>> Rabbi Sherman: There will be two speakers this morning: Honey, a member of our congregation to make the introduction, and Lauren Appelbaum, our speaker. Also because we have some time, there will be an opportunity, if you so wish, to engage, really, in a virtual conversation. As Lauren is speaking we'll ask you if you want to ask questions. You can do so by engaging your chat -- the chat vehicle on your computer, and what we will do -- at the end of her presentation Lauren will be kind enough -- she'll look over some of the questions and she feels comfortable to engage them, so we could spend another five-ten minutes really on follow-up, chat before we conclude our service. What I want to do is very briefly is introduce the person who's going to do the introduction, and I want to thank Honey. Honey, really, her family's been part of the Melrose community for decades and decades and decades. And after her mother passed away, she made a commitment to our congregation to be an important part of our disability inclusion committee, and I want to thank Honey on behalf of the congregation and from me personally for everything that you have done. I also want to thank also the members of the inclusion committee who spend a great deal of time -- and literally, it is a labor of love, and rarely does one have an opportunity to engage in what I call acts of selflessness and making this world a better place. But please know that your efforts do not go unnoticed. And so I'm going to call upon Honey who's going to introduce our speaker on this special Shabbat morning.

>> Honey: Shalom to the Rabbi, the cantor, the congregants and any community friends who are watching. It's good to see you I scrolled down to see so many faces that I haven't seen in so long. I felt like I was a virtual reunion. I miss you all and I hope we're together very very soon. Every year we have a very exciting inclusion Sabbath program, and today is no exception. As the Rabbi said Lauren Appelbaum is our speaker. She is a homegrown gal. In fact her parents are now new members of our congregation. And from what I understand, she was affiliated with Rabbi Sherman when he was at his synagogue in New York. She graduated from the Jewish theological -- seminary, excuse me, and has a Master's degree in broadcast journalism. She is very concerned about the role that Hollywood plays in creating a more inclusive society for people with disabilities. I don't want to take any more time for what she has to say, so Lauren, you're on. I don't know where you are but you should be here someplace.

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Thank you so much Honey. If you're in speaker view I should probably be popping up now. If you're in gallery view, it usually rearranges so you can see people who are speakers. I first of all want to want to thank you very much, both Honey and Rabbi Sherman, for inviting me to speak today. I'm really glad to be here. You know three years ago -- [Morgan says something off camera] so my daughter would like to come over and say hi, so hold on, we're gonna do that first, if that's okay. She's been anxiously waiting for this, because I told her it was Nana and Zeta's synagogue. So this is Morgan and she would like to say hi. Morgan here -- they can hear you. And she's dressed up because we've been Schul hopping this morning -- [Morgan yells something off camera] Yes, because we celebrated Purim with my synagogue for gag shabbat. So getting back -- getting back to the topic at hand. As Honey mentioned, I'm the VP of Communications at RespectAbility, a nonprofit organization fighting stigmas and advancing opportunities so people with disabilities can fully participate in all aspects of community. I started my work at RespectAbility as an ally. Three years ago, however, I became a member of the disability community, and I'm grateful that I really had that community of people there to help me adjust to my new life. Due to a fall I acquired what is called an autoinflammatory and autoimmune disability affecting my nervous system called reflex sympathetic dystrophy. It's not something you can see, but to be honest, it causes me to live with chronic pain every day. And I share this not to elicit pity but to point out that regardless of your current connection to disability right now, the longer you live, the more likely you or someone you love will acquire a disability due to illness, trauma, aging or an accident. Therefore the inclusion of people with disabilities should be important to everyone. After all, one in four adults in America have a disability, and this includes non-visible disabilities such as learning disabilities like dyslexia and mental health conditions. As Honey mentioned, my parents are members of Melrose B'nai Israel Emanu El and I have another connection to Rabbi Sherman. Back when I was earning my Master's degree at Syracuse university, I worked for his synagogue as their USY advisor. I remember lots of times spent at their house and some really delicious home-cooked meals, which when you're off at school is a really important thing. I also went to college with Rabbi Sherman's son Ezra, and served as a staff member when his youngest daughter did a college program during high school. So it is important to be welcomed as a speaker today. My background includes an education through the Jewish theological seminary and working as a political journalist. Through a curvy path, nearly six years ago I joined RespectAbility. We're based in Rockville, outside of Washington, D.C., but pre-pandemic I traveled around the country often. Our goal is to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities. As I mentioned, one in four adults in America have a disability. That is 61 million people. And just 34 percent nationally are employed. And those are pre-pandemic numbers. People with long-term COVID will likely find themselves with a long-term disability, and the employment numbers continue to plummet at an even higher rate for employees with disabilities. But the biggest barrier is stigma: the idea that, for example, people believe that because you may be a wheelchair user that you're not capable of doing anything, even things that have nothing to do with your legs. So my work brings me to Hollywood often, albeit virtual now, as I seek to increase diverse, accurate and authentic portrayals of people on screen. After all, what you see and hear influences how you think and act in real life. When children with disabilities do not see people that look like them on TV, what are they supposed to think? How about young adults? How about employers? So I ask writers and casting directors, why can't a judge be a wheelchair user? Why can't a doctor be an amputee? Why don't crowd scenes accurately reflect America, showing people with visible disabilities? A few years ago we did a focus group of showrunners, writers and other entertainment professionals, and so many expressed that they are afraid of talking about disability in scripts or hiring actors with disabilities because they just don't know how. So my team and I partner with studios and writers rooms to create equitable and accessible opportunities to increase the number of people with lived disability experiences throughout the overall storytelling process. These initiatives increase diverse and authentic representation of disabled people on screen, leading to systemic change in how people view and value people with disabilities. I think it's fun that I really get to help influence what type of entertainment will be available for my daughter as she grows up. Last year, fewer than one percent of leading characters in children's television, for example, had a physical, mental or communication disability, but more than twenty percent of individuals globally have a disability, meaning that millions of people are unable to see themselves reflected in media today. In children and family films, just eight percent of the most prominent characters are shown with a cognitive or physical disability, which is actually the highest percentage of the last decade. However, when we look at how these characters are represented, there's an issue. These characters are more likely than others to be rescued and more likely to die in the film than other characters -- and yes, I am talking about films made for children. So the calls for help increase, the pile of non-disclosure agreements grow, and I become more optimistic about the future of accurate representation in television and film. I'm proud to be a member of the Disney+ content advisory council, the MTV entertainment group culture code, and Sundance Institute's allied organization initiative, where I get to really help the industry from within. In 2019, my team and I consulted on a dozen projects: tv episodes, films and related. In 2020, that number grew to 70. In the first six weeks of 2021 we consulted on 20 new projects, already setting a pace to more than triple our work from last year. Entertainment has such potential to be a positive influence and I'm hopeful we are moving in the right direction. For example, one of the first series I consulted on was A&E's Born This Way, done by Bunim-Murray productions. And actually, Jonathan Murray is one of our board members. So Born This Way is an internationally syndicated TV series that chronicles the lives of seven men and women with down syndrome who are really defying society's expectations by striking out on their own and pursuing dreams, including jobs, housing, health and marriage. This widely popular show has earned three Emmy awards and a Critics Choice award. In addition to providing consulting advice, I also organized a Hollywood style premiere on Capitol Hill showing the pilot episode with members of congress, cast members and an A&E executive speaking. We galvanized national disability organizations and created social media campaigns to motivate their members to watch and share. Most impressively, this show's audience grew to 1 million viewers in the first season, with 40 percent of those viewers being new to the A&E network, and that is a stat that most shows cannot boast. So this really showed that including people with disabilities on screen is not only the right thing to do but is really a profitable thing to do, as the disability market, according to Nielsen, is valued at more than one trillion dollars. In scripted, I consulted on Netflix's family show The Healing Powers of Dude, which features Sophie Kim as Amara, a middle schooler succeeding in both her academic and theatrical career. Kim is an actress with muscular dystrophy who uses a power wheelchair, authentically portraying a character who uses a wheelchair. We became partners with the writers room, providing consultants with muscular dystrophy and other disabilities, sharing our own experiences and anecdotes that ended up being included in the scripts. In one episode the lead character's parents built a ramp so Amara can get in, becoming a good teaching moment for audience viewers, since most houses would not be accessible for wheelchair users. We worked closely with the production team as they tried to find accessible housing for the actress, built sets with universal design in mind and ensured that the character of Sophie was fully included. We also worked with the marketing team, being fully involved from the development stage through promotion. Diversity and inclusion processes that include disability are needed inside networks and studios so authentic portrayals become natural and consistent. For example, we run a lab every summer that aims to do just that. Through that lab, we have helped place more than 20 alumni into jobs at studios, including the Walt Disney Company and Paramount Pictures. Progress toward authentic disability representation on the screen begins behind the camera. Only by including people with disabilities in the spaces where creative and business decisions are made will we begin to see concrete results on screen. We've noticed a perceptible uptick of studio interest and enthusiasm for disability representation, which makes it all the more essential that the right tools and authentic points of view are available to creators writers and producers who can benefit from them. This past summer, we celebrated the 30th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act. While there is some cause for celebration, we still have a long way to go. After all, laws only go so far. Only by changing societal attitudes will we see real change. Religious institutions always have been exempt from the ADA. Thousands of Jews with disabilities still are being denied access to Jewish participation involvement and institutions. Progress is being made, but there is so much work left to do to create and sustain more welcoming and respectful communities in all areas, including our synagogues, camps, schools, JCCs, job opportunities, online learning and more. Jewish Disabilities Awareness and Inclusion Month is a great time to reflect. We have a long way to go in many physical spaces and in the hearts and minds of our friends and neighbors. The sayings of our father states "you are not obligated to complete the work but neither are you free to desist from it." While the desire to be inclusive may exist, too many organizations, including Jewish non-profits, do not yet know how to do so. In fact, in early 2019, RespectAbility published a report called "Disability in Philanthropy and Nonprofits," which demonstrated that 75 percent of the social sector want to include people with disabilities. And a landmark study by RespectAbility of more than four thousand Jewish respondents in 2018 found that more than 90 percent who responded indicated that this is a priority. Yet our nonprofit survey showed that this inclusion is practiced by less than one-third of nonprofit organizations. For example just 30 percent of respondents said their organizations enable people with disabilities to request accommodations. Asking about accommodations sends a clear signal that people with disabilities are welcome and that inclusion is a consideration. Pre-pandemic, just 59 percent said their events are always held in physically accessible places. Only 14 percent of those surveyed said that their organizations use video captions to ensure people who are deaf or hard of hearing can use the content. Captioning services are fairly easy to use and often free, and yet 86 percent do not even attempt to take advantage of such tools. So over the years, the well-intentioned push for diversity, equity, access and inclusion in Jewish organizations has led to real improvements for people with disabilities. However there's still a long way to go, as time and time again, organizations unintentionally exclude people with disabilities in their events and programming. For example many Jewish events pre-pandemic would include a reception with little seating options for individuals who could not stand for an hour. So how did a JTS graduate end up doing this work? Well, there's a big overlap. You know, inclusion is an inherent Jewish value. For example, "do not separate yourself from the community" is one of the central tenets of Pirkei Avot. So is "all of the people of Israel are responsible for one another." The torah tells us not to insult the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind. Insults and stumbling blocks can be literal, but they also refer to attitude, preconceived judgments and stigma. Primary differences are differences in how an individual's brain or body works. Secondary differences are the result of different life experiences or experiencing social stigma and being misunderstood. I ask you to think about what primary and secondary stumbling blocks are you aware of in your own community. Jews often sing the prayer Henei MaTov, how pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell together in unity. Our community is stronger when we welcome individuals with disabilities. Advancing disability inclusion requires the active involvement of those already involved, as well as those outside the disability community. When I meet with studio executives, I often leave them with a challenge, say, to create an employee resource group for employees with disabilities, or to ensure that a minimum of 10 percent of their background characters have a visible disability which will aid in normalizing disabilities. So I challenge you to think about what can you personally do to help advance disability inclusion in your synagogue, your workplace and our community. I'd be more than glad to answer any questions.

>> Rabbi Sherman: Lauren first of all, todah rabah. Thank you, thank you, thank you. It's -- it's a personal honor, it's a privilege to be really in your presence. And I also want to extend what I call the definition of nachos to your mother Beth and your father Bruce to be with us -- to be part of our synagogue community, and also to see their granddaughter, but probably also to recognize the work that you do in making this world a better, better, better place. And I'm absolutely thrilled. What she failed to also mention, however, is that she's not only a graduate of the Jewish theological seminary of America, but she's also a graduate of one of the better secular universities in the world, and that's Columbia university really as well. So it's from both sides. We have a few moments in -- somebody asked I think a question, it's just -- Jeff wrote, can you see it up there?

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Yeah so I see -- so we have a few questions. So the first one is from Jeff Ostrov, so thank you. He says that I love the work that you and your group are doing -- and I do want to do a quick shout out that we have a few other folks from RespectAbility have joined your service today, including our President and CEO Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi, and our board member Vivian Bass. I've also noticed my brothers are on with you as well, as well as some members of my synagogue who have kind of hopped over to listen.

>> Rabbi Sherman: What synagogue are you at?

>> Lauren Appelbaum: Har Shalom in Potomac Maryland. Rabbi Raskin. So Jeff is asking can you speak a little more about the work that our organization does outside the Hollywood industry with the private sector, and how it can be reached by email? I'll send you my email, well, anyone can reach out. But so we are, as I mentioned, we started with the goal of increasing employment opportunities for people with disabilities in all sectors. And the reason that we focus on the Hollywood -- that one pillar is the Hollywood industry, is because what we see on screen influences how we act. But we also have a huge policy wing. We're not a lobbying organization, but we do do a lot of education and advocacy. We work with a lot of Governors, we've met with almost every single Governor and/or their teams over the past few years. We also have a really robust Jewish inclusion team that is based in Los Angeles but works nationally. And we also have a inclusive philanthropy team to really work with foundations and nonprofits to help them be more accessible and realize that disability need -- the disability lens needs to be added to the work that anyone is working on. So Deborah Schachter says my dad had Parkinson's at age 50. My children had great passion toward their dad because they lived with their grandfather with Parkinson's. Marsha -- thank you, says Yasher koach. Deborah adds that he practiced dentistry from age 50 to 64, since it was considered non-occupational Parkinson's, thank you to you -- that yes, as I mentioned at the beginning, you know, you may not have a disability in your family at the moment, but you know, as people age disabilities do acquire. That is why if we talk about, you know, in general we would say one in five people have a disability, but when we're talking about just adults it's one in four. Randy asks what about the show a season or two ago that featured a young man in a wheelchair? Was it well received? I believe you're speaking about Speechless. And so Speechless was well received. That was Micah, who - he himself has cerebral palsy. In real life he can speak, in the show he played someone who was non-verbal, but it was one of the shows where you really had a lead who was portrayed authentically. And what I think they did really well, because we often get the question of well, we can't do a show with someone with a disability if they don't have a big name, because we need to get people to want to come watch the show. And so what they did is they had what's called an ensemble cast. And they had people like Minnie Driver, who did have a big name, so you could drive people with some cast members and then you could bring in new cast members with that disability. -- Carl asks, is there a way to promote the use of people first language, not only in Hollywood but also in journalism? Too many news reports still talk about autistic people as opposed to people with autism, or someone confined to a wheelchair. So yeah, so I'm gonna do that last part first. You know, confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair bound, all this language that we really try to get people to stop using. So I, as I mentioned, I started my career in journalism. I received a Master's degree in broadcast journalism from Syracuse university, and then kind of had the perfect first job working at NBC news in the political unit for the [2008] election cycle, and then the Obama transition years, but I do want to add prior to that -- and I think what helped me get that job was Rabbi Sherman introduced me to an individual from Good Morning America while I was still in in grad school, which led to me doing an internship at Good Morning America for a period of time while I was still in school. And so we -- I work with journalists, I work with editors of major newspapers to really educate them. I'm actually going to be speaking at the ACES conference, which is a conference for editors, at the end of April to try and help them with language. And so you know one of my -- colleagues, she's kind of like our number two in the -- in our Hollywood work. She herself uses a wheelchair, and you know, explains how the wheelchair gives her freedom. She's not confined to it. If she didn't have the wheelchair, she would be kind of stuck in bed, but the wheelchair allows her to go around the world. And so -- and then people first language. For folks who do not know what that means, people first means a woman with a disability. So we're putting the person before the disability. There also is identity first language, which would be disabled woman. And so for a long time people were pushing people first language as the language to use. However I do want to share that -- and I think it's, I've noticed as a generational thing. So I'm in my 30s and I've noticed that people, typically 40s, 50s, 60s, are very much people first language. But I notice teens and 20s, a lot of people who are growing into themselves and becoming self-advocates are preferring identity first language, the idea of calling themselves a disabled woman. So when I work with editors and studios, I always say the best thing to do is to ask the individual that they're speaking to or speaking about how they wish to be identified. And if you don't know, I'd say just say their first name, because oftentimes the person's disability usually has nothing to do with the story, and you're adding it in for no reason. I kind of say, think about like -- are you putting the person's race or religion? You know, kind of the same thing. If it makes sense to do so, do so. But yes, so I think -- so this is two issues. There's the people first and identity first language, but then there's also just language that is totally inappropriate like confined to a wheelchair, in terms of trying to get people to use more respectful language. Lots of thank you's, I really appreciate it. Let's see Randy Friedman says "are you aware that the handicap symbol has been changed to show action? I work for einstein hospital and they were responsible for that change over at moss rehab." Yep, so a lot of people have been talking about new symbols, because a wheelchair symbol for a while has been what has been used to show disability. And you know -- there's a more active wheelchair symbol to show that people aren't just sitting in a wheelchair, they're actually living life in a wheelchair. But there's also the idea of, you know, not everyone who has a disability uses a wheelchair. You would not be able to tell that I have a disability just by looking at me. In fact, more people have non-visible disabilities than visible disabilities. And so -- there are often memes and I can send it over to Honey who can share with folks, where, you know, it shows what the idea of what disability looks like, and it shows someone in a wheelchair, someone who's an amputee, someone who has a guide dog, someone who is deaf and using ASL, and then someone who just looks like anyone else, because you can't tell if someone has a disability or not. Let's see, a few more. Can you talk a little bit about autism? Rain Man brought the disorder to the forefront for many, but since it is a spectrum disorder the character of Rain Man represents only a small percentage of people with autism. At the same time a show like The Good Doctor is just as unrealistic on the other end of the spectrum. How difficult is it to have Hollywood recognize and portray a spectrum disorder? Well, I always like to say if you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism. No one can represent an entire disability, and that is true for every single disability. So what I feel is that the more representation we have, the better it will become. Because you can have different examples of -- you know, you mentioned it's a spectrum, so people are going to be able to do different things according to different levels of capability. And so when we are able to show, to have lots of representation, you know if we started seeing -- in the next five to seven years -- 20 percent of all characters on TV and film having a disability, we'd have so much more representation, so it wouldn't -- we wouldn't be relying on one or two examples to show what autism is, or what any disability is. Also there's a chance for a show on Freeform, it's on cable, a show called Everything's Gonna Be Okay, and it features Kayla Cromer. She's a young woman with autism, she calls herself -- you know -- she uses different terms, kind of uses different terms. And on there, there are several characters with autism, and it's a way to really show that not everyone with autism is exactly the same. Rebecca brings up Atypical. So Atypical, you know, has the lead character who has autism not portrayed by an actor with autism, but has a lot of other characters who are portrayed by actors who are on the spectrum. And they are all different -- kind of different levels. So the more representation we can have out there of all types of disabilities, the less we'll be reliant on a single show to be depicting what a single disability is. But because of that, there is a weight on a lot of people's shoulders. They want to do it right, which is why my life has gotten very busy over the past year or so with multiple requests to help. Because we do work with the studios as they are preparing new TV shows and films and bringing in new characters to existing TV series that have disabilities, because they want to do it right. You know, I haven't met a single person who intentionally does bad representation. They might be uneducated and unaware, but they have good intentions. And so our goal is to help them do that.

>> Rabbi Sherman: Let me just -- before we conclude, I want to thank our inclusion committee for pointing us in a direction. And Lauren, as you said before, the promised land is really just just a promise, and we still have certainly in our own community a great deal of work to do but I know we're committed to it. We want to thank you for being part of the knowledge community, and once hopefully the pandemic allows such, we look forward to seeing you in the synagogue here in Elkins Park with your family, and we sort of have a mini reunion with [name], we'll bring him from California as well. But it goes to show how small the Jewish world really is. The other thing, if you allow me, I want to give a shout out to a very special special person who's with us this morning. His name is Dr. Mark Halfer. Dr Halfer was head of the PICU - pediatric intensive care unit at children's hospital of Philadelphia, and also professor of anesthesiology until he himself became physically challenged. And Mark Halfer, without his insight and without his passion and without his inspiration, our family would have never ever reached the point to enjoy our son with his so many challenges over so many years. So Mark, we haven't spoken a long time but we say to you, our family thank you my friend for being really one of our heroes, and really one of our special, special people. And you know --Mark has really a little message, really Lauren -- and we'll talk really with each other because he has experience with RSD. So what I will do -- I will write to you after Shabbat, okay? And we'll be able to say. So folks, really, I want to say thank you really again Lauren Appelbaum. This has been a Shabbat that has lifted all of us. I want to tell you it goes to show that there's goodness in this world, and what we're able to achieve. Thank you for your inspiration and your goodness, Lauren. We look forward to seeing you real real soon.