TEMPLE SINAI INCLUSION AWARENESS AND EDUCATION DAY

SPEAKER AND DISCUSSION LEADER SHELLY CHRISTENSEN, MA, FAAIID

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REPORT TO THE TEMPLE SINAI BOARD OF TRUSTEES

1. **Walking tour of building to assess physical accessibility** attended by Accessibility and Inclusion Committee members and Shelly, producing the following observations and recommendations:

Building entry points, room transition points and electric door sites: Excellent

Signage for availability of hearing loops, glasses and large print prayer books: Excellent

Handicapped accessible bathroom:

* door signage to read “KNOCK FIRST”
* do a “dry run” with person in a wheelchair to assess the following considerations: move soap dispenser and towels to more reachable locations; lower toilet paper holder; remove under-sink ledge so sink handles more reachable; change to automatic motion-activated faucet and soap dispenser; additional grab bar(s)
* assess if deodorizer scent too strong (for person with allergies/sensitivities) with door closed

Signage for “Accessible and Gender Neutral Bathroom”: place existing sign lower and display additional signs at better eye level in other locations

Water fountains: add cup dispenser at appropriate height and a small waste basket underneath

Mezuzot: lower to height reachable for persons in wheelchairs and by children

Parent/school wing lounge: examine chair arrangements at table and at couch area to improve access and movement by person in wheelchair; examine shag rug regarding ease of movement by person in wheelchair and tripping hazard.

Classrooms: alter desk arrangements when needed to accommodate student in wheelchair

Courtyard: consider guard/handrails outside access doors (currently a fall risk)

Bulletin boards: lower height

1. **How can Jewish Text guide us to advance inclusion in our community?**

Attendance: 21, including one likely new Sinai member and two Federation representatives

Shelly asked each attendee to introduce themselves and state their reason for attending. This was an excellent starting point, allowing those present to see the broad range of personal backgrounds and that a large majority of attendees had a family or professional connection to people with disabilities. It unified the group in a very positive way.

Shelly then led discussion regarding interpretation and meaning of the following:

“I will bring them to My holy mount, and I will cause them to rejoice in My house of prayer, their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be acceptable upon My alter, for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” Isaiah (56:7)

Representative comments and discussion points on how this text mandates us to be inclusive:

* We should look out and see who is yet to be involved
* Bringing everyone into the synagogue allows all of us to rejoice
* There is God, and there is everyone else
* We are all part of the bigger “Us”, with different abilities
* Disability labels set up the “otherness”
* We all have “obstacles” depending on the context
* It’s everyone’s responsibility to get to know an individual as a person

See **attached handout #1** for other text references on inclusion

* Suggestion made to mount and post these in prominent building locations
1. **Parenting a Child with a Disability: Understanding Our Challenges on the Journey to Hope**

Attendance: 24, including two families accompanied by their adult children with disabilities.

The session commenced with attendee introductions, again the large majority with personal connections to family members with disabilities. One parent related the story of her inability to find a mohel willing to perform a b’rit milah on her baby with Down syndrome, finally turning to a physician/mohel. Another parent inquired about

whether a resource was available in the community to help them navigate and coordinate the complex world of services for their child. Attendee Rachel Kest from Federation made him and other parents aware of the newly launched “Jewish Family Navigator” which will be convening “meet ups”/ support groups for Jewish parents of children with disabilities. The ability of this relationship to be immediately formed felt like a wonderful service to these families in need. Discussion led by Shelly included the following: **(Handout #2 attached)**

* By allowing a child and parent to tell the story of their unmapped and unplanned journey, we can recognize the parent’s fears and challenges, and thus support them so there and the child’s hopes and dreams can develop
* Ask “how do you want to connect?” and “what do you enjoy doing?”
* Then ask “are you willing to let me be a part of it and help you?”
* Parents need information, through resource books for their Jewish children with disabilities, especially if they are not affiliated with a synagogue.
* Social support allows connection with other parents of children with disabilities, because it’s a similar experience. Families can tell their stories, allowing others to walk in their shoes, creating community and emotional support
* Groups create a therapeutic environment where parent and child can feel safe and comfortable. Parent and child can choose either a “self-contained” or an “inclusive” group, or both.

Shelly asked us to consider “whether inclusion can be woven into the fabric of what Temple Sinai is already doing well?”

She concluded with the following story: A synagogue benefits from inclusion efforts like a jazz group uses improvisation to create beautiful music. A young Herbie Hancock, invited to play with the great Miles Davis, made a mistake on stage. Davis took those unintended notes and improvised, creating something even more beautiful.

We can take members with different abilities and their “mistakes”, and create something wonderful, learning from each other and growing together.

1. **From Longing to Belonging: Advancing Inclusion at Temple Sinai**

Attendance: 35

Presentation with background information, including a reminder that the prevalence of people living with disabilities in the U.S. is 20%. An exercise followed where each person wrote down three things they couldn’t live without in their Jewish life. When some of those were literally “taken away”, it reinforced the experience of a disabled person deprived of something important to them. Discussion followed around “Practical approaches to inclusion” and the “Five key areas of inclusion and belonging: basic no and low-cost ways to get started” **(see attached handout #3)**. Attendee and leader comments include:

* Procedures should be in place to assure accommodation requests get to the responsible person
* Review all forms for language “Are there any accommodations you require?” and add if missing: Event registration, membership, website, religious school, b’nai mitzvah, tutoring
* Dialogue is needed, asking people what they want, so we can be in partnership with them to help them move ahead, because disregarding them is disrespectful
* Work with people with disabilities, don’t just try to fix something for them…”Nothing about us without us”
* Dialogue requires balancing the needs of everyone, and working together, because no one has the right to weigh needs and say that certain ones are more important than others
* A parent/child with a disability should be sensitive to the needs of the community, knowing how the child’s needs may impact others
* Having conversations will set up a structure of inclusion and a spirit of belonging
* The congregation’s overarching goal is to create a setting where everyone truly belongs, by incorporating inclusion in everything we do
1. **Wrap-up session with Sinai leadership, committee and speaker**

Discussion, observations and suggestions made:

* Assure open and timely communication from leadership and committee chairs to Accessibility and Inclusion committee
* Empower congregants so they feel the responsibility to bring needs of members with disabilities to the Temple’s attention
* Encourage people with disabilities to join Social Action and other committees
* Work with teachers to be sure welcomeness occurs in the classroom
* “Listening Sessions” for members to tell their stories and give suggestions
* Panel of people with disabilities
* “Nothing about us without us”…but also it’s not our sole responsibility to educate you on our issues. Do research; look online for your questions that have already been answered (by disabled people). Check your sources, and be sure they’re by disabled people affected. Then come to us for clarification and confirmation. Listen to our needs and experiences, but avoid putting the whole burden on our shoulders. We advocate for ourselves non-stop and it is exhausting.
* Members and their children can learn from seeing people with disabilities doing things in the school or synagogue
* Each Sinai leader and Board member can be an emissary to their constituents…take what we gain by including everyone and use it to make things better
* The Religious School mantra is “No one left behind”. “We support the child and the parent through collaboration”
* Study training of madrachim: current training is being done well by a volunteer Sinai member; is additional training needed?; keep it ongoing with feedback and support; get guidance from within the congregation; get info from speaker about Philadelphia-based program.
* State overtly *why* we are doing things to give access to all people with disabilities
* Plan for the obvious. If we’re aware of help that is going to be needed for a student, work with the parent and teach to enact the solution rather than waiting for a problem