

THE POWER  
OF BELONGING

WELCOMING  
JEWS WITH  
DISABILITIES  
INTO JEWISH  
COMMUNAL LIFE

By Bayla Sheva Brenner

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Can you imagine a world devoid of people in wheelchairs and absent of the blind, deaf, developmentally disabled and hearing impaired? Easy—visit most synagogues, *mikvaot* and Jewish community centers in North America.

According to the 2000 US Census, 49.7 million people (nearly one in five) have some sort of disability. This statistic applies to the Jewish community as well. It makes one wonder—where are all the Jews with disabilities? Blame it on ignorance and insensitivity, but the fact remains: Too many intellectually and physically challenged Jews live lives behind closed doors, shut away from the joys of Jewish communal life.

Over the past two decades, the Jewish community has made tremendous strides in integrating people with disabilities. This is especially true of the Jewish community's educational system. "Of the 700 or so *yeshivot* and day schools in America, you would be hard-pressed to find an elementary school that does not have a resource room program," says Dr. Jeffrey Lichtman, director of OU's Yachad/National Jewish Council for Disabilities (NJCD), which is dedicated to addressing the needs of all individuals with disabilities.

Yet, integrating Jews with disabilities into other areas of communal life has not been the Jewish community's focus. "Disability awareness is really the newest area of social activism for the country and for the Jewish community," says Dr. Lichtman.

## If Stairs Could Speak

Ironically, the most visibly disabled population, those in wheelchairs, could very well be the most overlooked. They would tell you that if stairs could speak, they would say, “No!”

Twenty-five years ago, long before accessibility entered the American consciousness, the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, in New York, built a new synagogue with a ramp for every incline. A few years later, the shul added another ramp leading to the bimah.

“A young man in the community became a paraplegic,” relates Rabbi Avi Weiss, *rav* of the shul. “At my son’s Bar Mitzvah, I asked him to come up for an *aliyah*. He could not come on his own to the bimah and refused to be lifted. He said, ‘When I come to the Torah, I will come on my own, with dignity or not at all.’” Rabbi Weiss had the ramp to the bimah installed with funds raised by his congregants. “People will always give to a project that makes sense,” he says.



*Dr. Shmuel M. Gedwiser of Brookline, Massachusetts, loves to dance at weddings. He maneuvers his wheelchair before the bride and groom and spins around as an expression of simchat chatan vekallah. On the back of his wheelchair hangs a sign that says it all, “Ket zad merakdin lifnei hakallah—Dance in front of the kallah any way you can.” Photo: Dr. Irving Ehrlich*

“Growing up, I can tell you there were no synagogues in my area that were accessible [to people with disabilities],” says Chava Willig Levy, a writer, editor and lecturer who lives in Long Island, New York. “At my mother’s *levayah* [funeral] fourteen years ago, I remember being carried up in my wheelchair twenty or more steps. A year ago, my father passed away, and the *levayah* was held in the same shul. I expected the same situation. When I got to the front of the building, a friend informed me that the shul now had a ramp.” Levy, who contracted polio at age three, credits the community for the change.

Before observant Jews consider putting down roots in any community, the two musts are mikvah and minyan. However, many individuals with

physical disabilities have to do without these essentials.

Close to thirty years ago, shortly after a new mikvah opened in the West Rogers Park section of Chicago, a member of the *kehillah* became disabled. The community raised the funds to install a manually operated hydraulic lift (commonly used in rehabilitation facilities for the disabled). To ensure that the immersion is halachically valid, a chair made of (completely porous) nylon mesh is connected to the lift so as not to impede the flow of water.

A bicycle accident in the mid-eighties that left a woman a paraplegic prompted the Teaneck, New Jersey, community to make its mikvah handicap accessible. “I thought it

According to Suri Crawford, grant writer for the OU, shuls interested in accessibility but strapped for cash can obtain funds from various foundations. For more information, call 212-613-8170.



*The Hebrew Institute of Riverdale is completely wheelchair accessible. The ramp leading up to the bimah—the first of its kind—was built almost twenty years ago. Photo courtesy of The Hebrew Institute of Riverdale*

was untenable that a woman who wants to observe the laws of *taharat hamishpachah* [family purity] wouldn’t be able to do so,” says Rabbi Aryeh Weil, who, at the time, was the *rav* of Congregation B’nai Yeshurun in Teaneck. Rabbi Weil recalled an article he had read about a special lift used at a mikvah in Jerusalem. The congregants provided the necessary donations, and the renovations were completed in six months. “I don’t think we should be patted on the back,” says Rabbi Weil. “It was our obligation.”

In 1990, Congress passed the long-overdue Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). This groundbreaking statute granted equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities, and mandated, among other things, that all government facilities and public transportation be accessible to the disabled. Unfortunately, houses of worship are exempt.

## Tips on Making Your Shul Accessible

### 1. The Building:

- Are there steps at the entrance or within the building? Is there a ramp(s) to accommodate a wheelchair?
- Are all doors wide enough to accommodate a wheelchair?

### 2. Accessible Entrance:

- If the main entrance is not accessible, is there an alternate entrance?
- Are there curb cuts close to the entrance?

### 3. Restrooms:

- Is there a stall designated to accommodate a wheelchair?
- Is the seat the proper height?

### 4. The Bimah:

- Is there a ramp to the bimah?

### 5. Provisions for the Blind and Visually Impaired:

- Are Braille and large-print *Chumashim* and *siddurim* set aside in a designated area?

### 6. Provisions for the Deaf and Hearing Impaired:

- Is there a sign language interpreter?

### 7. Special Needs Children:

- Do you have “shadows” to supervise children participating in Shabbat groups?

“In a rare move of unity, all the major religions banded together in a motion to be exempt from the ADA mandate,” says Dr. Lichtman. “Like so much in life, it came down to dollars and cents. One would think shuls would be the first to take on such an obligation [and become accessible],” says Dr. Lichtman. “I believe [not doing so] is not due to prejudice, but to ignorance.”

Dr. Lichtman admits that physical accessibility has not been Yachad’s main concern. “Our priority has been reaching the community and making inroads in changing attitudes towards accessibility in general,” he says. “Bringing the Yachad program to many communities has helped to knock down barriers and raise awareness. I believe that, as a result, it makes it easier to begin to talk about physical access.”

Despite the legal exemption from being handicap accessible, many shuls undergoing construction or renovation have opted to include accessibility in their building plans. “Since the ADA has been in effect, architects have become more versed in incorporating ramps in their blueprints,” says Jason Lieberman, director of government and community affairs at Yachad. “Overall, it’s much more cost-effective to build the ramp when designing the building than constructing [one] later.” An informal OU survey found that more and more communities are answering the accessibility call. Close to seventy Orthodox synagogues throughout

North America responded with a resounding “Yes!” to the question of whether they were wheelchair friendly, with some even providing wheelchairs and escorts to congregants who require them.

Lieberman, who was born with cerebral palsy, tries to spread the message of physical accessibility while traveling to shuls across the



*A charismatic speaker, Chava Willig Levy, who contracted polio as a child, shares her personal story and her ideas for living life fully to corporate, college and communal audiences. Additionally, Levy offers dynamic interactive workshops on disabilities for adults and children. Photo courtesy of Chava Willig Levy*

country for Yachad *Shabbatonim*. “When I speak from the pulpit about Yachad’s message of inclusion,” he says, “I make a point of struggling up the steps to get everyone watching to think, ‘Why don’t we have a ramp?’ I seriously doubt that any shul board member would say he doesn’t want someone’s grandmother in a wheelchair to see her grandson’s Bar Mitzvah. That’s what this is about; accessibility means accessible to everyone.”

### One Good Sign Leads to Another

For many years, the Jewish deaf had no choice but to live as a separate segment of the community, cut off from religious communal life. “Fifteen or twenty years ago there were few, if any, accommodations for the deaf in shuls,” says Shalom Lependorf, the principal of a boys’ school in Brooklyn and a counselor for the deaf. In regard to communal

Capacity of Seating in an Assembly Area	Number of Required Wheelchair Locations
4 to 25	1
26 to 50	2
51 to 300	4
301 to 500	6
Over 500	6, plus 1 for each additional hundred seats

awareness and services for the deaf, the non-Jewish community was way ahead of the Jewish community. Back then, Rabbi Dovid Goldwasser, noted lecturer and *rav* of Khal Bais Yitzchok in Brooklyn, was one of the few American rabbis to arrange to have an interpreter at his Wednesday evening classes.

Lependorf, who at the time was coordinating Brooklyn's Edward R. Murrow's program for the deaf (the largest public high school program of its kind), wanted to get involved with the Jewish deaf. He began inviting members of the deaf community to

Zichron Chaim Tzvi in Brooklyn, which regularly attracts nearly 2,000 participants. "We sat all the way in the back," says Lependorf. "And I signed the *shiur*." After several weeks, Rabbi Reisman noticed them and insisted they sit up front. Word got out and more deaf men and women joined the curious contingent up front. "I find the classes extremely interesting," says Shimon Steinhaus. "Most of us would love to have an interpreter available for shul, lectures and events."

The Jewish deaf communities of Baltimore, Chicago and Toronto have

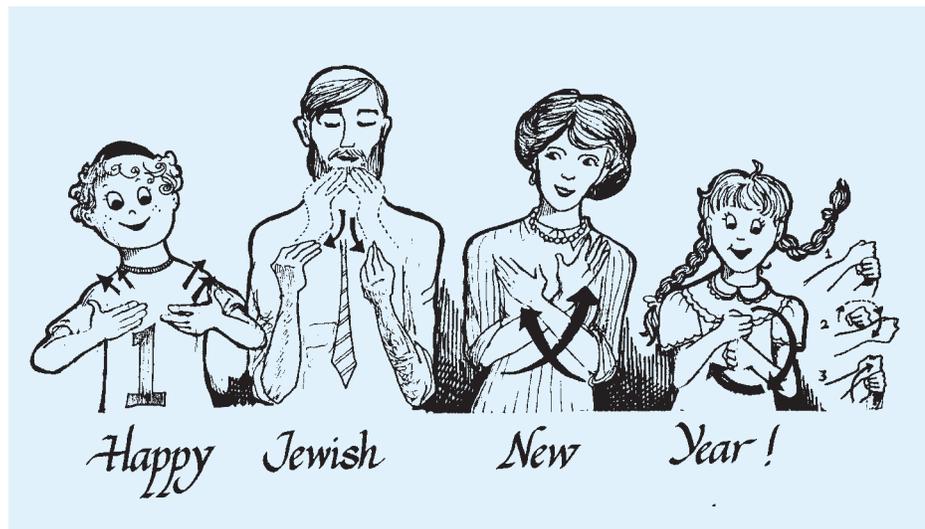
"I make a point of struggling up the steps to get everyone watching to think, 'Why don't we have a ramp?'"

Frاند and Rabbi Matisyahu Salomon spoke, you couldn't find a dry eye among the hearing impaired."

Lependorf currently devotes a growing portion of his time to counseling those in the deaf community.

"Whatever problems are out there in the community at large are also in the deaf community, and they need to be dealt with." Lependorf says he feels blessed to have forged valued friendships with many deaf Jewish individuals over the years.

The active concern of one congregant toward another is at the very heart of the accessibility movement. When Hillel Rosenfeld, a psychologist from Oak Park, Michigan, learned American Sign Language at the request of the clinic where he worked, he had no idea how far-reaching this skill would be. That is, not until he met Rabbi David Rabinowitz, a deaf man in his community. (The first deaf person to get *semichah*, Rabbi Rabinowitz is also North America's first deaf rabbi.) Dr. Rosenfeld happily took on the job of interpreting the prayer services for Rabbi Rabinowitz at Bais Knesses HaGra, the local shul. "The congregants were very supportive of my signing the services," says Dr. Rosenfeld. "Since Mrs. Rabinowitz [who is also deaf] is proficient in lip reading, my wife, Susie, would mouth a translation of the rabbi's *divrei Torah* and point to where we were in the Torah reading," says Dr. Rosenfeld. The Rosenfeld family recently made *aliyah*. "One of the hardest things about making *aliyah* was leaving behind the Rabinowitzes," says Dr. Rosenfeld, who still misses his friends. "Our serving as their link to the speaking world was a wonderful merit for Susie and me. We are grateful for having had that opportunity."



sukkah parties, *Shabbatonim* and to shul, where he *davened* alongside them and interpreted the rabbi's speeches. "Initially, people in the congregation told me to stop moving my hands," says Lependorf. "Apparently, they weren't familiar with sign language. [Community interest] began to grow as people became accustomed to signing." Various individuals even expressed an interest in learning to sign.

Lependorf began conducting Torah classes for the deaf and got involved with Beth Torah for the Deaf, a Brooklyn-based club that sponsors *Shabbatonim*, holiday celebrations and monthly *shiurim* for the Orthodox deaf community. At one point, Lependorf brought one of his Jewish deaf students from public school to the popular *motzei Shabbat shiur* given by Rabbi Yisroel Reisman, *rav* of Agudath Israel

requested a live video feed of the *motzei Shabbat shiurim*, and presently Rabbi Reisman arranges to have an interpreter at all of his lectures.

After years of interpreting and teaching the deaf, Lependorf says he's beginning to notice a welcomed shift. "It went from a virtual *midbar* [desert], due to total ignorance and lack of community involvement, to people actively expressing an interest in providing services for the deaf. I attribute this turnaround to the fact that the community is getting used to seeing interpreters and deaf people around."

This past year, at the Siyum HaShas, a section was reserved for deaf participants and their interpreters for the first time. "I stood at the opening of the *mechitzah* so that both the men and women could see me," says Lependorf. "When Rabbi Yissocher

One of the most effective ways of connecting deaf Jews to the synagogue community is through a *Shabbaton*, an event that brings together deaf and hearing Jews for a warm Shabbat experience. “Since there are so few social and religious opportunities for deaf Jews, these events tend to attract deaf individuals from surrounding states,” says Rabbi Eliezer Lederfeind, director of Our Way, the OU’s program for the deaf and hearing impaired and the only program that hosts *Shabbatonim* for the Jewish deaf. Our Way is a division of NJCD. Our Way *Shabbatonim* are held several times a year at OU synagogues in various communities throughout the United States. “In shul, we usually interpret the *tefillah* and the rabbi’s speech. Most of the hearing Jews in the shul are amazed [to see] the signing,” says Rabbi Lederfeind. “They are astonished to find that so many deaf Jews are neighbors of theirs whom they have never met before.”

Established in 1969, Our Way continues to provide the Jewish deaf and hard of hearing with resources and programming that puts them in touch with each other and with Jewish experiences formerly closed to this most isolated population. Through sign language publications, programs providing interpretation of synagogue services, interpreted classes, its Megillat Esther PowerPoint Presentation for Purim (used in numerous shuls across the country) and the Jewish Deaf Singles Registry matchmaking service, among other programs, Our Way continues to advance the quality of life for Jews who are deaf and hard of hearing.

As the network of the Jewish deaf community grows, so does the concern for one another. Rabbi Lederfeind became acquainted with the Antar family, a deaf couple living in Alabama, while he was manning an Our Way booth at a convention for the deaf in Washington, DC. A horrific tragedy brought them closer. In November 2002, terrorists committed a vicious car bomb attack on an Israeli-owned hotel in Mombasa, Kenya, killing three

Israelis and wounding eighty others. Among the victims were the Antars’ nephews, Noy and Dvir, aged twelve and thirteen, of Ariel. Rabbi Lederfeind contacted the Antars to console them, and suggested a powerful way to pay tribute to their nephews: holding a *Shabbaton* linking the deaf and hearing communities, in memory of the boys. The Antars loved the idea and decided to host the *Shabbaton* in a sizable Jewish community; they chose Atlanta.

Rabbi Chaim Neiditch, director of NCSY’s (National Conference of Synagogue Youth) Southern Region, assisted with the necessary arrangements and brought twenty NCSYers eager to join Congregation Beth Jacob in welcoming the thirty deaf participants. “It was a great success,” says Rabbi Lederfeind. “The Antars spoke very movingly about their nephews. I told them, ‘They brought the message of Shabbat to the deaf community in Atlanta.’”

The Jewish deaf in Atlanta continue to maintain a connection to Congregation Beth Jacob and to the broader local Jewish community. Rabbi Neiditch has organized more Our Way programs at the shul. “The shul has become the home for Atlanta’s Jewish deaf community,” says Rabbi Lederfeind. “The local Purim parade even featured a presentation made by the deaf *kehillah*.” Plans for another *Shabbaton* are in the works.

### Who Gives Sight to the Blind

A poignant *teshuvah* (responsum) of Rav Moshe Feinstein involves a blind man who needed a guide dog to accompany him to shul. Since a dog is not permitted in a synagogue, some *posekim* rule that a blind person is exempt from praying in shul. In his *teshuvah*, Rav Moshe expresses the concern that if an individual can’t bring a



*Leah and Louis Caplan, both of whom are deaf, met through the Jewish Deaf Singles Registry (JDSR). An international matchmaking service, JDSR, which is sponsored by Our Way, aims at pairing deaf Jewish singles of all ages, denominations and communication modalities. Sixty percent of the Jewish deaf population intermarry, out of desperation rather than indifference. The JDSR works to stem the tide of Jewish deaf assimilation.*

seeing-eye dog to shul, he won’t ever be able to participate in *tefillah betzibbur* or hear *keriyat haTorah*, and would feel completely isolated from the community. To preserve the person’s identity as a member of Klal Yisrael, Rav Moshe ruled that the man be allowed to attend shul with his guide dog.

When social worker Chaim Biberfeld of Brooklyn introduced his guide dog, Vike, to the members of his minyan, a few of them warily kept their distance. “They’ve since gotten used to him,” says Biberfeld.

Born with retinitis pigmentosa, the most common cause of blindness, Biberfeld did not realize he had a problem until he reached his teenage years. “I saw 20/20,” he explains, “but I lacked peripheral vision. It wasn’t until I bumped into enough people that I realized I’d better go see an eye doctor.” As the years progressed, his eyesight continued to deteriorate. He eventually took a course in mobility training and got a cane and a seeing-eye dog. “Starting out with a physical disability and becoming disabled later in life are very different experiences,” says Biberfeld. “I had to go through a series of stages—denial, anger, bargaining with God and, finally, acceptance. I

## Hebrew Texts in Braille and Large-Print

The Jewish Heritage for the blind, a Brooklyn-based non-profit organization, provides (free) Hebrew texts in Braille and large-print including *siddurim*, *machzorim*, *Haggadot*, *Megillot* and children's stories. Many of the requests received by the organization come from visually impaired individuals living in Israel. For more information, call 718-338-8200.

had to accept the hard fact that certain things are beyond me. I realized I had to continue to be productive with what was possible.”

Biberfeld knows most of the *tefillot* by heart, except those recited on Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and certain other *yamim tovim*. On those holidays, he arranges for someone to *daven* next to him and whisper the *tefillot* so he can repeat them. “I asked Rav Dovid Feinstein [the son of Rav Moshe] if I should *daven* the Chazzan's Repetition along with the *chazzan* [in lieu of praying the Amidah] rather than disturb someone else's Shemoneh Esrei by having him whisper the passages to me. Rav Dovid *paskened* [ruled] that I should *daven* the Amidah along with the *tzibbur* [and have someone assist me].” Rav Dovid's ruling, similar to his father's earlier decision, allows Biberfeld to continue to feel like an integral part of the shul community, and preserves the vital contribution of his voice and heart to the minyan.

Jewish Braille Institute International (JBI) in Manhattan offers large-print, Braille and audio *siddurim* and *Chumashim*, and has close to 13,000 titles in its library. Unfortunately, very few of these materials are found in shuls. “We should be hearing from synagogues, but very few have made requests,” says Pearl Lam, director of Library Services at JBI. “Conseq-

uently, the visually impaired in the Orthodox community may not be getting the help they need. Many congregants are too embarrassed to request large-print materials, but if the synagogue provided such material, it would be easier [for congregants] to avail themselves of it.”

“We can no longer legitimately claim, ‘We didn't realize this population exists,’” says Dr. Lichtman. “Being inclusive means providing for the needs of all worshippers, including those with disabilities.”

While fewer babies are born blind today due to the advances in medicine, many people tend to develop vision problems as they age. Nearly



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250,000 Jews in America suffer from severe vision loss, which is usually the result of age-related diseases such as macular degeneration, diabetic retinopathy, glaucoma and inoperable cataracts. Individuals who experience vision loss later in life are, for the most part, unable to use Braille and must rely on audio- and large-print books. “The challenge is to address this new

population while continuing to serve the other one as well,” says Ellen Isler, president and CEO of JBI.

## Me and My Shadow: Special Programs for Special Kids

About three years ago, a family with a seven-year-old boy with CP moved onto Terry Eisenberg's block in Teaneck. Eisenberg also had a close friend with a special needs child. “It was heartbreaking [to see] how these families couldn't bring their children to shul. The children had so much to give and yet weren't included as part of our *kehillah*,” says Eisenberg. “The little boy with CP was going to public school and coming home with things for Halloween and Thanksgiving; he didn't have the opportunity to *daven* and be with the Jewish children in the community. Here is a child who has the cognitive ability to be a part of what's happening in the shul but needed someone to help him get from place to place.”

Together with her husband, who is head of their shul's youth department, Eisenberg encouraged the synagogue to employ “shadows,” or helpers, to enable children with special needs to participate in Shabbat youth groups. To its credit, the board of Congregation Rinat Yisrael agreed to fund the initiative.

“Being a shadow is very intensive; it's a huge commitment,” explains Eisenberg. “If a shadow doesn't show up, we've got a problem; that kid can't come to shul.”

Currently, the shul's youth groups include the boy with CP, two girls with Down syndrome, and a high-functioning young man with autism, among other children with special needs.

Corey Fuchs, fifteen, who is a shadow for a developmentally disabled boy his age at Congregation Rinat Yisrael, enjoys his job immensely. “I learned a lot,” says Fuchs. “I learned patience and how to deal with life situations. My father tells me I don't realize what a *chesed* I'm doing for the [child's] family. I look at it as something that needs to be done.”

# Illuminating the Way for the Jewish Blind

*Revolutionary new technology opens up the world of Torah texts to observant blind and low-vision population*

It all began with a request from Rabbi G., a *talmid chacham* learning in a Brooklyn *kollel* who had become blind. While his *chavrutot* would read the *gemara*, Rashi and Tosafot to him, Rabbi G. missed the invaluable opportunity to review the difficult passages independently. Then he recalled that a fellow *kollel* member, Rabbi Nachum Lehman, was exceptionally proficient in computer programming. Rabbi G. asked for his help.

Rabbi Lehman designed an innovative program that allowed Rabbi G. to listen to passages in the Gemara and *Chumash* displayed on the computer screen. "He could press a few keys to hear Rashi, Tosafot or the Rosh, which is, of course, impossible with a tape recorder," says Rabbi Lehman. Rabbi Lehman began enlisting the aid of fellow *kollel* members to record entire *masechtot* (tractates of Talmud), which would then be programmed into the computer.

In 1997, Rabbi Lehman's efforts spawned Computer Sciences for the Blind (CSB), an organization dedicated to opening up the world of Torah texts to the observant blind and low-vision population. Currently, CSB's best-selling product is The Metsudah Chumash, Seligsohn Edition, a set of three CDs that encompass the entire *Chumash* with Rashi as well as linear translations of both. Users can simply ask the computer to begin *parashat Balak*, for example, and the program reads the chapter, verse by verse, in a pleasant human voice. Hundreds of users, of all ages, in Australia, England, Holland, Israel and North America currently find the program priceless.

Rabbi Lehman takes particular pride in CSB's refreshable Braille display program. A device with electronic pins, a Braille display attaches to a standard computer and converts the text on the computer screen into Braille. Unfortunately, there was no software that enabled a Braille display to "read" Hebrew text. Harnessing the wealth of Torah sources found in Torah CD library programs, Rabbi Lehman created a program that allows a Braille display to convert Hebrew text on the screen into Braille. This has revolutionized Torah learning for Braille users who were, until recently, forced to contend with the scant Torah literature available in Braille. Thanks to the program, says Rabbi Lehman, one blind *talmid chacham* is able to deliver a daily *shiur*.



*Refreshable Braille displays, which attach to standard computers, use hundreds of tiny electronic pins that move up and down to convert computer text into Braille. CSB's software converts Torah CDs into the refreshable Braille format, giving observant blind users instant access to over 500 Torah works including the Talmud, Midrash and even obscure halachic works.*

Blind from birth, Rabbi Michael Levy, director of Travel Training at the MTA New York City Transit, marvels at Rabbi Lehman's accomplishments. "To me, the true definition of access is helping a person achieve his potential as a Jew," says Rabbi Levy.

Individuals with severe physical disabilities can also access the CSB system. "Two individuals who are paralyzed and blind can learn *Chumash* by puffing on a straw," says Rabbi Lehman, who designs custom-made tongue and breath switches.

CSB constantly receives phone calls from Jewish blind and visually impaired individuals who are eager to use the programs, which are available to users free of charge. Additionally, children with various learning disabilities are experiencing phenomenal success with products such as The Metsudah Chumash. The *Chumash* enables students with dyslexia, ADHD and other learning difficulties to benefit from a multi-sensory learning experience. They get to see the Hebrew text on one side of the computer screen and the English translation on the other, with the computer highlighting each word as it is read.

CSB, which holds annual conferences for the observant blind community, continues to work on projects that open up the vast world of Torah learning to Jews with disabilities. Rabbi Levy closed a recent CSB conference with poignant words that speak for all the grateful CSB users: "Thank you for increasing my portion in *morashah kehillat Yaakov*, the inheritance of the Jewish people." *All* the Jewish people.

To contact CSB, call 718-234-6476, or visit [www.computersciences.org](http://www.computersciences.org).

Last year, the congregation celebrated the Bar Mitzvah of a child with physical and intellectual disabilities. “The entire shul was instrumental in helping [the boy] prepare for this significant milestone,” says Eisenberg. “When [the Bar Mitzvah boy] got up to say the *berachot*, you could hear a pin drop. We stood and in unison said, ‘Amen!’ It was a beautiful day. If not for this program, these children would have missed out on the experience of *davening*, on knowing what a shul is.”

Upon the loss of their child with special needs three years ago, Dr. Elliot and Linda Klonsky of the Kemp Mill Synagogue (KMS) in Silver Spring, Maryland, formed a committee to make shul functions accessible to children with special needs and their parents. “The need for accessibility extends to the mothers and fathers of special needs children who feel isolated from shul activities because of the responsibilities involved in caring for their children,” says Dr. Klonsky, chair of KMS’s Special Needs Committee. KMS currently integrates special needs children into its Shabbat morning youth groups with the help of a buddy system, which pairs special needs children with teenagers. The program is not only invaluable for the children who get to socialize with their non-disabled friends, it gives the parents time to *daven* and enjoy the shul experience.

“There is nothing more a parent wants than to see his children happily socializing with other children,” says Dr. Klonsky.

In an effort to educate and sensitize the congregation, the shul also held a “Special Needs Shabbat,” featuring speakers at each of its four minyanim who addressed this pressing topic.

While individual shuls have taken steps toward integrating the special needs population, much work remains to be done. As the former executive chairman of the Orthodox Caucus, Rabbi Basil Herring was a founder of Kulanu, a Long Island-based grassroots organization dedicated to spreading the message of inclusion. The organization met with some initial resistance.

“We went to various communities and impressed upon them the need to sensitize their members to the importance of including the [special needs] population in all of Jewish life,” says Rabbi Herring, the current executive vice president of the Rabbinical Council of America. “Often the response was ‘We don’t have people like that in our shul.’ I told them that

Viewing a disabled person as a tragic figure flies in the face of the primary Jewish tenet that we are all created in the image of God.

maybe [individuals with special needs] don’t feel welcomed or doubt that the shul is accessible to them, so they stay away.” Kulanu went on to help numerous shuls institute “shadow” programs.

Yachad takes the concept of inclusion on the road by introducing its members and the many communities they visit to the joys of Judaism and *achdut*. The mother of a Detroit Yachad member with Down syndrome called the OU office to ask if her son could *layn* (read the portion of the week) from the Torah at the Yachad family *Shabbaton* in Waterbury, Connecticut, held earlier this year. “I told her it would be fine, and that he could pick the *aliyot* he wanted,” says Lieberman, who works on arranging Yachad *Shabbatonim*. “He was so excited that the Shabbat before the *Shabbaton*, his family arranged for him to go around to three different shuls in Oak Park and *layn* the first *aliyah* at Minchah.” It so happened that at one of the shuls a Junior NCSY *Shabbaton* was in (exuberant) progress. “The NCSY participants were very moved by this boy’s *layning*,” says Lieberman. “So much so that they approached his father afterwards and told him that they were going to make sure [to] learn how to *layn*.”

Yachad, which boasts sixteen chapters around the country, was created twenty years ago to bring children and adults with developmental disabilities into the community. Today it services children and adults with all kinds of disabilities. Aside from family *Shabbatonim* that attract some 500 people, Yachad’s multi-faceted programs include IVDU, a pre-vocational high school for teenagers with developmental disabilities, a myriad of camp experiences designed to mainstream children with disabilities and relationship building courses that help the adults of this population acquire a wide set of social skills.

### Hashem Doesn’t Make Mistakes

The *mitzvot bein adam lechaveiro* (interpersonal obligations) emphasize the precious and often precarious state of human dignity. As *Pirkei Avot* states, “Your friend’s honor should be as dear to you as your own.” Judaism teaches us that every Jew, regardless of physical or intellectual ability, is an integral member of the *klal*.

Even when the ramps have been set in place and doorways have been expanded, less visible yet painful barriers still remain. “I’ve visited other communities and someone will say, ‘I think she should be placed here,’ without thinking to discuss it with me,” says Levy. “*That* placement could be [somewhere] where I would be completely isolated. If there is a question that relates to access or anything at all concerning the person with the disability, he or she should be included in the dialogue, because that person is really the expert.”

Levy and Biberfeld often speak before groups of children and adults in various communities about appropriate ways to react to a person with disabilities. Viewing a person with disabilities as a tragic figure flies in the face of the primary Jewish tenet that we are all created in the image of God. “We need to realize that people are people, whether they can or cannot see,” Biberfeld explains. “I find that people tend to get

shyer than necessary around me. They shouldn't hesitate to approach a disabled person to ask if he or she needs help. Like anyone else, when we need assistance, we say, 'Yes, please,' and are very grateful."

"I hear terms like *nebbach*," says Levy. "Is a person a *nebbach*? I'd much rather not have a disability, and I'd rather that no one had a disability, but does that mean I think that [having] one is a tragedy? Absolutely not. People with disabilities can and do live happy, fulfilling lives. Hashem doesn't make mistakes." 

*A pioneer in the movement to include every Jew in the joys and benefits of communal life, the Orthodox Union has designated October as North American Inclusion Month (NA'IM). Yachad/NJCD is offering synagogues, schools and communal institutions across the country educational programming designed to sensitize the Jewish community to the importance of welcoming our physically, developmentally and emotionally challenged brethren as integral and valued members of the kehillah. The programs include dynamic speakers, scholars-in-residence, classes for adults and children and guidance on making synagogues accessible. For more information, please contact Yachad/NJCD at 212-613-8229 or e-mail njcd@ou.org. For a directory of synagogues and mikvaot with accommodations for individuals with disabilities, visit [www.ou.org](http://www.ou.org).*