



## SYNAGOGUE, SHUL, AND BEIT MIDRASH BUILDING ACCESS : ACCESS MATTERS

**Preparer's note:** The text below is based upon and was greatly modified by Yad HaChazakah-JDEC for Torah observant communities from the monograph, "That All May Worship" by Ann Davis and Ginny Thornburgh. We added several bullet points and changed wording. The original publication may be found at [www.aapd.com/what-we-do/interfaith/that-all-may-worship/01-that-all-may-worship.html](http://www.aapd.com/what-we-do/interfaith/that-all-may-worship/01-that-all-may-worship.html). We credit Ms. Davis and Ms. Thornburgh with pioneering efforts to encourage religious institutions to become user friendly to people with disabilities. **Though the focus is on synagogues and shuls, much of the checklist applies to most types of buildings, including yeshivot and event halls.**

When beginning to make the architectural and structural changes that are necessary to welcome people with disabilities into existing buildings, start with things that can be accomplished relatively easily. Get underway! Visible signs of change will encourage your community to take the next step towards achieving maximum physical access. Certainly, all new construction or remodeling should meet local access and building codes. "Open for me the gates of righteousness. I will enter" *Tehillim* (Psalms), 118.

Begin by consulting architects, contractors, carpenters and plumbers who are familiar with disability access codes. Their skills are needed and this is their day to shine! Don't forget to consult persons with various physical, vision, and hearing disabilities during every phase of evaluation and planning. By not doing so, you may make well-intended but inadequate, even wasteful, modifications.

If you're constructing or renovating a synagogue or shul, please make sure that congregants who use wheelchairs and other mobility devices can access the *bima* (platform or place where services are led) in order to lead services, read the Torah, and deliver *divrei* Torah. It's essential that people with disabilities are related to as givers and leaders, as well as beneficiaries of synagogue services, events, and community life.

Plan a fundraising strategy that involves everyone, young and old, rich and not-so-rich. Think about everything from bake sales, to special events, to capital campaigns that offer dedications in loving memory of a deceased relative. In addition, seek out community-based grants and low-interest loans.

Check for the following around and inside your existing building or in your design plan:

### **PATHS , ENTRANCES, AND PARKING (where applicable)**

- ☐ Curb ramps to sidewalks are in place.
- ☐ Pathways are smooth and unobstructed and are at least 48" (inches) wide, with slopes of no more than 5 percent.
- ☐ At least one entrance is wheelchair accessible for men and women. Ideally, it is the main entrance where all arrive and greet each other.
- ☐ Signs direct people to wheelchair accessible entrance, if it's not the main entrance.
- ☐ Level resting space around entrance doors, 5 x 5 feet is provided.
- ☐ Accessible parking spaces are marked and are close to accessible entrances.



## RAMPS AND STAIRS

- ☐ Ramps are 36" wide, minimum, extending one foot in length for every inch of rise, a 1:12 ratio. Thus, a ramp replacing an 8 inch step must extend 8 feet.
- ☐ Handrails are placed on at least one side of the ramp, 32" above the surface.
- ☐ Ramps have non-skid surfaces and are cleared from snow and protruding objects.
- ☐ Stair handrails on both sides are installed, 32" above the step, and extend a foot beyond the top and bottom of the stairs.
- ☐ Stairs have slip-resistant surfaces, i.e. rubber treads.
- ☐ A slightly raised abrasive strip is adhered to the top step of each stairway to warn people with limited sight where the stairs begin.

## DOORS, DOORWAYS, AND INTERNAL PATHWAYS

- ☐ Door openings are 32" wide or more.
- ☐ Doorway colors contrast against the wall colors.
- ☐ No more than 5 pounds of pressure is needed to open doors.
- ☐ Doors can be opened with lever handles or with a push bar.
  - If not, the door will be kept open or a door assistant will be assigned.
- ☐ All pathways are slip resistant and free of protruding objects so that persons who use crutches, canes, and walkers do not fall.

## WORSHIP AND LEARNING PLACES IN SYNAGOGUES OR SHULS

- ☐ Seating arrangements are made for people using crutches, walkers, braces or casts.
- ☐ Scattered seating spaces are provided for wheelchair users who prefer to be seated in the main bodies of the men's and women's sections or general assembly, not in the front or back of the sanctuary or auditorium, nor in the passageway aisles. These spaces can easily be made by shortening several pews or removing seats from several scattered aisles, leaving 36" of space for wheelchair users.
- ☐ The *bima* is level to the ground or has a ramp leading to it.
- ☐ The *bima* has lecterns, tables, and microphones (used when *halachically* permissible) that are height and angle adjustable for *baalei tefilla* (prayer leaders), *baalei keria* (Torah readers), and speakers with mobility limitations.
- ☐ Adequate lighting is directed on the face of the speaker for those who read lips, as well as adequate general lighting in the sanctuary.
- ☐ An assistive listening system is available and used, when *halachically* permissible, by program presenters for the benefit people who are hard of hearing.
- ☐ Tables with scattered spaces for wheelchair users or bookstands are available to rest *sifrei kodesh* (prayer books and other holy writings) and handouts.
- ☐ The *ezrat nashim* (women's section) is accessible for women who cannot easily climb stairs. If the *ezrat nashim* is located upstairs, do one of the following:
  - Install a *Shabbat* elevator or stair lift that can accommodate wheelchair users.
  - Carve out a section in the accessible men's section where the above mentioned women and a few of their friends (whether or not they are ambulatory) can participate in the service. The *m'chitza* (divider) should be designed to enable women in seated positions to easily see the rabbi or other people speak.



## BATHROOMS

- ☐ At least one bathroom for each gender is accessible to wheelchair users, ideally one on each floor. Unisex bathrooms are best for wheelchair users and their assistants. Two grab bars are installed, one adjacent to the commode and one behind the commode, to facilitate side transfer from a wheelchair.
- ☐ Floors are slip resistant and paths are unobstructed.
- ☐ Men or women can access a toilet stall that is 36" wide, with 48" of clearance from the closed bathroom stall door to the front edge of the toilet seat, 17" to 19" above floor, and a 32" door that swings out. Ideally, provide a 5ft x 5ft toilet stall with a 32" door that is placed off to the side and swings out.
- ☐ If major renovations are not possible at the moment, metal toilet stall dividers can be removed and an attractive washable curtain hung for full privacy for users.
- ☐ Toilet paper can easily be reached from the toilet seat by someone with minimal arm extension.
- ☐ A sink is placed with 29" of clearance from floor up to the bottom of the sink.
- ☐ Lever-type faucet controls and door handles are installed.
- ☐ Towel and soap dispensers are placed no higher than 48" from the floor.

## WATER FOUNTAINS (if otherwise provided)

- ☐ A water fountain is mounted with a basin no more than 36" from the floor, making it easy to operate from a wheelchair. A bar in front is pressed for water.
- ☐ As an interim measure, a supply of paper cups may be mounted next to the water fountain, or a water cooler.

## ELEVATORS AND LIFTS

- ☐ Elevators or platform lifts are installed for access to the sanctuary and all major program areas that are located on higher or lower levels. [*Grammah* (time-delay) switches may be installed for use on Shabbat. Ask your community *posek* (rabbinic authority) for his position on Shabbat elevators.]
- ☐ Elevator or lift controls are reachable by a wheelchair user.
- ☐ Braille and raised number plaques are adhered to elevator or lift control panels.
- ☐ A handrail is installed on at least one side of the elevator, 30"-32" from the floor.

## SIGNAGE, ALARMS, AND COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS

- ☐ The international symbol of accessibility identifies wheelchair accessible routes and bathroom facilities. Exits are clearly identified and are accessible.
- ☐ All permanent signage complies with Section 4.30 of the ADA Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG), for people with various vision disabilities.
- ☐ Fire and emergency alarms have both audible and visible signals.

For further information, please contact Yad HaChazakah-JDEC; [access@yadempowers.org](mailto:access@yadempowers.org); 646-723-3955. We will be happy to meet and begin access planning with representatives from your community, either in person or by web conferencing. [www.yadempowers.org](http://www.yadempowers.org).