>> Eva: Shabbat Shalom everybody. It's so good to see everybody. In 2009 February was designated as Jewish Disability Awareness Acceptance and Inclusion month. JDAM, as it's commonly called, is a unified effort among Jewish organizations and communities worldwide to raise awareness and foster inclusion of people with disabilities and those who love them. Here at RTR, we strive every day to foster an awareness of the needs of all congregants, future congregants and guests, and to ensure that everyone who wishes to participate is able to do so. As the chairperson of RTR's Caring and Inclusion Committee, I'm pleased to welcome Shelly Christensen as our speaker this evening in recognition of JDAM 2021. Shelly literally wrote the book on Jewish community inclusion of people with disabilities, titled "From Longing to Belonging: A Practical Guide to Including People with Disabilities and Mental Health Conditions in your Faith Community." Shelly is an international speaker, consultant and leader in the faith community disability and mental health inclusion movement, and co-founder and lead organizer of JDAM. Shelly comes to us this evening from her home in Minneapolis through the magic of Zoom. I know that we're going to be inspired and energized by Shelly's words, and will be motivated to further this important work. Shelly, welcome and the floor is yours.

>> Shelly: Thank you Eva. Hi everybody! I'm just so moved and so happy to start my Shabbat, our Shabbat together. Cantor Nev, mm mm mm, you just inspire, thank you so much. And I'm here - some of you know my cantor, Cantor Tumar Havelio, recently was at HUC in Jerusalem and I'll probably see her tomorrow. So this is great. I really want to extend my deepest thanks to you, Eva, for contacting the RespectAbility National Speakers Bureau and connecting us so that I could be here tonight. It is a little bittersweet in a way, this JDAIM 2021. For many years I've spent the month of February away from my family, away from my home, my own congregation. I missed our oldest grandson's birth -- being born. I -- there's a lot of things I haven't done at home, but I want to tell you wherever I go - any synagogue, any Jewish community I go, I feel like I belong. I feel welcomed. And I have devoted much of my life's work to focusing on belonging and ensuring that all people feel that sense of belonging that we feel tonight and that we feel so so often. I want to introduce you to one of my mentors and one of my best friends, and I just have her picture here in my office - I don't know if you can see. This is Rabbi Lynne Landsberg, and Lynne is -- Lynne was legendary and she still is. Lynne died almost three years ago on February 25th. She was one of my dearest friends. We were partners in crime, so to speak - well, not crime. Partners in get it done for the URJ in many different iterations, in the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism. And Lynne inspires me so much, and I miss her very much in this work. So as we go forward, she's -- I'm standing on her shoulders, as many of us are. Just a little bit [of] my story. Some of you may be wondering - the last name Christensen, is she Jewish? I get that a lot. Don't worry. Yes, I'm Jewish. We like to say that the way we spell our last name is the Jewish spelling. Sometimes I'll just tell somebody that it was -- our last name was Cohen but they changed it at Ellis Island. In any event, our last name plays into some of the things that I want to share with you tonight. Because we all make assumptions of things, of single stories, of the one thing we know or we observe about a person. And one of the most important lessons I've learned that I want to share with you this JDAIM is -- hearing my notes somewhere. I love having my tablet here. There was a TED talk and it was a TED talk by a woman named Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. She's an author -- some of you may have seen the TED talk. It was in -- I think 2014. And the talk was called "The Danger of a Single Story." And I realized that a single story about a person is often what we know about them, what we observe. And what she said is this: the consequence of a single story is it robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult, and it emphasizes how we are different, rather than how we are similar. So each of us can appear to others as a single story - that's true. That's a habit, a bias it's just what we do. Neither good nor bad, no judging. Sometimes we make our -- we see the single story based on just kind of a quick glance, or an assumption based on very little information. Maybe a unique appearance or someone's reputation or even knowing a diagnosis of a disability or mental health condition. It leads to a single story. But our other stories: who we are, what we've accomplished in our lives, the people we love, the things we care about and value, the stumbles and the triumphs, the hopes and the dreams -- these are our real stories, and they help us see each other more fully. The idea of a single story and getting beyond that is where I hope dearly that JDAIM leads us. This is the 12th year that we've celebrated, recognized -- I like to say recognized Jewish disability awareness acceptance and inclusion month. It's grown so much. In 2009, seven or eight communities participated, and every year it grows. And now it's an international event. Every year, all of the Jewish movements are involved in some way shape or form, as are local communities and many of the national programs - Jewish Federations of North America and the Religious Action Center have some programs this month. And because we are sequestered in our homes and we're not meeting in person, inclusion and belonging have taken on an entirely different meaning and I think something more intimate than we've ever experienced. The barriers that we encountered before - we think of ramps, and we think of better lighting in our sanctuaries, and we think of transportation, and we think of large print prayer books, and we think of people greeting people at the door. We're not doing that right now. That's going to come back -- I believe that wholeheartedly -- but now, more people than ever before are participating in Jewish life thanks to the wonder of Zoom. You may have had a drive to find iPads and other tablets and computers and laptops for people who maybe didn't have them before the pandemic. There's a lot of synagogues that have gathered those items to ensure that people living alone, living in their homes have access to the internet and to be able to participate in Jewish life. And so there have been so many ways that people are involved. And -- really, our role, all of us, is to keep that alive in the days when we come together again, [Hebrew] as we say. Well, I hope that we've all learned from JDAIM for sure. But sometimes people ask me this question. They say "why do we need a month? What is this?" And that's a great question. And in the beginning, inclusion was on the radar of just a small number of Jewish institutions, special education and supporting children with disabilities in a religious school setting, a day school setting although not as robust as it is today, had its roots. It was the root of inclusion back in the day. And so JDAIM was created to raise awareness, first of all - the Jewish organizations would understand that there are people with disabilities and mental health conditions. When I first started in this field, working in my own community in Minneapolis as the inclusion coordinator for the entire Hennepin County Jewish community, I started my job by calling synagogues and telling them -- introducing myself and explaining to them what the inclusion program, how we could be supportive to include people with disabilities -- to work with the congregations to help them identify what they needed to do, what they were doing well. But they needed help, and I remember calling one synagogue. Rabbi said, "Shelly, what wonderful work you're doing. What holy work you're doing. But we don't have people with disabilities here, we don't need your services." FYI, twenty percent of us have a disability, a mental health condition, and way more than that are related to somebody with a disability or mental health condition, have friends, other family members, people in the community that we know. Disability is natural. And that's an important thing to understand, because for so long we've drawn these lines of "them and us." People with disabilities and mental health conditions are over there, and we don't necessarily see them as participating as fully as us. And so JDAIM has been really raising that issue too. But there is no them or us. It's just us. And so what this comes down to is simply one thing, and that is belonging. When I wrote my book "From Longing to Belonging," I had been thinking about it for a really long time, how I wanted to convey this idea of belonging. Well I'll tell you - it came to me pretty easily when I met a woman in my own community named Sharon. And Sharon had lived in the Minneapolis community for 14 years. She had moved here from a small town in one of the Dakotas. She moved here because she wanted to be part of Jewish life. She has a disability that affects her movements. She is a wheelchair user, and it also affects her vocal chords and her pronunciation, so making it difficult to understand if you're just gonna go, "yeah, tell me what you need. Let's have this conversation and just tell me what you need." And then -- hard to understand. So she spent 14 years calling synagogues and trying to get someone to say "come here, we want you here." For 14 years! Finally, she landed upon a synagogue that she wanted to join, and this was a synagogue that was building a new building that was completely accessible. In fact, the ramp to the Bima is -- the Bima is about -- it's hard to measure -- it's probably about seven, eight, nine inches off the ground, and there's a ramp on either side that takes everybody up the same way. She found that synagogue. I met with her when I first started my job and went to her house, and I was there to help facilitate. And she said to me -- first of all she said "no one Jewish has ever visited me in my home." It's shocking, it's sad, but it's not unusual. And then I said to her "what is it that's so important to you and your Jewish life?" And she said "all I've ever wanted was to belong." Imagine! "All I've ever wanted is to belong." So let me ask you this question: what are some of the things in your life that give you a sense of belonging? In your Jewish life? Think about that for just a second. And now imagine that the ways that you feel a sense of belonging are no longer there, or maybe weren't there ever. How would your life be different? Getting to a state of belonging is to infuse that sense into all aspects of the synagogue and Jewish life. When I was writing the book, I was looking for text. I was looking to Torah, I was looking to Tanach to find something that would state unequivocally that everybody belongs and that everybody is valued and has something to contribute. Well you've -- I'm sure have heard this phrase from Isaiah 56-7. "For my house shall be called the house of prayer for all peoples." Yeah, I can't see you but some of you are nodding I know. Well I looked at that -- you know, many faith communities embraced this as the expression of inclusiveness. I see it as an aspiration, something we want to be, but it's really the beginning of this verse that provides the sacred mandate to include all people in a house of God. And this is the beginning of Isaiah 56-7: "I will bring them to my holy mount and I will cause them to rejoice in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be acceptable upon my altar, for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." In God's eyes, every one of us has something to contribute. God brings us together, God brings us to that holy mount, the 2021 version of the holy mount, to accept our gifts. And we come together, be it virtual space, physical space, we come together in times of sorrow and times of joy to be in community as God's partners. Everyone belongs, and that's what makes a house of prayer for all peoples. So inclusion isn't about programs, it's about people. And here's the important thing: belonging is our why. It's why we connect. It's why we take the time to spend with other people who just want to belong. Inclusion is our how, and again, Kol Hakavod - for everything that you've done. It's so important, but belonging is universal and belonging is the key to inclusion. The role of a synagogue is to support people to live involved and engage lives based on their own preferences, interests and choices. We do this for people without disabilities, and to a greater extent we do this with people living with disabilities, mental health conditions, and those who love them. We do it with them, and it's just time for people with disabilities and mental health conditions to give voice to what is important to them. So when we don't communicate, engage in communication, a conversation with people, which is really -- the conversation is really the focus of creating a community where people feel that they belong. When we don't communicate, we limit how people can participate in the ways that are important to them. We don't learn people's unique interests. We don't learn their gifts, their strengths. And then that's when we "other" people. So the key to inclusion -- and the key beyond JDAIM, beyond this month of February -- is to embrace this idea of belonging for all of us. And it's summarized in three words: ask, listen and learn. Develop that relationship with another person. My son is a big fan of the author Terry Pratchett, and as I was preparing this talk he showed me a quotation from Terry Pratchett's New York Times best-selling book "Pyramids." This is what the author wrote: "The role of listeners has never been fully appreciated. However it is well known that most people don't listen. They use the time when someone else is speaking to think of what they're going to say next." Supporting a sense of belonging is about listening -- really listening -- to someone's story, asking questions to begin a dialogue, not an interview leads to the most important discoveries and common threads. And even though we're on Zoom, when I joined, so many people were connecting with each other, so much joy at being together. And that's something that can be part of everyone's journey. Often synagogue and community leaders say to me "we want to be more welcoming of people with disabilities." And honestly, every time I hear that an organization wants to be more welcoming, I say to them "you don't really mean you want to be more welcoming. You already are welcoming. But encouraging and supporting people with disabilities and mental health conditions to participate is really what you want to be." The portal to a Jewish life doesn't have two entrances, one for people without disabilities who get to decide what they want to do, and another for people who are seen by others as maybe unable to make decisions about how they participate because of a disability diagnosis or a different way of moving, speaking, hearing, seeing, thinking or any other way of being in the world. It's being seen as a single story. But there's only one portal to a Jewish life and that's the one that's marked for all who are created in God's image. And on that door is written the word "welcome." Deuteronomy Rabbah has this most beautiful beautiful midrash that I want to share with you, it's very short. "A procession of angels passes before each person and the heralds go before them, saying "make way for the image of God." May we go forth -- each of us -- to do our part to ensure that people with disabilities, mental health conditions, and those that love them, anyone who does not feel that sense of belonging in community life: may we do our part. May we do our part to support people to contribute to the richness that all of us find here. That is when we all belong. Thank you again Eva, Rabbi, Cantor, all of you who are here tonight. Thank you for -- I'm going to say it's a warm welcoming, because it is. So Shabbat Shalom!

>> Aaron Blasband: Thank you so much for your wonderful teaching. Yasher koach. It leaves us with so much to contemplate and so much to work towards, as we move to a place of our inclusivity goals.