
As the Gates of Prayer Open, Does the Sanctuary Enable Universal Access?

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Key Words: Religious practice, religious institution, accessibility, prayer, equal rights, disability

Abstract

This article depicts the world of synagogues from an accessibility point of view. Full participation in daily and weekly synagogue life not only involves physical mobility within the facility, but involves sensory and cognitive participation for daily synagogue services. Synagogues have been renovated to include ramps, extra seating, special lighting, and accessible bathrooms. However, many synagogues neglect to address the needs of individuals with sensory and mental health impairments. An organization named Maaglei Tzedek, conducted a survey of 250 synagogues in 2013, to assess the extent to which facilities offer accessibility features. According to this survey only eight had prayers books with Braille. Moreover, several synagogues listed as accessible had bathrooms that were inaccessible to the average user. Additionally, synagogues equipped with accessible bathrooms neglected to offer access to these bathrooms in the woman's section. The role of both the occupational therapist and the accessibility consultant are pivotal within the latter field. Occupational therapy modules are used to recommend the appropriately

use of assistive devices and procedural changes within a synagogue. Accessibility consulting can provide practical recommendations for each facility to be built under the rubric of "design for all" principles. This article will provide a detailed view of how a synagogue can be made accessible in accordance with accessibility law and practice.

Introduction

Synagogue Access: Making prayer accessible

Daily synagogue life involves ritual, religious practice, social gatherings, and Torah learning. The synagogue represents a place of social unity for a community, allowing one to participate in all life cycle and religious events. For an individual with disabilities, accessing all services and functions within a synagogue requires environmental adaptation and procedural change. Most importantly, no shame should ever be brought to an individual Jew with a disability, due to his/her disability. Full accommodation of special needs prevents individual embarrassment, promotes universal participation of all community members, and prevents potential law suits due to unethical situations (Yalon-Chamovitz, 2006).

According to a 2013 survey conducted by Maaglei Tzedek of 250 Israeli synagogues, 10% were equipped with ramps, accessible bathrooms and elevators, in addition to acoustic reduction (Access for All, n.d.). Many buildings have installed appropriate signage, flooring and lighting throughout the facility.

However, according to recent Israeli law, facilities still need to be equipped with assistive devices and to implement procedural changes into daily services to better serve the needs of individuals with disabilities. Additionally, all synagogues that are listed as accessible must regularly check their facilities to ensure that the accessibility features offered are up-to-date, accessible, and user friendly by all community members (Draft of Service Accessibility, 2013).

In accordance with the law of equal rights for individuals with disabilities (1998) all individuals should have access to the main synagogue regardless of ability or disability (Equal Rights for Individuals with Disabilities Law, 1998). Following the laws passed in 2005, 2008 and most recently in 2013, the standards of accessibility have grown to encompass procedural changes during services, and assistive devices offered within the main sanctuary. The Israeli law recognizes two specific categories of accessibility consulting: structural and service. The former addresses all the physical aspects of building (parking, doorways, ramps, bathrooms, elevators and stairs), while

the latter addresses services offered within each facility (signage, lighting, procedures, assistive devices and equipment). An accessibility consultant assesses existing accessibility features and recommends changes for improvement. With respect to a synagogue, a structural accessibility consultant recommends changes for widened doors, ramps, seating, and elevators, while a service expert recommends assistive devices, procedural changes, special seating, lighting, and prayers books designed for individuals with special needs (Draft of Service Accessibility, 2013).

Synagogue participation: From internet access to leading services

Online information. If the synagogue has its own website, it should be accessible and provide features such as enlarged font, arrows pointing to relevant links, and visible print for all the information provided within. There should be a link entitled "accessible features of synagogue", whereby all accessible features of the facility are outlined for the viewer. In order to ensure efficiency, these features must be updated regularly. There should also be information that directs the viewer to an appropriate contact person who can answer additional questions, prior to the viewer's arrival at the synagogue. In the section that lists daily service times, each time should be highlighted and enlarged

in bold print (Access for All, n.d.). According to the 'Accessible Service' regulations (2013) there should be a person whose role is to ensure that the website follows the guidelines for accessible internet set by the **Web Accessibility Initiative (W3C)**. The regulations determine that by 2015 all internet sites should be accessible at level 2.0 (www.w3c.org.il; Sason@netgroup.co.il).

Entry way and parking. By law, accessible parking should be located near the main entrance, with visible signage. All entrances must be equipped with an obstacle free ramp and sufficient lighting at all times. Since services are often held at night, entry and exit to and from the building must be obstacle free. A ramp should be installed with an incline of no more than 6%. From the accessible parking area, there must be a clear path that leads directly to the main accessible entrance. There should be ample signage on the front entrance indicating in large accessible font times of services, in addition to the contact numbers of the office management. At the main entrance an automatic door that is 75 cm wide should be installed to allow for easy entry. Typically a mezuzah can be found at the entrance of each doorway. It is recommended that each mezuzah be placed at an accessible height, which was determined to be 140 cm high (Access for All, n.d.).

Signage and lighting. There should be ample signage and lighting throughout the entire building. Upon entry, there should be a visual sign in Braille in addition to arrows pointing to the bathrooms, main sanctuary, stairs, elevators, beit midrash (Torah learning room), the woman's section (often located at a level above the main sanctuary, as required. Additionally all light switches should be accessible to wheelchair users. Should the sanctuary have large windows, a non-glare surface or filter should be applied to them in order to block out the glaring effect of the sun during the morning hours (Yalon-Chamovitz, 2006).

Bathrooms. Fully accessible bathrooms should be located on the same floor as the main sanctuary, as well as on the floor where the woman's section is located. There should be complete access to the main entrance of each bathroom on each floor with no barriers limiting entry. Doors leading into the accessible bathrooms should be wide enough to accommodate a wheelchair user (no less than 75 cm). Each bathroom should abide to the prescribed code (166 cm X 136 cm), and have an accessible sink at a height of 85 cm. In addition, the bathrooms should be equipped with a lowered toilet with an enhanced seat, grab bars on each side of the toilet (preferably an L shaped grab bar), an angled mirror, and an emergency button next to

toilet in the case of emergencies. Easily maneuverable faucets should also be installed. Automatic faucets would cause too much of a problem regarding their usage on the Sabbath, and are not an ideal modification. Wall mounted soap dispensers are useful assistive devices that can be added to accessible bathrooms. The lighting within the bathroom should have accessible switches that can be operated by a wheelchair user (Access for All, n.d). Additionally, bathroom facilities must be checked on a regular basis to ensure that they are hygienic, clean, and accessible to all community members. Any concern that arises should immediately be addressed by the synagogue management (Shamberg & Barr, 2006).

Main sanctuary. In order to ensure maximal participation of all community members, the main sanctuary (where the prayer is conducted) must be comprehensively accessible. Moreover, procedural changes should be implemented into the daily service prayer. There should be additional seats designated for those in a wheelchair, a ramp leading to the main podium, and ample lighting throughout. A rabbi or cantor typically conducts his sermons and leads prayers from the main central podium. Any individual who follows the rabbi or cantor by lip reading must have the ability to get a clear, unobstructed view of the podium

from the surrounding seats. Moreover this podium should be at a lowered height with an open area beneath for a wheelchair user. There should be a reduction of acoustic sounds within the main sanctuary that ensures hearing on all levels. A recommended sound system that blocks acoustic sounds can be installed. Moreover, mobile furniture such as mobile benches and stands are necessary (Yalon-Chamovitz, 2006).

Useful assistive devices to be provided include: enlarged prayer books and Torah books, tactile page indicators, and an enhanced sound system that ensures maximal hearing. It is recommended to provide individual stands next to assigned placement for the main leader of the prayer service. This can provide the opportunity for people to place relevant items near them so that they know they have somewhere to place such items during prayer service (Shamberg & Barr, 2006). The latter recommendations apply to any social events that take place within the facility; either in a social hall, or a room designated for a life cycle event (i.e., brit milah, bar mitzvah, wedding, etc).

Procedural changes. During the course of the services, pages of prayer should be announced on a regular basis, so that any person with a memory or orientation impairment will be able to follow the services without difficulty. Individuals who regularly attend the synagogue should

be assigned to assist those with special needs before, during, and after prayer (perhaps a buddy system can be established with regular community members). All announcements should be made clearly, and repeated if need be. Individuals with special needs should be escorted out of the main sanctuary prior to the throng of congregants who will be exiting the building en mass following the services. Moreover, if the individuals are able and willing, they should be included in the services and allowed to lead services, read from Torah, or perhaps make announcements according to their desire and abilities (Draft of Service Accessibility Regulations, 2013).

Conclusions

Synagogue attendance and participation requires ample support and modifications for those congregants who must contend with disabilities. In order to ensure the maximal participation of community members, modifications should be made so that these individuals can access these facilities with ease and comfort. Currently, only 10% of Israeli synagogues are moderately accessible, however, a broader range of individuals with disabilities can be accommodated through additional modifications. With more research and accessibility consultation, facilities can be renovated, and procedural changes can be implemented to create barrier-

free environments. Occupational therapists can play a pivotal role in implementing the principles of universal design to the building and management of each synagogue. Through such changes, Jewish religious practice can be accessed with greater ease and comfort for all community members, regardless of ability or disability.

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