

An Infrastructure for Inclusion of People with Disabilities

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Since I can take no credit, I like to brag about our Temple's architecture. I call it "Seventies done right!" That may sound like an oxymoron, but it's a compliment. I grew up in a house that my parents built in 1972, and the colors and styles of that era appeal to me. While some aspects of seventies architecture can feel dated, our Temple has stood the test of time. Orange and purple don't always go together in the way they did a half century ago, but they are magnificent in our sanctuary.

I first visited Congregation B'nai Israel for SWARR, a regional rabbinical convention, not long after the Clinton Library opened, but I don't recall paying special attention to the building, aside from the beauty of the Sanctuary. When I returned in January 2013, though, as a candidate to become your rabbi, I was immediately struck by the lengths to which the congregation had gone to redress the central disadvantage of 1970s architecture: all those split levels, which had previously made much of the building inaccessible to people with physical disabilities. Both the elevator lifts and the ramp to make the sanctuary *bimah* accessible must have been costly. They were constructed at the same time as the Tenenbaum Center, the Mendel Amphitheater, and the part of the building that includes the youth lounge and archives. Those new spaces were far more attractive causes for celebration than lifts of a ramp. As grateful as I am for those beautiful additions, accessibility was the most important part of the work done on this building in 2008-9.

This week's Torah portion, *Parashat Tzav*, does not seem to be about inclusion of people with disabilities. Instead, it is full of often-excruciating detail about sacrifices in the ancient Temple. Writing in *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, Rabbi Ruti Regan observes: "Doing the right and necessary thing can be expensive. Those who brought grain offerings were required to use the highest quality flour, investing a valuable resource into sustaining the sanctuary. In the words of [the medieval commentator] Ibn Ezra, 'It is not fitting to offer a meal offering to the Most High that is not of the highest quality.'"ⁱ Rabbi Regan derives a lesson from the requirement that offerings be valuable: "In the times of the ancient sacrifices and today, desire to proclaim our sacred values is not enough. We have to put our money where our mouth is."ⁱⁱ More than a decade ago, before I came here, Congregation B'nai Israel, its leaders and donors, articulated a value of

including people with mobility disabilities, and they did so through sacred architecture, not merely through proclaiming principles.

Those principles are clear and well known to us. As Rabbi Regan writes, “The Torah teaches us that we are all created in God’s image.” She quickly adds, though, that “our communities do not always treat everyone equally. All too often, Jews with disabilities are excluded from both Jewish and secular spaces or treated unequally within them.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Rabbi Regan turns back to the Torah portion to ask us to pay attention to the details. She writes that “seemingly small details can make the difference between a sacred offering and an offensive offering,” quoting the Leviticus injunction that requires that a sacrifice be eaten, but that forbids eating it beyond the second day, going so far as to label the eating of that meat on the third day “offensive.”^{iv}

Rabbi Regan “is an associate at the Harvard Law School Project on Disability, where she researches Jewish ritual and innovation. She is a practical and theoretical educator on disability issues and works with individuals and communities to build capacity to embody inclusive values.”^v Like several of the contributors to *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, she taught me, the editor, about a subject about which I was largely ignorant or to which I had given insufficient thought.

Focusing on how getting the details wrong can be “offensive,” Rabbi Regan writes, “For example, if someone who needs an electronic format is repeatedly offered large print instead, they may be completely unable to read class materials. Similarly, videos automatically captioned with voice recognition software are not accessible to people who rely on captions. It is necessary to correct the captions and make sure that every word is accurate so that people can understand it. Even with the best of intentions, offerings that fail to facilitate access ... are offensive, and we are responsible for the consequences.”^{vi}

Rabbi Regan has made me conscious of accessibility issues, even in our congregation, despite significant investment in accessibility. One example is the *bimah*. Yes, it can be reached via that ramp over there. However, I wonder how many even of our regular worshipers know that. I have been here nine years, and I have never seen that ramp used for handicapped accessibility to the *bimah*. As I was told when given a tour in early 2013, we would have to make a path through the musicians’ area for a wheelchair to navigate it. I have little doubt that we would do that, if a person in a wheelchair needed to get to the *bimah*. However, since it is never used that way, people don’t consider it a possibility. For example, when I have offered a High Holy Day reading part to a wheelchair-bound

congregant, they have preferred to wheel to the front of the sanctuary and have me bring them the microphone.

I have often said that we would offer sign interpretation if we had a worshiper who needed it—and again, I don’t doubt that we would. However, I wonder: Does our failure to offer sign interpretation make hearing-impaired people think that Congregation B’nai Israel is not for them? To make the point more positively: LGBTQ folks and people of color who cross our threshold can see that sexual orientation, gender identity, family structure, and race are not barriers to full participation in our *kehillah k’doshah*, our holy community. It can’t be a coincidence that a significant percentage of our conversion candidates are LGBTQ or people of color but are not people with disabilities.

Congregation B’nai Israel is so good at the details—our finances are impeccably managed, our building is cared for meticulously, and our worship and music are planned carefully. When we make mistakes—and we do, since even careful attention to detail cannot prevent all errors—we acknowledge those mistakes honestly and work to correct them.

Our ancestors were careful with the details of Temple sacrifices. Still, they made mistakes, and they brought offerings to remedy the resulting ruptures in their relationships with God. I have learned from Rabbi Regan that we have work to do, some of it potentially very costly, to correct our own mistakes and to get the details right in ways that say to people with disabilities, “You belong here.” I know that this *kehillah k’doshah*, this holy community, will do no less.

Amen.

ⁱRabbi Ruti Regan, “Sacred Work Requires Infrastructures: Including People with Disabilities,” *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, New York: CCAR Press, 2021, p. 148.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Regan, p. 147.

^{iv} Regan, p. 149.

^v *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, p. 360.

^{vi} Regan, p. 150.