who are ‘religious’ and want to belong.”

Rabbi Lynne Landsberg, Religious Action Center

“Why has it been so difficult for us to fully include and welcome people with disabilities into our communities? The message of our tradition is clear: All human beings are created in the image of God, and must be treated with dignity and respect. We must pursue justice and perform acts of loving kindness. We must welcome the stranger and visit the sick. We must tend to the more vulnerable members of society. We must treat others as we wish to be treated. We know better, yet we still exclude.

Folks who have studied this have identified several common barriers to inclusion. The top three, like our Ashamnu, are an ABC – Attitude, Buildings, and Communication.”

“I pray that we will bring closer the day when every part of Mount Zion Temple – from our members to our programming to our building says to people with disabilities: “*B’ruchim Ha’Ba’im.*” You are welcomed here. You are valued here. Please, come in. “

Rabbi Esther Adler, Rosh Hashanah Sermon, 2012

A. Attitudes

A comprehensive list of attitudinal barriers has been compiled by The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability. They include pity, ignorance, stereotyping, denial, and what they call the “Spread Effect,” where we assume that if a person is disabled in one aspect, they must be in others as well. It is what makes us shout at a person who is blind, or speak slowly to a person in a wheelchair.

B. Building (Accessibility, Policies, Practices, Systems, Programs)

C. Communication

1. Accommodations (hearing devices, ASL interpreters, large print prayerbook, etc.
2. Listen.
3. “People First Language”

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Jewish Texts and Quotes

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

Isaiah 56:5

“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 religious and public life. We are taught “Do not separate yourself from the community” (Pirke Avot 2:5); accordingly, we must prevent anyone from being separated against their will. This occurs frequently; for example, Medicaid will often pay for long-term services for people with disabilities only if they live and receive care at institutions such as hospitals and nursing homes. Guided by our belief in the importance and value of community life, Reform Jews have been working on programs that will end Medicaid’s “institutional bias.”

Furthermore, in Leviticus 19:14 we are commanded, “You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind.” Stumbling blocks come in many forms, from less-than-accessible buildings, Shabbat services, prayer books and web pages to health care that is harder to access or isn’t sufficient for people with disabilities. We are obligated to remove these stumbling blocks; this is why Reform Judaism cares so deeply for the rights of people with disabilities.

Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism

“A human being mints many coins from the same mold, and they are all identical. But the holy one, blessed by God, strikes us all from the mold of the first human and each one of us is unique.”

From Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

“Every member of the people of Israel is obligated to study Torah—whether one is rich or poor, physically able or with physical disability.”

Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Talmud Torah, Ch. 10

“Ben Azzai taught: Do not disdain any person. Do not underrate the importance of anything for there is no person who does not have his hour, and there is no thing without its place in the sun.”

Pirkei Avot, Ethics of our Fathers, 4:3

“Do not look at the container, but what is in it.”

Pirke Avot 4:27

“Veahavta l'reyacha kamocho--Love Your Neighbor As Yourself.”

Leviticus 19:18

“Reprove Your Kin.”

Leviticus 19:17

Lashon Hara--“The Hebrew term for speaking badly of others is called *lashon hara*, literally "evil language." Interestingly, the Torah calls "evil language" anything negative, even if it's true. “

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