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## An Introduction For 5783

“Judaism teaches us that we are all created *b’Tzelem Elokim*—in the Image of The Divine. That doesn’t mean only some of us, that’s all of us. When we include the true richness and fullness of *Am Yisrael* in our spiritual communities, we are truly living out our people’s mandate to be an *Or L’goyim*—a light unto the nations as the Prophet Isaiah famously teaches. Access accommodations don’t only benefit those directly requesting—they are emblematic of our deep-seated values. Every human being is infinitely precious. What is the fast *Hashem* desires, asks Isaiah? Is it one that merely makes us feel good about ourselves or is it intended to transform society and the world? Our spiritual communities aren’t able to help us transform ourselves and our world if we do not seek to include all who thirst for Torah’s life-giving waters.”

Rabbi Lauren Tuchman

Shana Tova!

I’m Shelly Christensen, the Senior Director of Faith Inclusion and Belonging at RespectAbility (pronouns she/her). On behalf of our Faith Inclusion and Belonging team, we warmly thank you for your commitment to ensuring that people with disabilities and those who love them can participate in Jewish community life.

Opening All Doors—Making High Holiday Celebrations Accessible to All, In-Person and Online, was written by Rabbi Lauren Tuchman and Rabbi Darby Leigh several years ago. This year we added new sections: An overview of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA); Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Access = Belonging; and, accommodating neurodivergent worshippers in services and events.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Access (DEIA) are central to RespectAbility’s mission: Fighting stigmas and advancing opportunities so people with disabilities can fully participate in all aspects of community life. A DEIA approach guides synagogues and other Jewish institutions to provide a culture where all people feel a sense of belonging.

Neurodivergent people receive, process, and interpret information differently and will often problem solve in unconventional ways or consider approaches and possibilities that other people might not. Neurodivergent disabilities include autism, ADHD, social anxiety, learning disabilities, and traumatic brain injury. We have included several ways to support neurodivergent people with accommodations in this guide, but remember, each person is unique, and may need different supports. Always remember to Ask The Person (ATP) what they need in order to fully participate and to belong.

When we belong, we are heard, valued, and respected. Our gifts, talents, and strengths become contributions to the community to the benefit of others. People know our names. We make connections and develop friendships. We study, worship, and are actively engaged in activities and programs of our own choosing. When we belong, we are missed when we are not present.

The above quote from Rabbi Tuchman references Isaiah. “What is the fast Hashem requires?” Rabbi Tuchman challenges us to decide between the fast that just makes us feel good and the fast that transforms society and the world. Another text from the book of Isaiah can provide additional context.

From Isaiah 56:7 we often extract the text “For My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples,” to inspire us to practice inclusion in our congregations. It’s aspirational, describing a future when no one is left out of Jewish life. However, the first part of 56:7 is what provokes deeper consideration for it is the Holy One’s words that provide the “why” of inclusion:

*I will bring them to My sacred mount   
And let them rejoice in My house of prayer.   
Their burnt offerings and sacrifices   
Shall be welcome on My altar;   
For My House shall be called   
A house of prayer for all peoples.”*

May we enter the year 5783 with joy, gratitude, peace, and a dedication carry out the Holy One’s vision of inclusion and belonging.

*Shana Tova U’metuka!*

Shelly Christensen

Senior Director of Faith Inclusion and Belonging, RespectAbility

## The Importance of Accessibility

* According to the U.S. Census, 1-in-5 people in America has a physical, sensory, cognitive, neurodivergent, mental health or other disability. These numbers are proportionally similar within the Jewish community. Additionally, 1-in-4 working age adults have a disability.
* 48 percent of Jews have a family member with a disability and 42 percent of Jews have a close friend with a disability.
* 20 percent of people in the U.S. are Deaf/ hard of hearing. If you don't have captions, 48 million Americans cannot access your content for virtual and in-person events.
* More than 40 million Americans have a learning disability, another group that finds captions beneficial. Many English-language learners, and those following along in Hebrew, find it helpful to have both sound and captions.
* More than 1 million people in the U.S. are blind, and more than 12 million have low vision. Ensure your digital content is screen reader accessible and provide audio descriptions for visual content.
* A lot of the things we think of as accessibility measures, like captions, identification of speakers or the availability of materials in advance, are helpful to many people learning to acclimate to a digital world, not only people with disabilities.

## The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in Faith Communities

*What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.*   *Micah 6:8*

Thirty-two years ago on July 26, 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law by President George H.W. Bush. The ADA is a comprehensive federal civil-rights statute protecting the rights of people with disabilities, entitling over 56 million Americans with disabilities to equal opportunities as full citizens of the United States. The ADA is landmark legislation for many people who, prior to its passage 32 years ago, couldn’t even cross the street using a wheelchair, use the restroom in public buildings, or ride public transportation.

Religious institutions are generally exempt from the ADA. However, organizations with 15 or more employees are covered by Title I employment regulations.

According to the [Collaborative on Faith and Disabilities](http://faithanddisability.org/) ([faithanddisability.org](https://faithanddisability.org/)), 84% of people with disabilities say their faith is important to them, but only 45% of people with severe disabilities attend a place of worship at least monthly. Only ten percent of faith communities practice congregation-wide disability awareness. Thirty-two percent of parents changed their place of worship because their child was not included or welcomed.

The ADA can serve as a moral mandate for faith communities to draw upon. The regulations offer specific guidance on how to improve access to buildings and grounds, as well as how to make programs and employment accessible to people with disabilities. The ADA does not stand alone as a moral mandate. Biblical texts can provide another kind of guidance, one that opens hearts as well as minds, causing us to question attitudes and beliefs about how people with disabilities are regarded, treated, and valued.

Throughout the *Tanakh* (Hebrew Bible), we encounter people with lived experiences of disability. Moses, who lived with a speech disability, was appointed by God to advocate for freedom from the Egyptian and lead them to the land God promised to Abraham. When Moses resisted taking on this enormous responsibility because of his speech disability, God provided the first known accommodation, Aaron, to be Moses’ voice.

The legacy of Moses is to ensure that all people are accepted, included, and supported to have access to all that a religious or spiritual community offers. The key word is “community.” That is where we feel that we belong.

## Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Accessibility = Belonging

“When one creates accommodations and access for all, sometimes people think doing so benefits the person or people with disabilities who now have access to services. While that may be true, it is only a partial truth. In realty creating accommodations and access benefits the community as a whole. If people with disabilities aren’t present in your spiritual community, then you don’t really have a spiritual community, you have a private club with homogenous membership. In order to have a true spiritual community the membership of the community needs to reflect the breadth and depth of G-d’s creation of human beings, which, of course, includes people with disabilities. Personally, I have always been so uncomfortable with a common patronizing attitude that providing communication access is done out of the “kindness” of the organization for “my” benefit. Communication is a “two-way street” and I always feel like an organization may be missing out on something potentially valuable if they aren’t able to communicate with me. So, providing communication access is actually in their own best interests.”

Rabbi Darby J. Leigh

Creating a community of belonging is an intentional endeavor.

Understanding the terms that comprise DEIA=B provides a solid framework for faith communities.

**Diversity** encompasses all the ways in which people of the same faith and belief system can differ, including but not limited to race, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic status, disability, mental health, or national origin.

Diversity is more than just acknowledging and/or tolerating difference. It is a set of conscious practices that seek to understand and appreciate the interdependence of humanity, cultures, and the natural environment.

**Equity** ensures everyone has support and access to the resources they need to flourish, identifying and eliminating barriers that have prevented the full participation of communities most impacted by systemic oppression.

Improving equity involves increasing justice and fairness within the procedures and processes of institutions and systems, as well as in the distribution of resources. Tackling equity issues requires an understanding of the root causes of outcome disparities within our society and institutions.

Equity differs from equality, in that equality refers to treating everyone the same but does not necessarily lead to equitable outcomes because diverse communities have diverse needs and have faced varying obstacles and inequities.

**Inclusion** requires that people of all backgrounds, identities, abilities, perspectives, and beliefs have an equal opportunity to belong, achieve, and contribute to their communities. An inclusive institution promotes and sustains a sense of belonging; wherein all people are respected for their inherent worth, dignity, talents, beliefs, backgrounds, and ways of living.

**Accessibility** is the design, construction, development and maintenance of facilities, information and communication technology, programs, and services so all people, including people with disabilities, can fully and independently engage with them.

**Belonging is a human need. When we belong, we are seen for the whole of who we are. We are contributors to the community, not recipients of others’ intentions. We are known, valued, respected, and supported. A community of belonging is the most important outcome we can achieve.**

## Creating and Sending Invitations

During this pandemic, most event invitations are sent via email and/or posted to social media. While email invitations may have multiple graphical elements, one should ensure that images and logos have alt text – image descriptions – for people who are blind and use screen readers. In addition, it is best practice to have an option for the recipient to click through to access a plain text version of the invite, which can improve access for individuals with a variety of disabilities. Please note that some systems, like Eventbrite, are not accessible to people who are blind or have low vision and use screen readers. Learn more about ensuring website accessibility by watching [our webinar on the topic](https://www.respectability.org/2020/07/training-how-to-ensure-a-welcoming-lexicon-accessible-websites-and-social-media-and-inclusive-photos/).

Also, the invitation should list how long the event will last, as well as what the format of the event will be. Will individuals participate on video or audio, especially if praying, or will they be more like spectators watching a presentation? If there is any interactive portion, describe it to people ahead of time.

You also should list your plans for accommodations in your invitations and marketing, especially captioning services or ASL interpreters, which we will discuss further below. Thankfully, the Jewish world is now working to make these services available to Jews who are D/deaf and hard of hearing. Many such individuals may not even attempt to access your event, because they are so used to the idea that their needs will not be met. By advertising upfront that these needs will be met, you not only maximize your value proposition, you also provide a welcome to Jews who too often have been excluded.

## Accessibility in the Sign-Up Process

On your organization’s sign-up form, ask registrants if they need any accommodations to effectively participate in the event. Additionally, provide a name, email, and phone number for someone who can assist people with accommodation requests. Having open communication with individuals who request accommodations is important, as they may have ideas for workarounds that are doable for your event. Accessibility is often free or inexpensive.

## Ensure That All in Your Community Can Join

It is important to have an accommodation for individuals who do not have access to video conferencing. By offering the option for attendees to dial in by phone, people with and without disabilities who do not have internet access still can participate. The pandemic is further highlighting the social and economic issues around technological privilege and access.

If your congregation has the capacity, you may wish to think about pooling congregational resources to help connect those not previously connected. This could include setting up mobile hotspots for those without internet access, offering tablets or secondhand or inexpensive laptops for those without screens, training for those who are not tech savvy, or all of the above. This may be an opportune place for a donor drive, as many of us have older technology that we do not even use, which could be an amazing lifeline for someone else. An initiative like this would pay dividends far beyond the midst of connecting people to services, as it also would allow them to connect to the entire digital world that has grown up to address isolation and community during this pandemic. Training the recipient to use the technology might be a wonderful mitzvah project for your tweens and teens. Let us remember that this is a celebratory time of year. Consider including a honey cake, some apples and honey, or something equally festive (after inquiring about food allergies) along with any gift of technology.

## Provide Accessible Key Materials, Including Prayer Materials, Beforehand

If you are using any documents or a Microsoft PowerPoint presentation for your online event, distribute it to your attendees in advance. This includes online *Siddurim* or *Mahkzorim*, or source sheets for sermons or discussions. [JBI International](https://www.jbilibrary.org/interior.php?sub=2&op=11) ([bit.ly/3q4uefx](https://bit.ly/3q4uefx)) (formerly the Jewish Braille Institute) has many materials for individuals (not the organization) to borrow. In addition to Braille materials, JBI International has large print and audio materials. The National Braille Press offers translation services and will provide a quote for materials on their website. Note: it takes 20 business days to process requests, so plan accordingly.

Whether in Braille or not, providing documents in advance can enable attendees who are blind or have low vision to use screen reader software to familiarize themselves with the materials being presented. Some of the major publishers offer online versions of *Mahkzorim*. Link to them in your invitation, but also offer to email copies upon request. Please note that while PDF and Word document formats can be made quite accessible to people who use screen readers, proprietary formats are not. See what you can do to convert any such files into these formats. Also, unless you follow your digital *Mahkzor* packet exactly, be sure to provide the order of page numbers, which portions of the page you will be reading from, etc. If you are still determining what materials to use, the website [Sefaria](https://www.sefaria.org/texts/Liturgy) has an accessible, traditional, digital *Mahkzor* available.

Determine if your downloaded or created materials are accessible. Both Microsoft Word and PowerPoint provide accessibility assessments of materials. More information can be found at <https://bit.ly/microsoft-accessibility>. We also recommend having a text-only version of all documents for people who request one.

## Braille *Mahkzorim*

We have not been able to identify any way for a congregation to purchase Braille *Mahkzorim* in the Reform, Conservative or Reconstructionist traditions, which means that your congregants will need to obtain them on an individual basis.

The law allows certain nonprofits to create copies on an individual basis, to be made directly available to blind users at no charge. The Brooklyn-based Orthodox organization, [Computer Sciences for the Blind](https://www.computersciences.org/), provides traditional Hebrew texts to eligible blind individuals upon request, including traditional Orthodox *mahkzorim* for Rosh Hashanahand Yom Kippur*.* The Jewish Braille Institute (JBI) also works to provide Hebrew texts upon request by eligible blind individuals, although one must register with the site. The most up-to-date offerings in Braille and large print format from JBI are not listed on their website, but they are listed as Appendix C, along with the code necessary to request them. Although you cannot make the request on behalf of your blind members, be present with them. Acknowledge the systemic ableism, and be with them in whatever way you can. This could range from emotional or spiritual support to assistance with the process. Let us take a moment to envision a day when the onus is not on blind people to obtain their own worship materials.

## Neurodivergent Access and Considerations

Up to 15% of the US population is neurodivergent (also referred to as “neurodiverse”). Neurodivergent (ND) disabilities include: Learning Disabilities, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Autism, Down Syndrome, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Developmental speech disorders, Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, Dyspraxia, Dyscalculia, Dysnomia, Intellectual disability, and Tourette syndrome.

Here are some things to keep in mind:

* In your digital invites, share a document that shows the order of each service so that neurodiverse people can prepare ahead.
* Provide a plain-text version of the e-invite. Overstimulating materials can be distracting, distressing, and may cause seizures.
* List an option on your e-invite materials for low-sensory experiences, such as live streaming rather than attending the in-person service or having a low-sensory space (sensory rooms) within the building.

If physical invitations are used, avoid glitter and scented stationery.

Neurodivergent people experience and interact with the world around them in a variety of ways.There isn't a right or wrong way of thinking, learning, and behaving. Accessibility supports may vary widely. When a neurodivergent congregant requests accommodations, have a conversation with them to understand how to support their participation in services and events.

Many neurodiverse people are extra sensitive to external stimuli. Excessive sensory input can be overwhelming and exhausting. Overstimulation can occur when the senses take in more information than the brain can process. Provide support by offering a low stimuli “quiet room.” The space should have a low-volume, captioned livestream of the service.

## Immediately Prior to the Event

To run a successful event, preparation ahead of time goes a very long way. For a virtual event, you should ensure your clergy, speakers or presenters log in sufficiently before the start time to test their audio, visibility, and appropriateness of their background. This could include whether there is too much distraction, or whether they are trying to run a virtual background that is causing blurring or fade out. While, for the purposes of this guide, it is worth noting this preparation will be of value to people who are hard of hearing or have low vision, the fact is that this little bit of preparation will increase the quality of the event for everyone.

## Ensure as Many People as Possible Can Participate

Before we jump into technical specifics, it is important to remember a few best practices that make all your events more accessible, digital or not. First, if you are speaking or presenting in English, and you drop in a term in Hebrew or Yiddish, provide the English translation. Also, consider the language used as an invitation to a traditionally standing prayer. As discussed by Matan Koch in his [article](https://www.respectability.org/2022/03/revisiting-please-rise/) for our newsletter, there are many potential modifications, from “please rise if you are able” to “please rise in body or spirit.” Making intentional change to your language shows a type of inclusive mindset by letting people know they are under your consideration.

Even before the pandemic, a RespectAbility survey showed that only 14 percent of respondents’ organizations used video captions to ensure people who are D/deaf or hard of hearing can use the content. Captioning services are easy to use; yet 86 percent of respondents did not even attempt to take advantage of such tools. Captioning services ensure that as many individuals as possible can participate.

Many high holiday services tend to include multiple speakers, including clergy, an appeal from the synagogue president, and/or any number of other speakers. Whenever there are going to be multiple voices, the best practice is for each person to say their name every time they begin speaking. This helps people with a variety of disabilities, including people who are blind or have low vision, as well as individuals with cognitive disabilities, to know who is speaking.

Different formats for your services will present different organizational needs. For events where everyone is visible and can participate, every individual not speaking should be on mute and a moderator will need to manage taking turns. A noisy meeting environment increases listening processing and fatigue for everyone; keeping yourself on mute when not speaking helps all participants. On the other hand, a moderator should be alert to a speaker that is too soft to be heard, encouraging them to speak up or to use a microphone.

Are you planning to have interactive portions to your holiday celebration? It is important to give everyone options as to how they share their thoughts. For people who cannot or would rather not speak, the moderator or host can read notes made in the chat box out loud to everyone. The moderator or host should announce this as an option for people to do. They, or a designated staff or board member, will then need to check the chat box so comments are not overlooked or forgotten.

To help people with different types of disabilities, when someone is not speaking, they also should turn their video off. The host of a Zoom meeting can unilaterally turn off the video of participants. The sign language interpreter’s video should always be on.

If there is a PowerPoint or other visual aid, then the speaker should describe what is on screen to accommodate individuals who are blind or have low vision. Even if the PowerPoint has appropriate accessibility features for screen readers, people will not be able to use screen readers for a PowerPoint being shown on screen. Therefore, the speaker should describe what is on screen before delivering any other talking points. If you are using a virtual *Siddur* or *Mahkzor*, and you will be sharing it on your screen, it is especially important to send a copy to any congregant that requests it in advance, as screen readers and other accessibility technology simply will not be able to follow. Ensuring accessibility during the planning process of an event is important; if you are planning to post a video of the event after the fact, you may need to ensure accessibility during the actual event, even if no live participants request one. If video clips that do not include audio description are played during a presentation, the speaker should explain the visuals before the video begins. This is important not only for participants who are blind but also because it is unlikely that audio description, which is narration describing what viewers see on screen, can be added after-the-fact to a fast-paced virtual meeting. We recommend [this great guide to audio description](http://www.superfestfilm.com/audiodescription), including examples.

One should note that there are pros and cons to screen sharing, from an accessibility perspective. On the one hand, a shared screen, especially in a prayer environment, is a way to make the text of the service available. On the other hand, a shared screen makes it far more difficult to see an ASL interpreter on Zoom and on Facebook Live. If sharing a screen on Zoom while participants follow along on Facebook, the ASL interpreter’s video must be spotlighted in order to see the interpreter versus the individual speaking. Screen share is also not screen-reader accessible so blind and low vision participants will not be able to interact with whatever is being shared.

Whatever format you choose for your event, you should have a very clear plan of when there will be screen sharing and when audience participation is expected. Having this schedule will keep everything operating smoothly but also is critical so people with disabilities who need to make special plans for these parts of the event, as well as interpreters, can plan appropriately.

## Ensuring Your Space is Physically Accessible

COVID has forced the Jewish community to regroup and rethink how it conducts just about every activity. Remote work, an explosion of online programming and religious offerings, and the wide adoption of technology has made Jewish life more accessible and welcoming to many people, including Jews with disabilities.

Even though mask mandates have been lifted, consider requiring or encouraging congregants to wear masks during high holiday events. This will allow immunocompromised and immunosuppressed individuals to join your community in person.

There are some other free and easy steps to take that can make an immediate difference. Keep interior spaces neat and organized so people with mobility disabilities can navigate through the space. There should be a five-foot circle or T-shaped area within the space for people using a wheelchair to reverse direction. Floors should be free of potential tripping hazards or barriers so individuals with visual disabilities and those using walkers or wheelchairs can move around and find a place to sit. Items can often be moved or rearranged to increase access for everyone.

When hosting an event, ensure that seating is available during all parts of the event, including during parts when most people would typically stand. Space for wheelchairs should be distributed throughout the venue with companion seats nearby. Have a plan in place to support those who may have difficulty with plates and utensils. Consider having assistive listening devices readily available. It is a best practice to ask guests what accommodations they may need to fully participate prior to the event.

If you have the budget to allocate additional resources, a little can go a long way in terms of ensuring your interior space is accessible. Adjust lighting to facilitate lip reading and reading in general. Lighting should be even, glare-free and bright throughout the building. It can be inexpensive to lessen abrupt changes in floor surfacing. The carpet should be no more than a half-inch high and edges should be securely attached. Light switches could be moved low enough to be within reach of people using wheelchairs and people of short stature. Adding adjustable workspaces for those who use wheelchairs or scooters or those who need to sit while working also can be beneficial. Switch to unscented/hypoallergenic cleaning products, candles, soaps and air fresheners for guests with various chemical sensitivities.

Thinking bigger, does your building meet ADA code? Install automatic door openers so people with physical disabilities can open interior doors without assistance. The criteria are that the door handle is not higher than 48 inches, and the maximum force needed to open the door is five pounds. Have a route of travel that is at least 36 inches wide without any stairs throughout the building for a person using a wheelchair. Ensure that all staircases have continuous rails. Have an elevator or lift if stairs are unavoidable. Ensure that there are accessible restrooms and wheelchair-accessible water fountains.

## Live Captioning

The gold standard of captioning is Communication Access Realtime Translation or CART, where a live transcriber types what is spoken in real time. RespectAbility currently uses Zoom for our webinars (including prior to this current climate), which is screen reader accessible. RespectAbility events always include CART. Other platforms that support live captioning include: Adobe Connect and Webex. This involves utilizing a third-party closed captioning service. Thankfully, there is no shortage of companies that provide this relatively inexpensive service. A full list can be found in Appendix A: Live Captioning Companies.

In addition to live CART, technology is rapidly catching up and now a handful of high-quality automatic speech recognition (ASR) options exist. For example, Zoom has enabled free automatic captioning as an option for all meetings and webinars. Automatic options are not particularly helpful for services, as they are not designed for Hebrew text. For more about this technology in a context other than the High Holidays, see RespectAbility’s [Accessible Virtual Events toolkit](https://www.respectability.org/accessible-virtual-events/during-the-event/#captions).

Live captioning is better able to help access Hebrew, when the captioners are provided with the text, including any Hebrew words in transliteration, beforehand. As such, live captioners should be given the script and text for the service in advance, including transliteration of Hebrew, and a clear indication of when that transliteration should be in the captions. This also helps for names and technical terms. In addition, unlike ASR, a live captioner can fill in the gaps with contextual clues if the audio is poor and let participants know if they are speaking too softly or too many people are speaking at once.

Any platform can utilize the services of a live captioner with a third-party captioning service. With this option, captions are displayed in a separate browser window. Services such as StreamText and 1CapApp also allow for customization in how an individual views the captioning. Because different users of captions have different preferences in this regard, having flexibility to choose either by window or in program is particularly good.

To learn more about what each platform accommodates, we recommend viewing [this chart compiled by Connect-Hear.com](http://connect-hear.com/knowledge-base/chart-of-videoconferencing-captioning-availability/).

If you would like to provide these services for an in-person event, there are in person CART transcribers who will type captions to appear on a monitor or TV screen present in your physical space.

CART, ASR and non-embedded captions can be useful for a few different audiences, including people who are D/deaf or hard of hearing, those with learning disabilities who have an easier time comprehending the written word, and people whose first language is not English. CART greatly eases the cognitive load of a video meeting or event for many people.

It is important to note that captioning solutions may not always work best for the D/deaf or hard of hearing viewer. For example, those that participate via mobile devices, or through small screens, may find it difficult to read the small-sized captions, particularly for a lengthy period. Some platforms allow users to increase the size of their captioning, which may or may not be helpful in addressing this issue. It is helpful to let people who are D/deaf or hard of hearing know that it will improve their experience if they join the service online through a device with a larger screen. Still, this is true of all people, whether they have a disability or not, as joining an online service when there is a large screen is much better than on a phone. Also, while live captioning may work well for forward-facing events, where participants are mainly watching, it must be noted that if the D/deaf or hard of hearing individual does not use voice, in order to chime in or comment, they will be forced to use the platform’s text chat function.

## American Sign Language (ASL) Interpreters

For those who are unfamiliar with American Sign Language (ASL), there is a potential misconception that it is simply a visual depiction of English. It is actually, however a, complete language, and so like any other language, it can be translated to and from English, but that does not make it identical, in either idiom or structure. It is in fact, linguistically and grammatically distinct. For many speakers, it is their native language, and they may find it far better to watch a service if ASL interpretation is available, even if there are captions.

Further, for meetings and events where participants are actively engaged in interactive discussions, some D/deaf or hard of hearing individuals would prefer having an ASL interpreter over live captioning to ensure their active participation. In addition, for events that involve complex subject matter, technical terms or industry-specific terminology, viewers will find that automatic captioning, and in some cases, even live-captioning solutions, struggle to maintain a reasonable minimum level of quality and legibility for the user. Appendix B has a list of interpreter services. Some provide Zoom interpretation. Whomever is organizing your services needs to email the log-in information to the interpreter with a link or an invite to the room. They also should share names of speakers and any PowerPoints ahead of time so the interpreters can become familiar with the materials.

Specifically for Zoom, when utilizing ASL interpreters, it is important to never [spotlight a video](https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/115000505583-Pin-or-Spotlight-Video) other than an ASL interpreter when sharing a screen. Doing so leads to all attendees only seeing the video of the active speakers. This means that attendees are unable to view the ASL interpreter’s video. Instead, ensure that the meeting or event is set to gallery view. When screen sharing, ensure the video is set to side-by-side view; otherwise, participants will only see the screen share and the person speaking and not the ASL interpreter.

When hiring a sign language interpreter for a service, do so as early as possible because there is a shortage of ASL interpreters who are ready to do high holiday services. Two weeks minimum is recommended. Be sure to confirm that the sign language interpreter is certified and experienced, and let the interpreter know if the event will be shared publicly. Please be aware that interpreting a live event is very physically labor-intensive and tiring. For something as long as a high holiday service or anything longer than one hour, you will likely need to hire interpreters in pairs to relieve each other. In fact, it is an industry standard that an ASL “team” of a minimum of two interpreters is required for any event two hours or longer and most certified interpreters will require a “team” for any event one hour and longer.

## Hebrew Text with Captioners and ASL Interpreters

Provide your captioner or interpreter with the complete run of the service, i.e., the order of the texts paired with each Hebrew text and its translation, and transliteration. The translation will allow interpreters who do not know Hebrew to translate the prayer or song directly from English into ASL. For the captioner, the transliteration will serve a dual purpose allowing a non-Hebrew speaker to follow the text while giving a captioner the appropriate text to put in the captions. Whichever way you choose, the most important thing is that you have a detailed discussion with your captioner and/or interpreter before the service and agree on an approach. Many captioners will want an electronic version of the service, especially transliteration, so they can cut and paste transliterations into the text at the appropriate times. Indeed, this is something you will likely want to practice in advance of a high holiday service if you are doing it for the first time.

## Maximizing Investment and Acknowledging Cost

There is a financial investment involved with providing these services. The cost can range from $80-125 per hour for captioning and $160-200 per hour ($80-100 per hour per person) for a team of two ASL interpreters. This is a relatively small amount of money to enable many people, including seniors who may have no problem following a service in person but need captions for it to work online, to be included.

You may want to have a value-based discussion with your board or speak to a few key donors who may be willing to make a gift if they know it will allow other members of the community to access spiritual life. Many will instantly understand that during COVID-19, many seniors and people with disabilities essentially are forced into even further isolation. While they may be able to hear well enough to follow and enjoy a service in person, they will not be able to connect to the service well if they are watching it onscreen in isolation and do not have access to captions.

We recognize that some synagogues may be unable to afford these accommodations. Jewish law tells us that it is incumbent upon our community to help meet the spiritual needs of our fellow community members. That might mean finding out about another synagogue that is able to provide full accessibility and referring people to those resources.

For those synagogues that have made the investment in accessibility, it is vital to let your community and others know so those who need accessibility have a place to pray. Share it with your colleagues and put it on your website. Consider creating a webpage in your local community of which synagogues will have which accommodations at what time. For those unable to provide this accessibility this year, we urge you not to forget the feeling of regret that ought to come from having to send a member of our synagogue family elsewhere to meet their spiritual needs. Let that regret push the community to plan, and fundraise over the next year, so that whether High Holidays are virtual or in person, your congregation will be able to welcome its entire community.

## Accessible Hybrid Events

Hybrid events are events that contain both an in-person and a virtual component. This enables both increased collaboration and increased participation. Individuals with disabilities have been requesting hybrid events for a long time. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, these types of events are now happening more often. Making a hybrid event accessible is much easier and much less expensive than you might think! Here are some specific tips for ensuring accessible hybrid events.

Make sure that people watching the event, both in-person and online, can see the ASL interpreter and the speaker at the same time. The ASL interpreter should always be visible on the livestream. You can also provide an ASL interpreter in-person and a separate one on the zoom.

There are many options for presenting live captioning at an in-person event. Captions can be displayed on a separate screen. They can be on the same screen as the PowerPoint presentation. Certain captioning services make the live, running transcript available on a website that guests can view on their personal laptop or smartphone. Think about which option makes the most sense for your event and decide in advance.

To learn more about hybrid events, watch our webinar on “[Ensuring Accessibility During the Return of In-Person Events – And Why We Should Keep Doing Accessible Virtual Events](https://www.respectability.org/2021/06/accessible-in-person-virtual-events/).”

## Accessible Videos for Websites and Social Media

Many organizations place recordings of their events online so they can be enjoyed and experienced later. It is vital for those recordings to be accessible as well. Indeed, 41 percent of videos are incomprehensible without sound or captions. In fact, 80 percent of viewers react negatively to videos auto-playing with sound. So now, many social media outlets auto-play videos on silent. Therefore, if you record your event and plan on sharing the video, it is crucial that you have accurate captions.

Since many people confuse subtitles and captions, here is the difference:

* Subtitles only reflect what is being spoken.
* Captions go a step further by including non-spoken information such as, [laughter], [applause] and [music], as well as environmental sounds.

Open captions are always visible. Closed captions can be turned on/off by the viewer on TVs as well as on social media platforms. With modern web services like YouTube, closed captioning is easy to implement. If your video is hosted on YouTube and has good sound quality, basic captions similar to subtitles automatically will be added to your video at no charge. These basic captions or subtitles are never perfect. Speakers will not be identified, certain words will not be accurate, and there will not be any punctuation. Furthermore, things like laughter and applause will not be mentioned. In order for your video to be accessible for people who are D/deaf or hard of hearing, it is vitally important to review automatic captions and fix these issues before posting the video. This is especially important with services, as YouTube will be completely unable to cope with the varied languages of liturgy.

There are step-by-step guides on [YouTube’s help section](https://support.google.com/youtube/topic/9257536?hl=en&ref_topic=9257610) that will tell you everything you need to know about captions on YouTube including how to edit captions that need fixing, as well as how to upload a transcript and have YouTube create captions from the transcript. If your uploaded video is short and has poor audio quality, the help section details how to create captions from scratch. Upload an SubRip file to services like [Vimeo](https://help.vimeo.com/hc/en-us/articles/224968828-Captions-and-subtitles) or [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/help/261764017354370) to enable captions on these platforms.

## Webinars on How to Make Your Programs Accessible

RespectAbility, in partnership with 45+ Jewish organizations, hosted free online webinars about how to make Jewish life and institutions accessible to people with disabilities. They are posted on the [RespectAbility website](https://www.respectability.org/jewish-events/).

* [Inclusion as a Jewish Value](https://www.respectability.org/2020/06/inclusion-is-a-jewish-value/)
* [How to Advance Disability Inclusion in Jewish Education](https://www.respectability.org/2020/06/training-how-to-advance-disability-inclusion-in-jewish-education/)
* [How to Recruit, Accommodate and Promote Jewish Leaders with Disabilities for Paid Employment and Volunteer Leadership](https://www.respectability.org/2020/07/training-how-to-recruit-accommodate-and-promote-jewish-leaders-with-disabilities/)
* [How to Ensure a Welcoming Lexicon, Accessible Websites and Social Media and Inclusive Photos](https://www.respectability.org/2020/07/training-how-to-ensure-a-welcoming-lexicon-accessible-websites-and-social-media-and-inclusive-photos/)
* [How to Create and Implement Successful Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives – Best Practices and Must-Haves](https://www.respectability.org/2020/08/diversity-inclusion-jewish-training/)
* [How to Ensure Legal Rights and Compliance Obligations](https://www.respectability.org/2020/08/legal-training-jewish/)
* [Accessible Events: Both In-Person and Online](https://www.respectability.org/2021/07/leaders-of-the-future-accessible-events-both-in-person-and-online/)

## About Our Co-Authors



Serving Congregation Kerem Shalom in Concord Massachusetts, **Rabbi Darby Jared Leigh**, a native New Yorker, is a life-long “truth-seeker.” His rabbinate is characterized by creativity, inclusivity, and a commitment to diversity. Rabbi Leigh describes himself as “committed to finding creative ways to engage Jews of all ages and backgrounds and to creating welcoming, caring communities with intellectual honesty and spiritual depth.” His rabbinate is characterized by creativity, inclusivity, and a commitment to diversity.

Rabbi Leigh received a bachelor’s degree in religion summa cum laude from the University of Rochester. Deaf himself, he then toured with the National Theater of the Deaf (NTD) and served as a social worker and counselor at the New York Society for the Deaf. Rabbi Leigh earned a master’s degree in religion from Columbia University and his rabbinic ordination and a Master of Arts in Hebrew Letters from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.



Based in the Washington, D.C., area, **Rabbi Lauren Tuchman** is a sought-after speaker, spiritual leader and educator. Ordained by The Jewish Theological Seminary in 2018, she is the first female rabbi who is blind. She has taught at numerous synagogues and other Jewish venues throughout North America and was named to the Jewish Week’s 36 under 36 for her innovative leadership concerning inclusion of Jews with disabilities in all aspects of Jewish life. In 2017, Rabbi Tuchman delivered an ELI Talk entitled “We All Were At Sinai: The Transformative Power of Inclusive Torah.”

Rabbi Tuchman has trained and continues to teach with Rabbi David Jaffe and the Inside Out Wisdom and Action Project, which provides a space for Jewish spiritual and contemplative practice for social justice activists rooted in the spiritual discipline of Mussar and the teachings of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov. She serves on the board of JOIN for Justice, which trains Jews in community organizing for social change.

## Appendix A: Live Captioning Companies

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Company | Phone Number | Website |
| 1CapApp | (866) 945-0250 | [www.1capapp.com](https://www.1capapp.com/) |
| Carolinas Captioning Services | (704) 552-6753 | [www.abccaption.com](http://www.abccaption.com) |
| On Point Captions | (818) 279-8136 | [www.onpointcaptions.com](http://www.onpointcaptions.com) |
| StreamText | (608) 234-4759 | [www.streamtext.net](http://www.streamtext.net) |
| Transcription Star | (877) 323-4707 | [www.transcriptionstar.com](http://www.transcriptionstar.com) |
| Closed Captioning Services | (818) 775-0410 | [www.ccscaption.com](http://www.ccscaption.com) |
| 20/20 | (800) 870-1795 ext. 1 | [www.2020captioning.com](http://www.2020captioning.com) |
| Alternative Communication Services | (800) 335-0911 ext. 705 | [www.ascaptions.com](http://www.ascaptions.com) |
| A La CARTe Connection | (888) 900-3239 | [www.alacarteconnection.com](http://www.alacarteconnection.com) |
| CART Agency | (877) 871-2653 | [www.cartagency.com](http://www.cartagency.com) |
| Captions Unlimited | (775) 746-3534 | [www.captionsunlimited.com](http://www.captionsunlimited.com) |

## Appendix B: ASL Interpreting Companies

This is a listing of professional interpreting companies. Many communities have reported success, and lower cost, with independent interpreters. That said, finding the supply that you need, and the references you would like, might be a time-consuming process. Further, providing quality interpretation in a Zoom format is a special challenge. We offer this list of professional interpreting companies, known to us to work well with the virtual format.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Company | Phone Number | Website |
| InterpretThat | (562) 400-5452 | [www.interpretthatinc.com](http://www.interpretthatinc.com) |
| LifeSigns | (888) 930-7776 | [www.lifesignsinc.org](http://www.lifesignsinc.org) |
| The Sign Language Company | (818) 728-4241 | [www.signlanguageco.com](http://www.signlanguageco.com) |

## Appendix C: Materials Available From JBI

This is a list of available *Mahkzorim* is received via email from JBI as of August 6, 2020. Please remember that in order to request any materials from JBI, you must be an individual who is blind or has low vision, and you must register as a member.

**Braille *Mahkzorim***

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Mahkzor** | **JBI Code Number** |
| Birnbaum High Holy Day- 21 Volumes (Orthodox) | B-18 |
| Silverman Rosh Hashanah (Conservative) | B-84 & B-85 |
| Silverman Yom Kippur (Conservative) | B-86 -B-89 |
| Mishkan HaNefesh Rosh HaShanah (Reform) Hebrew-English & Transliteration 5 Volumes | B-118 |
| Mishkan HaNefesh Yom Kippur (Reform) Hebrew-English & Transliteration 7 Volumes | B-119 |

**Large Print *Mahkzorim***

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Mahkzor** | **JBI Code Number** |
| Rosh Hashanah *Mahkzor* 2 Volumes (Orthodox) | L-071 |
| Yom Kippur *Mahkzor* 2 Volumes (Orthodox) | L-072 |
| Rosh Hashanah *Mahkzor* (Conservative) | L-069 |
| Yom Kippur *Mahkzor* (Conservative) | L-070 |
| *Nusach Sephard Mahkzor* Rosh HaShanah (Hebrew Only) | L-082 |
| Nusach Sephard *Mahkzor* Yom Kippur (Hebrew Only) | L-083 |
| Russian *Mahkzor* | L-086 |