Inclusive Israel
by Avi West, Director of the Shulamith Reich Elster Resource Center and Master Teacher at the Partnership for Jewish Life and Learning

There has been talk in recent days centering on the Jewish value *Klal Yisrael*. It has been translated in many ways, but it is generally about preserving the unity and completeness of the Jewish People as a whole.

Jewish history is filled with episodes of exclusion where Jewish communities have at times created barriers meant to exclude our own - Jews with differences - differences of opinion (the Hanukkah story), differences in practice, differences in background, and differences in perceived abilities (Talmudic categories of “women, mentally limited, and minors” applied broadly beyond the requirements of Jewish law).

How can we remind ourselves to change our own behavior, working to repair the damage to our people’s wholeness and wholesomeness? What steps can we in Greater Washington take to build a more unified community? One remembering tool is establishing a holiday, or appointed time for the theme/value to be remembered. Another is to create a meditation/blessing that imbues a behavior with more meaning. And the third is a reminder or sign such as the mezuzah on the door. All three tools can be used to transform February into an opportunity for all of us to turn *Klal Yisrael* into “Inclusive Israel.”

In a brilliant step towards building a fulfilled, whole *Klal Yisrael*, February has been designated as a time for Jewish Disability Awareness Month. As with other holidays or “appointed times,” Jewish Disability Awareness Month is dedicated to a specific value: themes of inclusion and dignity, and honoring the abilities of every human being as having been created in God’s image. It is a time to ask ourselves, “Who is not here?” The hope is that after a month highlighting this theme, each one of us will carry the theme forward throughout the year.

Between February 1-9, we will be able to meditate on exemplary artistic expressions of the lives, stories, and art of people with disabilities. ReelAbilities, a film festival at the three JCC’s and at other venues, will present award winning films accompanied by discussions or presentations. The lasting impressions of these people will be a blessing and a wake-up call for everyone to celebrate the diversity of our shared human experience. For more information see www.greaterdc.reelabilities.org.

And as for a sign upon our doorposts (mezuzah) to advocate for inclusion and dignity for all, YOU be the mezuzah at the gates to your home, place of business, and community organizations. Welcome people with abilities, including those who were told “You can’t…” and tell them “You can!” Foster an environment that encourages and nurtures people to learn new skills. Set a goal to reach out to those who have felt excluded, and create opportunities for those for whom access has been limited.

The mending of the global community of *Klal Yisrael* is a formidable task. But creating a local community that reflects the ideal of “Inclusive Israel” is well within our reach.
Ask the Question:
How do Jewish Congregations, Agencies, Organizations and Schools in Your Community Welcome People with Disabilities?

1. Has there been a discussion or training session with staff members, board members, congregants and teachers about how to make guests and constituents with disabilities feel welcome and included?

2. Do all publicity and written materials say, “All are Welcome,” and is it written in an easy-to-read typeface and font?

3. Is the universal access symbol posted in ads, signs, and in the organization’s newsletter bulletin?

4. Do people with disabilities participate as ushers, lead services, sing in the choir or serve on committees?

5. Are people with disabilities encouraged to apply for jobs and serve on the Board of Directors?

6. Are written materials, including prayer books, bulletins, newsletters, flyers and brochures available in large print, Braille, and/or e-mail?

7. Is the physical plant wheelchair accessible? Is there an elevator in the building other than the service elevator? Is there a ramp or lift to the building and to the bimah?

8. Is sign language interpretation provided at all programs and events that people who are deaf might attend, and is there someone familiar with calls using the Relay service for people who are deaf?

9. Does everyone enter through the same doorway; if not, is the accessible doorway welcoming and attractive?

10. Are assistive listening devices available in the sanctuary, classrooms and meeting rooms?

11. Are light switches, water faucets, water fountains and mezuzot at appropriate heights for people who use wheelchairs or who are small?

Adapted from Kesher: Working Together to Include People with Disabilities in Jewish Life (Cincinnati, Ohio)
Jewish Disability Awareness: 50+ Programming and Action Ideas

The following list is a starting point for ways in which your agency, organization or congregation might participate in Jewish Disability Awareness Month and act throughout the year to make your community accessible to all Jews.

Programmatic Accessibility

1. Assess existing programs and evaluate their accessibility. To aide in your self-assessment, begin with “Asking the Question,” of your agency, organization, or congregation – the document on the preceding page.

2. Hold religious school, nursery school and/or family education programs to raise awareness of and sensitivity to people with disabilities in the Jewish community.

3. Designate nursery school and religious school tzedakah during Jewish Disability Awareness Month for the congregation’s accessibility fund or to pay for an accommodation that will enhance the accessibility of your congregation. Put a tzedakah box in the congregation’s lobby and inside the school entrance during the week so that everyone can participate.

4. Ensure that people with disabilities are included in regular activities — youth groups, Sisterhood, Men’s Club/Brotherhood, fundraising, social action, minyanim, adult and children’s education, volunteer activities, aliyot, etc. — and provide accommodations to facilitate their participation.

5. Provide regular transportation for those who are elderly, homebound or have disabilities to activities and services.

6. Plan adult education modules/classes, sermons or newsletter articles to discuss non-architectural barriers to inclusiveness.

7. Take advantage of educational opportunities in the community concerning disabilities and disability-related issues.

8. Welcome members of the Jewish deaf community by publicizing interpreted programs and services, and hire a qualified Judaic interpreter to make those programs and services accessible.

9. Contribute to, and make use of, the Community Interpreter Fund to make sign language interpreters available at your events.

10. Encourage congregants and constituents to celebrate Shabbat and other holidays with people with disabilities in the community.

11. Invite a speaker — for example, an expert in the field, a person with a disability, or a parent of a child with a disability.

12. Have teens and pre-teens serve as big brothers and sisters/buddies to youngsters with disabilities within your agency, organization or congregation.
Policies and Language to Reflect Accessibility

13. Establish an inclusion or accessibility committee in your agency, organization or congregation to address the needs of people with disabilities on an ongoing basis. Include people with disabilities and family members of people with disabilities on the committee.

14. Evaluate your “policies” of inclusion for all Jews, reviewing attitudes conveyed by written policies and unwritten codes of conduct toward people who look or act differently from others.

15. Involve people with disabilities and parents of children with special needs in the development of policies and programs that will include all Jews.

16. If you are a congregation and haven’t already done so, join the Accessible Congregations Campaign of the American Association of People with Disabilities (formerly of the National Organization on Disability). Information available on www.aapd.com.

17. Use “people-first” language in all publications and other communications (www.disabilityisnatural.com).

18. Maintain regular communication with people who have disabilities and their families so that they continue to feel part of the community.

19. Encourage people with disabilities to feel comfortable requesting accommodations they may need in order to make the organization, agency, or congregation accessible to them.

20. Develop your website and a bulletin board to display information and materials about your accessibility and inclusion efforts.

21. Make a commitment to identify and work to break down structural, communication and attitudinal obstacles to socialization, study, or worship.

Physical Accessibility

22. Survey the physical surroundings of your agency, organization or congregation and evaluate their accessibility for people with disabilities that affect mobility, sight, hearing and development.

23. Do not limit your survey to classrooms, large program areas or space used for worship, but extend it to include space used by your staff and volunteers.

24. Consider replacing fixed seats with flexible seating that can be rearranged to accommodate a variety of needs in auditoriums, theaters, or sanctuaries.

25. Install signage in Braille or raised letters for those who are blind or have severe visual impairments.

26. Post appropriate signage indicating the location of accessible entrances, paths of travel and restrooms.

27. Install long-handled door hardware that is easier for everyone, especially those with impaired hand function, to use.
28. Improve air quality by dusting woodwork, brass and other fixtures, vacuuming with a HEPA filter and cleaning heating ducts and air conditioning filters on a regular basis.

29. Remove snow and ice promptly from all sidewalks and parking lots.

30. Mount a cup dispenser next to your water fountain if funds are not available to purchase a new, accessible one. Make sure the dispenser is mounted at a convenient height for those who use wheelchairs, and also make sure that cups are always maintained in the dispenser.

31. Raise the height of work surfaces such as desks and tables so that volunteers and staff who use wheelchairs can sit comfortably.

32. Survey your microphones and sound systems to make sure they meet the needs of those with high frequency hearing loss.

33. Make sure that carpeted stairs and risers contrast in color so as to make each step clearly visible.

34. Apply brightly colored, textured strips at the tops of stairs to indicate that stairs are being approached.

35. Make your facility available for use to organizations that serve people who have disabilities or are homebound.

36. Educate organization, agency, or congregation members and staff about environmental illnesses and allergies.

**Educational Resources**

37. Provide educational resources concerning Judaism and disabilities in your library.

38. Devote a section of your library to resources and texts addressing disability concerns.

39. Wherever there are shelves or baskets of books for children in classrooms, sanctuaries or libraries, include age-appropriate books on special needs and disabilities.

**Ritual Accessibility**

40. Invite people with disabilities to participate in services.

41. Clear space in different parts of the sanctuary for people who use wheelchairs.

42. Provide large print siddurim and chumashim and other materials in Braille.

43. Make print and recorded versions of sermons and other materials available.

44. Place a portable or permanent reading table on the sanctuary floor so that people with physical disabilities have greater access for Torah reading and honors.
45. Dedicate a kiddush or oneg Shabbat in honor of Jewish Disability Awareness Month.

46. Include special prayers or readings at each Shabbat service during Jewish Disability Awareness Month.

47. Add a relevant quote to each Shabbat bulletin during Jewish Disability Awareness Month.

48. Have a nursery school or religious school class lead and sign a prayer that they have learned with the help of a qualified interpreter at a Shabbat service.

49. In the context of Torah study or perhaps a sermon, explore the difference between “healing” and “cure.”

50. Educate ushers, greeters, receptionists and others who welcome and guide visitors about the various accessibility features offered by your congregation.

51. Place second mezuzot at wheelchair height on doorways throughout the congregation.

52. Lower your box of kippot and basket of women’s head-coverings so that they can be reached by everyone, including people who use wheelchairs.

53. Visit accessible congregations and other houses of worship in your area to get ideas for your own congregation.

54. Provide plastic magnifying sheets for use with siddurim and chumashim. They can be sewn into book covers in such a way as to overlay the pages of the book.

55. After Shabbat, deliver bimah flowers and extra copies of service bulletins to those who are sick or unable to leave their homes.
Low-Cost Accommodations for Accessibility in Your Agency, Organization, or Congregation

Modified from list compiled by Becca Hornstein, Executive Director, Council for Jews with Special Needs

IF YOU CAN'T AFFORD TO:

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Install a push-button electric door opener at the building entrance.

TRY THIS LOW-COST ALTERNATIVE:

Provide an old-fashioned door opener in the form of a volunteer before and after programs or services.

Set aside additional handicap parking spaces in front of your building.

Offer valet parking for those who need an accessible parking space.

Add a drinking fountain at wheelchair level.

Place a paper cup dispenser next to the drinking fountain at the correct height (be sure to keep the dispenser filled with cups)

Construct special places for wheelchair users in an existing sanctuary.

Change one or two seats at the ends of several rows into removable seats. Level the floor for a wheelchair.

Remove the stairs to your stage or bimah.

At minimum, add handrails for those who are unsteady on their feet.

Add a wheelchair-accessible stall in the existing bathrooms.

Retrofit a “Family Restroom” that is large enough for a wheelchair as well as baby strollers, etc.

Install special washbasins in all restrooms.

Replace short faucets with longer, kitchen-style faucets and replace round-knob handles with longer lever-style handles. Cut away the cabinet below at least one sink so a wheelchair can roll under the countertop.

Install all new light switches throughout the campus.

Add “wall switch extenders” to lower switches up to 12 inches.

Widen all doorways into rooms to accommodate wheelchairs.

Replace single doors with double doors.

Replace all doorknobs throughout the campus.

Add “doorknob extenders” over the existing doorknobs to create a level handle.

Replace stairs throughout the campus.

Add rough-surfaced, non-skid strips to all stairs.
No-Cost Accommodations

• Train all your staff and volunteers to provide Attitudinal Accessibility, welcoming individuals with disabilities and offering assistance as needed.

• Have volunteer “greeters” who will arrange to meet individuals with disabilities or families that include a person with a disability at the entrance to your building and accompany them to programs, activities, or services.

• Post a sign that indicates if you have a “quiet room” near program areas or a sanctuary for individuals who become overwhelmed by their emotions or the external stimuli and need a place to which they may retreat until they can rejoin the activities or services.

• Include the universal symbols for accessibility and disability resources in all of your written material, marketing and publicity.

• Train all employees in using “People First” language when talking about and with individuals who have disabilities.
Resources

Adapted with permission from resource lists compiled by Rabbi Lynne Landsberg, Senior Advisor on Disability Issues, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, and Becca Hornstein, Executive Director, Council for Jews with Special Needs.

Accessible Faith: A Technical Guide for Accessibility in Houses of Worship
Available from the Retirement Research Foundation
773-714-8080, 773-714-8089 (fax), info@rrf.org, www.rrf.org/noteworthy/accessible.html

UAHC Press, 2000, New York

American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD)
www.aapd.com, Justice for All listserv (a service of AAPD)—www.jfanow.org

Caring For The Soul—R’Fat HaNefesh: A Mental Health Resource & Study Guide
UAHC Press, 2003, New York

From Barriers to Bridges: A Community Action Guide for Congregations and People with Disabilities
National Organization on Disability, 1994, Washington, DC

Interfaith Disability Connection
A program of the Bobby Dodd Institute, Mark Crenshaw, Director
678-365-0071, 678-365-0098 (fax), www.interfaithdisability.org

The Jewish Community Guide to Inclusion of People with Disabilities
by Shelly Christensen
952-542-4838, schristensen@jfcsmpls.org

Jewish Disabilities Awareness “50+ Programming and Action Ideas”
Available from the Partnership for Jewish Life and Learning
240-283-6233, www.pjll.org

Jewish Perspective on Theology and the Human Experience of Disability
Edited by William C. Gaventa, M.Div. and Rabbi Judith Z. Abrams, Ph.D.
www.haworthpress.com

Judaism and Disability: Portrayals in Ancient Texts from the Tanach through the Bavli
by Judith Abrams, Gallaudet University Press

No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement
by Joseph P. Shapiro, Three Rivers Press
North American Disability Resources Directory of Jewish Agencies, Schools, Camps, Residential and Vocational Services
Council for Jews with Special Needs, Scottsdale, AZ
2006 edition available in hardcopy or CD-ROM from www.cjsn.org

Operation Mazal Tov
www.masorti.org
Operation Mazal Tov is the joint project of the Masorti Foundation and the Cantors Assembly to enable American B’nai Mitzvah to twin with an Israeli child with special needs.

Praying with Lior (film)
www.prayingwithlior.com

That All May Worship: An Interfaith Welcome to People with Disabilities
Available from the National Organization on Disability (NOD)
202-293-5960, 202-293-7999 (fax), ability@nod.org, www.nod.org/religion
Please note that all information regarding the Accessible Congregations Campaign including fact sheets and commitment forms are available at this Web site.

Union for Reform Judaism Department of Jewish Family Concerns
212-650-4294, 212-650-4239 (fax), JFC@urj.org, www.urj.org/jfc/disability

Who Makes People Different: Jewish Perspectives on People with Disabilities
Available from the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, Department of Youth Activities
1-800-594-5617, 212-253-5422 (fax), booksvc@uscj.org, www.usy.org

Yachad/National Jewish Council for Disabilities
An agency of the Orthodox Union
212-613-8229, www.njcd.org
There is an interesting mandate in Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) that asks us to be community-minded in a deeply personal way. In chapter 2, Mishnah 5, we are told directly that our place in the community cannot be compromised: “Do not separate yourself from the community.” We might envision that this means not physically separating ourselves from a community; the Talmud is emphasizing geographic proximity as an important component of community-building.

But we shouldn’t limit this adage to something physical and tangible, such as where people live. There are all kinds of invisible boundaries and walls that stand between ourselves and communities at large. We might separate ourselves mentally from a community out of our fear of conformity or gossip or exclusivity. We may find communities too rigid, too staid or too boring. We may hide ourselves away from involvement out of fear of rejection or as a response to rejection.

This statement from Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) assumes that we have choices about our involvement with other people; we should make those choices judiciously. We should understand what we sacrifice when we let go of community or fail to invest social capital in others. We need to appreciate that if we separate ourselves from community, the people we alienate will distance themselves from us. Community is a two-way street.

But how should we understand this maxim in light of those with special needs? They may be in a very different position. They may desperately want to be part of a community that has closed its doors to them. In that respect, perhaps we can add a word or two that helps add a layer of understanding: “Do not separate yourself from making community for others.”

Creating healthy, vibrant, loving and nurturing communities is not only about a choice to participate or not. It is also and perhaps primarily about crafting and shaping communities that espouse the values most important to us. We cannot abdicate ourselves from that sacred responsibility. Without this layer of meaning, we might read this statement as a passive act of will. Someone else will create a community—you can choose to be a part of it.

Instead, the Jewish community rests on the notion that each of us is tasked as a partner in a covenantal relationship with God and with others. None of us can or should exempt ourselves from making this covenantal community a place where people of all orientations and needs can find a place of comfort, safety and obligation. The brit or covenant of which we are part is an outgrowth of the fact that we are all created in God’s likeness and that the respect we shower on others is a manifestation of God’s very presence.
Beyond Accommodation: The Need for the Truly Inclusive Community
by Rabbi Michael Safra, B’nai Israel Congregation, Rockville, Maryland

[EDITOR’S NOTE: In 2006, students at Gallaudet University in Washington DC, the world’s only institute of higher education designed specifically for deaf and hard-of-hearing students, forced the resignation of the school’s newly appointed president, Jane K. Fernandes, over differences in different factions’ understandings of the deaf community.]

On Disability Awareness Shabbat, we celebrate our congregation’s commitment to inclusion and we recommit ourselves to the ongoing process of building community. In front of our building, there is a display board with service time and other information. It includes the message “Enjoy our extensive programming.” The sign is great. We are welcoming, and we are willing to make accommodations to allow people with special needs to participate in our services and programs. But still I think the sign should be changed. Instead of just inviting people to enjoy the programs that we list, the sign should say, “We invite you to be a part of our dynamic community.” Or better, “We invite you to join us in creating community.”

To be truly welcoming, we must value the input of every person who joins us, we must be patient in working with all people, and we must be compassionate. We must understand that there are people around us with disabilities, some of which are easily seen and some of which, like mental illness or infertility, can be hidden deep below a person’s surface. To be truly inclusive, we must be willing to change and to be changed by others.

A few weeks ago, the turmoil at Gallaudet University, ostensibly over the objection by students to the appointment of the university’s next president, exposed a larger debate within the deaf community over how to respond to disabilities. The argument centered on whether disabilities should be understood as a medical—or accommodationist—paradigm or as a community—or inclusion—paradigm.

In the medical paradigm, disabilities are viewed as obstacles that must be overcome, and the community is called upon to accommodate. The goal is to help people to overcome their disabilities so that they can be a part of what we do. The medical model looks to build ramps and provide accommodations to allow them to feel welcome in our community. Accommodation is important, but it fails to truly expand community. Joshua Walker, a Gallaudet sophomore, signed his disdain for this approach to a reporter for the New York Times: “In some way, you’re saying deaf people are not good enough; they need to be fixed. But I don’t need to be fixed. My brain works fine.”

The time has come to stretch beyond accommodation and to strive for the truly inclusive community, where the goal is to remove the boundaries between them and us. We can do more than accommodate. We can strive to be truly open, to be willing to be changed, to truly include others, with everything that inclusion entails. Unlike accommodation, which becomes unnecessary once certain changes are made, the process of building inclusive community never ends. There is always more we can do.

Parashat Vayera describes Abraham as the paradigm of hospitality and inclusiveness. The parashah begins with Abraham sitting at the entrance to his tent, waiting for guests to arrive so he might welcome them. A midrash wonders why Abraham had to wait by the entrance to the tent. Why couldn’t he simply go about his business and wait for a needy person to knock?

For the poor who had become accustomed to receiving bread and charity and who were not embarrassed by it, there was no need to wait; they would find the way themselves. However, often there was among them a “wayfarer,” a person who would approach the door and then back away and then approach again. Each time he would change his mind and back away, going the way he came. He did not have the courage to enter and stretch out his hand. Abraham waited at the entrance precisely for these kinds of people.

In the accommodation paradigm for disability awareness, our responsibility is only to meet the needs of those who knock and say they want to enter. The inclusion model—the community paradigm—implies us to go further, to be compas-
sionate even when the need is not explicitly defined, to seek to include people who may not already be knocking on the door, and to be willing to expand the definition of community, to be changed by people with special needs or new perspectives or diverse skill levels. The Talmud goes further still:

Rabbi Hama bar Hanina said: That same day, the third day after Abraham’s circumcision, God took the sun from its case and made it shine with intense heat so that no guests should bother the righteous man while he was recovering. Abraham sent his servant Eliezer outside to look for guests and Eliezer went out and (of course) didn’t find anyone. Abraham said, “I don’t believe you,” and so he went to see for himself. (Bava Metzia 86b, Quoted by Dov Peretz Elkins, from weekly e-Newsletter, DOV-ray TORAH. Used by permission of Growth Associates Publishers - Email: Office@JewishGrowth.org)

The creation of a truly open and inclusive community is never complete. Like Abraham, if we think we’ve welcomed everyone, we must go out and look for more people who can sustain the dynamism of the community.

At B’nai Israel, the mission of our special needs committee is not limited to creating physical accommodations in the synagogue. It is concerned with strengthening community on all its diverse levels. The committee provides a forum where we can reflect on our inclusiveness, build awareness about the various needs that exist so that we can all become more sensitive, and initiate programs that include more people in the process of building community.

This year the committee is working on a special “buddy system” project called the Chaverim Connection. More than ramps or hearing aids or large print prayer books, this program builds relationships among members of our community with specific disabilities and others in the community. The program does more than accommodate. It aims to destroy the barrier between us and them, so that our united community will be stronger.

The psalmist wrote “shiviti Adonai lenegdi tamid—I will place the Lord before me always.” Shiviti, translated as “I will place,” shares a root with the word shaveh, which means “equal.” The Baal Shem Tov understands the verse not as “I will place the Lord before me,” but as “All are equal to me because the Lord is before me always.” When we are truly aware that everyone, regardless of their needs or disabilities, is both connected and unified in purpose and essence, only then can we become content with ourselves. Only then can we become a kehilah kedoshah, a holy community.

In honor of Disability Awareness Shabbat, I conclude with a prayer, written by Isaac Mozeson, that highlights the blessings of a truly inclusive community where all people are recognized and valued:

Living God,
Help me always to feel
Like the blind, to see
Like the deaf, to hear
Like the mute, and to love
Like the dying.

Following the model of Abraham, may we always be inclusive of, willing to learn from, and strengthened by one another.
Saying Yes: The Story of Max Rubin and the Neve Shalom Nursery School
by Sheri Rose Rubin

This idea came to mind after dropping Max off at school after an early morning doctor’s appointment. He arrived after all the other children and the minute we walked through the door, children came running over and saying hello and a few even hugged and kissed him. The class had been wondering where Max was and hoping he would be in school.

I left him there that morning with my heart so big and full with not only pride and love for Max and all he has accomplished, but also with gratitude and awe for what Neve Shalom Nursery School has done.

At that moment, I knew that this is a story that should be documented. It is a story about what happens when one person has the courage and optimism to just say, “YES.”

Yes…to what you might be wondering. Well, at the age of 2 ½ when most of the children in our neighborhood were getting ready for nursery school, Max’s cerebral palsy was getting severely in the way of…just about everything. However, while his cerebral palsy was, and still is, significantly limiting, Max seemed to us to be like any other child.

We first asked ourselves whether he could or should go to nursery school. Everyone we asked from “the establishment” said of course he could go to school but that he would be enrolled in the one school district nursery school program for children with disabilities.

That wasn’t exactly what we were looking for. We wanted him to go to Neve Shalom, the local community nursery school our daughter and all of our friends’ children attended.

One brave morning, we asked the Neve Shalom Nursery School Director to meet with us and … SHE became, in that instant, the first of many courageous and optimistic people who said YES to all of all our questions:

Are you even willing to meet with us? Are you willing to consider him? Is it OK if we bring four therapists with us to the first meeting? Is it OK if he comes for half the time? Is it OK if he brings his own chair? His own floor mat, his own cup, his own spoon? Can he play with the other children outside? Can he come in a wheelchair? Can you build him a new playground that is accessible? Can you buy new tables? Can you make the old ones taller? Can he stay longer, he loves it so much? Can you answer the thousands of questions the school district has for you? Can you accept what they are willing to pay? Can you let him come different days, different times? Can you allow therapists to come in and out all day long? Can you move the furniture? Can you open a new bathroom for him? Can you help feed him? Can you help him to become independent? Can you tolerate our tears? Can you tolerate a few of his? Can you hire a new teacher? Can you hire a new aide? Can you change the daily schedule? Can you change his days again? Can you accept him for the summer? Can you teach the children love and kindness and tolerance and patience? Can you make him ready for Kindergarten? Can he play soccer?

Can you show him nothing but love and kindness?

The ONLY answer we ever heard was YES … and that is why four-year-old Max Rubin is the first disabled child to be fully and completely included in the Neve Shalom Nursery School and why he now has friends and play dates and soccer and is planning for Kindergarten in September and how a whole community of children, teachers and families came to truly and completely understand inclusion and acceptance and respect for the differences of others.

Schools and parents and synagogues and churches and community centers need to see what happens when just one person says “YES” and how one small school managed to make it better for EVERYONE.
Including Those with Disabilities in a Caring Community
by Nathan Weissler

“He is very verbal and has come a long way in being able to talk about things that bother him,” my parents wrote of me when I was seven. However, to understand their comment requires going back a few years. When I was four, I was diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome, an impairment that, among other things, makes certain language and social skills challenging for me.

There are both positive and negative aspects to having Asperger Syndrome. Like most people with this impairment, I have intense special interests which, for me, have been American and Jewish history in addition to opera. These interests have enriched my life. However, the intensity of these interests also makes it quite difficult for me to focus on new and different subjects.

Socializing comfortably, especially with others my age, remains a constant challenge. As a result, I am often quite lonely. The positive connotation, however, is that I use my energy and time to write, study and think. I think differently than many people, which gives me a unique perspective on the world that can lead to new insights. However, it sometimes makes it difficult for me to correctly interpret what other people mean.

Finally, on the negative side, I have great difficulties with lack of structure and routine. I get upset with unanticipated changes in routine and certainly am uncomfortable with a lack of structure. To avoid upset, therefore, I help keep things organized in my household and help keep my Mom on track!

Because I often feel vulnerable, I identify with minorities. I did a fundraising project last summer to help elderly Jews in the former Soviet Union and was appalled that their government had treated them so harshly for decades. It is this same dedication that motivates me to advocate for those with Asperger Syndrome and other disabilities.

In addition to empathizing with minorities, I have felt like a minority in the community for several years. In my early childhood, I attended the Torah School at Adat Shalom but struggled to fit in. I was uninterested in the material we were learning because it was not presented to me in a way I found interesting. I was also uninterested in forming relationships with the other students and since I naturally make friends with adults, I made friends with my teachers instead. Therefore, I would especially like to thank my wonderful teacher my last year of Torah School and her then-teenaged daughter for the effort they took to try to help me be comfortable in class. But unfortunately my parents decided that it just wasn’t working. I then started receiving Jewish education from a private tutor whom I became very close to. She ultimately tutored me for my bar mitzvah and we still talk occasionally on the phone.

Despite the tutoring I was receiving, I still found it difficult to come to synagogue and take an active role in the community because I felt out of place. I was uninterested in Judaism because the material was again not presented to me in an interesting and understandable way. Learning Hebrew was very difficult for me. However, I became more interested in Jewish learning as my bar mitzvah approached. I knew I wanted to merge my interests in modern American history with learning my parashah. That seemed difficult to do. However, after discovering that my parashah was Ha’azinu, which consists of Moses’ last speech, I decided to write a d’var Torah comparing and contrasting Moses and Robert F. Kennedy’s last speeches. I had a passionate interest in Kennedy and most significantly like Moses, Kennedy died after giving his last speech. There were many wonderful aspects to this d’var Torah, but the best part was the positive feedback I received. I was also thrilled when my speech was published as a Community Voices article in the Washington Jewish Week in June 2006. I have continued using my strengths to play an active role in the community. I have written articles for the Scroll as well as Letters to the Editor of various Jewish newspapers.

The Jewish community also needs to do a lot more for people with disabilities. Jewish day schools need to have adequate
accommodations for special needs students. I have wanted for a long time to attend a Jewish day school that can provide me with the support I need. Therefore, I am thrilled that I will be attending the special needs program at the Hebrew Academy this coming school year which is appropriately called “Sulam” meaning ladder in Hebrew. Non-special needs students should especially be taught to have empathy for people with disabilities.

Why should the organized Jewish community help those with disabilities? Because we have so much to offer the mainstream community and can see things no one else can see. I hope some of you will feel just as passionately as I do about helping not only those with disabilities but any minority group.

Thank you and Shabbat Shalom.

Nathan Weissler is 19 years old and lives in Chevy Chase. This is adapted from a talk given at Shabbat services at his synagogue, Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation in Bethesda on August 2, 2008. He was diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome at age four and is a 9th grader at the Sulam program at the Melvin J. Berman Hebrew Academy in Rockville. He can be reached at nathan.weissler@hotmail.com.
Inclusion in the Jewish Community: Dianne’s Story
by Rabbi Dianne Cohler-Esses, Scholar-in-Residence, UJA-Federation of New York

“[P]articularly the stranger in all her or his difference, who, because we were strangers in Egypt, deserves special goodness for life or at least until the end of strangeness.”
—Grace Paley, “Midrash on Happiness”

It is a truism that people are uncomfortable with those who are profoundly unlike them. Of course. We all are. We move away from the person on the street who yells obscenities to no one in particular. We stare at those who are disfigured. Walking down the street, the person marked by burns or missing limbs catches my eye. I look with fascination, repulsion, sympathy, fear and curiosity. What is it like for them to be so disfigured? What would it be like for me? Would I be able to, like them, go out into the world each day, show my disfigured face to the world, and function?

My son, Eli, has a significant impairment. As a parent of a child with special needs, I am faced daily, in my most intimate sphere, with profound difference. These differences are not of the bodily variety—there is no external disfigurement. In fact, Eli is a most beautiful child. Rather, it is the sort of impairment that manifests developmentally, behaviorally and socially. Some of these differences are quite charming and not so personally challenging. When my son, for example, meets someone named John, he, a Beatles lover, will ask them, “Are you John Lemon” (he means John Lennon). Others are interesting: “When will be the end of Eli?” he asks often, preoccupied with death. “Is this the beginning of Eli, the middle of Eli, or the end of Eli?”

Eli doesn’t have the same social filters other children his age have, filters that come from knowing what’s appropriate to say, when and to whom. Furthermore, for him, there isn’t always a sharp line between reality and fantasy, between story and day-to-day existence. When a stranger on the train asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up, instead of saying something typical, like wanting to be an astronaut or some such dream grounded in a modicum of reality, Eli excitedly replied, “I want to fly like Icarus into the sun!” These are the moments I delight in my son, and I can pretend that he doesn’t have disabilities at all. Rather, I say to myself: He’s a quirky kid. He’s imaginative. He moves to the beat of his own drum.

But there are other moments that don’t allow me to be so closeted from—and in denial of—my son’s disabilities, times when I feel like cringing and wish the floor would swallow me up. Like when he begins to rock back and forth for no apparent reason in public; or when he touches another child inappropriately, not understanding the impact of his touch. Or when he lays on the floor, or begins to crawl. These are the differences I am ashamed of. These are the differences I wish would go away. Not only for his sake, but also for my and my family’s.

A traditional Jew and a rabbi, I continually search sacred text for support and guidance in how to deal with the difficult fact of my son’s disabilities. Why did this happen to him, to us as a family? To those questions, I find no answer. Certain sacred narratives, however, allow me to shift from “Why me?” to “How do I understand it?” The primary and most relevant teaching I find is that we are all created in the image of God. Eli then, according to Genesis 1:27, is, exactly as he is, a reflection of the Divine Creator. In fact, his full name, Elichai, means “my God is living.” The more comfortable I become with my son’s “different” behavior, the more I come to understand another aspect—another, so to speak, face of God. This practice has borne fruit. Not only does it allow me to love my son more fully, but it also allows me to carry inside me an understanding that preserves his dignity as well as my family’s dignity in the face of those who are visibly uncomfortable or repulsed by him. Indeed, the more I am able to accept him
as he is, and love him as he is, the more my own sense of self as created in the image of God deepens and expands. From a divine perspective, the whole person, including his or her disabilities, reflects God as much as any other person does. Disabilities, with the rest of human being, are, from a Godly perspective, simply divine.

However, as powerful and transformative as these texts are, our community is not yet informed by these guiding texts. For many parents of children with disabilities, community can become the very occasion for the most acute pain. In community, difference and discomfort often become exclusion, and not because others mean to exclude. To give a personal example, there are no other children in my synagogue community who would, at this point, naturally seek out a play date with my son. Families with “normal” children of the same age invite one another over so children can play and adults can talk, but my family has not yet been figured into that equation. This is not malicious, and it actually, on some level, makes sense—my son, at this point, does not know how to play appropriately with his peers. But it yields the unwitting exclusion of our family from certain webs of connection. Or at least I experience it as such. And this exclusion can be painful for families like mine who yearn for their community to be their home, despite disabilities, despite differences, despite discomfort. How do we, as a Jewish community, begin to address this, the fact of strangeness in our midst?

I believe we need to start by asking a range of questions—religious, personal and communal. How does each of us feel about disabilities, physical or otherwise? How do we then respond? What might we learn about ourselves from contact with others who have disabilities? How might we see the world differently if we consciously begin to use the lens that each human being is created in the image of God?

Might families with children or adults with disabilities feel excluded or alienated in your community? How can you find out? Are you willing to talk with those families to find out, or perhaps invite them over for Shabbat? Are you willing to ask yourselves, as members of a community, how profoundly uncomfortable you are with these differences and how you respond, given that discomfort? Are children with disabilities welcome in a children’s service? In an adult service? Are adults with disabilities fully integrated into services? What resources does a synagogue need to ensure that every family member is included as much as possible?

How do we, as a Jewish community, begin to address this—the fact of strangeness in our midst? Religiously, this is crucial: the Jewish system of mitzvot, one can say, turns on the axis of memory, the memory that we were, each one of us, strangers in a strange land. As it is written in Devarim 10:19, “And you shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” And with this injunction, turn to the strangers in your midst and you, too, will be brought closer to the face of God.
Purchase large-print or Braille prayer books.

Provide large-print prayer books.

Add a ramp or electric chair lift to your stage or elevated bimah.

Produce large-print or Braille newsletters and other congregational notices and correspondence.

Hire a certified, licensed sign language interpreter for services, classes or special events.

Hire an extra interpreter to serve as an usher for large programs or services.

Purchase a TDD/TTY for phone calls to or from a deaf person.

Provide transportation to/from programs or services for people who cannot leave their homes.

Provide 1:1 support for children or adults whose behavior may require such in order to participate.

Transport a child who uses a wheelchair to a second-floor classroom (with no elevator).

Create a separate youth group for children with special needs.

Use the office copier to enlarge the specific pages of Shabbat and holiday services. Order Braille prayer books from Jewish Braille Institute International in New York.

Attach full-page plastic magnifiers with a cord or ribbon inside a number of prayer books that are available upon request.

In an auditorium/theater, place a microphone on the floor with a lower podium for someone using a wheelchair. In a congregation, place a Torah reading table in front of the first row of seats and conduct Torah services from there.

Produce enlarged versions and/or CD’s of newsletters and other correspondence for individuals who have vision impairment.

Visit the local college that offers sign language interpreter training to seek an affordable teacher or advanced student. Hire an extra interpreter to serve as an usher for large programs or services.

Train ushers to greet individuals who are deaf and guide them to reserved seating for those people using an interpreter. If necessary, provide ushers with a printed statement to communicate with someone who is not able to hear.

Most deaf people will contact you by e-mail or use the government-mandated “relay system” for phone calls. Train your office staff to use the “relay system.”

Arrange for a speaker phone at that person’s home and arrange for them to hear the program or services.

If a student, arrange for tutoring in that person’s home or supervised residence. Train teens to provide this support to earn service learning hours, even for recreational situations.

Relocate that child’s classroom to the first floor, even if only for one year, to accommodate that need.

They don’t want separate youth groups. Train the youth group leader and volunteers to provide the necessary supports for inclusion.