

**"All Israel is responsible for one another."  
(Shavuot 39a)**

### **Starting A Liheyot Committee In Your Congregation**

*"How can we afford it?"* That is one of the most frequently asked questions when a congregational board is discussing ways to make its synagogue a welcoming place for children and adults with disabilities. Too often the money issue clouds everything else, but it need not. To win the battle of the pocketbook, it is first necessary to win the battle of the heart. Here are some suggestions to help you make your synagogue "handicap accessible:"

1) Ask your rabbi to deliver a sermon on inclusion and the need to have a facility where all Jews, irrespective of their capability or disability, can participate in all temple activities. It is essential to obtain the full support of your rabbi in achieving the goals of Liheyot. Your rabbi's expressions of support for this project signify its importance to your congregation.

2) Search out members of your congregation who either have a disability or have a family member who has a disability. Others who would make valuable committee members are those who have expressed an interest in the inclusion of persons with disabilities. Try to enlist at least one Board member to serve on the committee.

3) Meet with the Board president and, if possible, the executive committee to recommend the establishment of a Liheyot committee as a permanent committee of the Board. Request the president's support for the work of the committee and the naming of a dedicated Board member to chair it.

4) Make a thorough survey of the areas of need and the cost of each project. Be realistic in your estimates and try to involve lay members of the congregation who have expertise in the areas of architecture, construction, programming and fund raising.

5) Become part of every Board meeting and, at each of those meetings, try to present at least one or more personal stories of the need for accessibility. This may be a story about an elderly congregant who was unable to ascend to the bima for a grandchild's bar mitzvah, an adult who is hearing impaired who could not hear the services, or a child in a wheelchair who could not use a bathroom because it lacked a wide enough stall. The more examples involving actual congregants which you can share with the Board, the more they will understand the need to address the issues of inclusion.

6) Prioritize the areas of need. Do not try to implement all of the changes at once, but insist that the long-range plan and capital budget include modifications and changes to make the synagogue handicap accessible. If the leadership of the congregation, with the urging of the rabbi, is convinced of the need to do this work, it will get done. Once the first project is successfully completed, the others will follow.

7) Be sure to publicize each change as it occurs, not only to the congregation, but to the community at large. It is something that most local newspapers will be happy to report. Include the names of people who assisted in bringing about the improvements.

8) Most importantly, seek funding from outside sources. In every community, there are small foundations among whose areas of concern are to improve the lives of persons who have disabilities. Some funding sources may even have been established or are controlled by members of your congregation. With a well-prepared approach, perhaps focusing on a specific project which could carry the donor's name upon conclusion, you will find a sympathetic ear.

In summary, by getting the support of the Board president and the rabbi, by keeping the issues of inclusion before the Board at all times, by working in carefully planned stages and by going to outside sources for financial assistance, you can make your congregation a welcoming place for children and adults who have disabling conditions.