

**"You shall not curse the deaf nor shall you put  
a stumbling block before the blind."  
(Leviticus 19:14)**

### **More Than A Ramp: Removing Barriers To Full Participation**

*Liheyot: Access to Judaism* is a project of the UAHC that was created to fulfill the biblical injunction: "God's house shall be called a house of prayer for ALL people." The community of Jews includes children and adults who have mental or physical disabilities, sensory impairments and mobility handicaps, attentional deficits, learning disabilities and emotional disorders. Being Jewish has, throughout the ages, meant being "different." This history should encourage us as individuals and institutions to choose a way of life that places *rachmanut* (compassion), *gemilut chassidim* (deeds of loving kindness), and *tzedakah* at the very center of our lives. We must seek to advocate the aforementioned as reflecting Reform Judaism's historic commitment to prophetic Judaism. We must, therefore, make every reasonable effort toward reaching this goal of full inclusion for children and adults who are different, disabled, or impaired.

For our temples to provide such support and opportunities, it is important that *all Jews* must be able to access our facilities; and, once inside, they must be able to navigate and participate in as comfortable and unrestricted manner as possible. For those in the process of building a *new facility*, it is neither difficult nor restrictively expensive to provide a full range of modifications to permit full accessibility. All that is necessary is planning and commitment. With the passage of the Americans With Disabilities Act (1990), all architects are well-versed in making the necessary accommodations.

For those in an *older facility*, the job of becoming truly accessible may seem overwhelming, but our tradition teaches us, "*Lo alecha hamlichah ligmor*," that we must not allow the enormity of the task to prevent us from undertaking it. If we approach this task with a well-organized plan, we find that even our older buildings can be made highly accessible without outrageous expense or laborious effort. Here are some examples of "common sense" modifications:

- 1) In order to make a drinking fountain accessible, it may not be necessary to replace an old fixture. Simply provide a paper cup dispenser next to the fountain at a convenient level for a person using a wheelchair.
- 2) Instead of retrofitting both men's and women's restrooms to make them wheelchair accessible, select one restroom nearest the sanctuary to be adapted to become a unisex (or family) restroom which includes a wide stall, wheel-under sink and lowered towel dispenser. Besides the person who uses a wheelchair, this restroom benefits families with infants and small children in strollers.
- 3) If you have a pay phone which is placed too high for a wheelchair user, the phone company will lower it to the appropriate height for you. Adding a chair nearby for unimpaired persons will make it more comfortable for them as well.
- 4) Purchasing a TDD (telephone device for the deaf and disabled), a small modem which is plugged into any phone line, allows for ease of communication between those who are hard of hearing or deaf and your synagogue staff. It is inexpensive and easy to use.
- 5) Placing an additional mezzuzah at wheelchair level is a simple but much appreciated symbol of your desire to open your doors to every Jew. Braille copies of "Gates of Prayer" are available from the Union publishers; enlarged copies of pages of prayer can be made on your own photocopier machines and made available to congregants who need large print.

6) Building a ramp to the entrance of the building or to the bima is vital. In older buildings, you have several choices including building a permanent or portable ramp or purchasing a wheel- chair lift to place next to the bima. By providing an alternative to stairs, you provide assistance not just to those in wheelchairs but also to the elderly, those who use walkers, crutches or canes, and those who are herding a family of children (including one in a stroller) into the building or up to the bima for a blessing.

To achieve a barrier-free building requires thought and planning as well as the commitment to make your synagogue truly welcoming to every Jewish child and adult. You will find that the benefits far exceed the efforts put into the removal of barriers.

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