

Make Me a Sanctuary & Come In
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I love how the rabbis of old imagined the sanctuary as a tent. The first prayer spaces were portable tents. For those of you who have done some camping, you know that tents can be an inviting space. A tent has a strong center that holds it up, it provides shelter from the elements (most of the time), it is a place of refuge and rest, a place for deep conversations, there's often food and drink nearby, and it has an open door that implies, "come in." A good synagogue, like a good tent, should be all of these things to everyone who enters. (From *The Spirituality of Welcoming*, Dr. Ron Wolfson)

Every morning when we enter the sanctuary in prayer, we recite the words from Torah, "How good are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel. *Ma Tovv ohalecha Yaakov mishkenotecha Yisrael.*" (Numbers 24:5) A good sanctuary should be open and accessible to all who seek to connect with God and Jewish community.

But how accessible are our sanctuaries and synagogues, really? Can all hear what is being said? Can all read what is in print? Can everyone enter the building? Are there convenient places to sit? Can everyone access the *bima* and come close to the Torah? Are all students able to learn Hebrew and become bar or bat mitzvah? While we are fortunate here at Temple Beth David to have a relatively accessible building, if you stop and think about it, you will notice that in some areas our responses falls short.

Last summer I was meeting with a father whose family was potentially interested in joining our temple. After getting to know each other a little he asked, how accommodating is the religious school to special needs? He explained that his son has some significant special learning needs and attends a specialized school program that has many resources to assist him. We spoke for a while on that occasion, and many times after that as he tried to determine if Temple Beth David could accommodate his family.

Thanks to the dedicated work of our Religious School Committee last year, I was able to reply that we could offer several learning options. Last year Temple Beth David's religious school applied for a grant and coaching through the Gateways organization in Boston. Gateways' mission is to provide access to Jewish education for children with all kinds of learning styles and needs. The committee reflected on different ways that people learn and how our religious school could not just be a one size fits all approach. Thankfully, this child, although he has some hard days, as we all do, is thriving in our temple community along with his family's support. Last week he proudly showed off how he has learned the Hebrew letters.

For the past ten years, February has been considered Jewish Disability Awareness and Inclusion Month. So it is a good time to be thinking about these questions. This month is dedicated to making sure that our Jewish communities are open and welcoming. Inclusion means every person gets to determine where, how, and when he or she participates in the life of the community. Organizations need to commit to supporting each individual on their journey. People with disabilities and differences can and should

make decisions about how they want to participate in Jewish life, and they should have options before them.

Inclusion advocate, Shelly Christensen writes, “Let us change our thinking. Don’t do things *for* people with disabilities; do them *with* people with disabilities. Jewish Disability Awareness and Inclusion Month is a renewal of our commitment to supporting people with disabilities to belong. Let the momentum take us through the next 11 months and build a genuinely inclusive community.” (*Where Are We Now? 10 Years of Jewish Disability Awareness in Inclusion Month*, URJ.org)

I want to share with you how heartened I am by the recent inclusion efforts here at Beth David. Did you know that we have a new inclusion committee? Thanks to the dedicated work of co-chairs, Immediate Past President David Wang and Connie Rizoli, along with eight other members of our synagogue community, we have recently engaged in a process of reflection and hopefully partnership with the Ruderman Synagogue Inclusion Project. We took an inventory of our synagogue and have committed to an action plan to make our temple more inclusive. We recently attended a program with other synagogues that are committed to this holy work. Over the coming year and beyond, we will especially be looking at hearing and visual aids, *bima* accessibility, temple communications, and accessible education for all ages and stages. It is an exciting time and we are fortunate to live in the Boston area surrounded by these resources.

If the work of synagogue inclusion is new to you, please check the upcoming temple Shofar newsletter and our website (<http://templebethdavid.net/community/inclusion/>) for updates about our inclusion efforts, as well as the Ruderman Family Foundation (<https://rudermanfoundation.org/>) for the amazing work that they are doing and funding, locally and abroad.

I, along with Rabbi Micah, firmly believe in the vision of an inclusive synagogue. We want to open our doors wider and welcome more people in. Our synagogues today are more diverse than ever. We have different backgrounds, orientations and abilities. One size, shape or color does not fit all. We need to look at both physical and mental health. Inclusion is not just about special needs and disabilities. The more we can move to a non-judgmental culture of yes rather than no, a culture of accessibility and welcome where everyone knows that this is how we do things here, the more included we will all feel. And as Jewish tradition teaches, we are all created “*B’tzelem Elohim*, in God’s image.” (Genesis 1:27) There is something sacred within each of us.

It is fitting that *Parashat Terumah*, the weekly Torah portion *Terumah*, falls during this month. The portion opens with God instructing the Israelites, “Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts; you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart so moves him.” (Exodus 25:2) And then a few verses later, “Let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them. *V’asu li mikdash v’shachanti b’tocham.*” (25:8) Let them make me a sanctuary, a holy place for all to draw near to God.

To conclude, I would like to share one of my favorite commentaries on this Torah portion, focusing on the part about how God accepted gifts from each person. The Hasidic commentator imagines the process of building the *mishkan*, this holy sanctuary

as follows: In the building of the tabernacle, all Israel joined in their hearts; no one felt superior to his fellow. At first, each skilled individual did his own part of the construction, and it seemed to each one that his own work was extraordinary. Afterward, they saw how their contributions to the service of the tabernacle were integrated—all the boards, sockets, curtains, and loops fit together as if one person had done it all. Then they realized how each depended on the other. Then they understood that what they had accomplished was not only by virtue of their own skill alone, but that the Holy One had guided the hands of everyone who had worked on the tabernacle. They had joined in completing its master building plans, so that, “It came to pass that the tabernacle was one” (Exodus 36:13). (Hasidic commentary, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner)

In their joint effort, the Israelites created not only the *mishkan*, but a strong sense of community. Everyone brought what he or she was able, and everyone relied upon each other. This month, let us pledge to take a closer look at our temple with an eye to toward accessibility and inclusion of all who seek to belong. Let us look out for one another and lift each other up. How good and warm is our Beth David tent, our holy space. Let us come together and recognize the sacred gifts that each of us brings. Our community will be stronger for it.

Song: Sanctuary

V'asu li mikdash v'shachanti b'tocham.

O Lord prepare me, to be a Sanctuary, pure and holy, tried and true
and with thanksgiving, I'll be a living, Sanctuary for You.