

Beth El Congregation of the South Hills  
Ruderman Inclusion Initiative Action Plan

Ruderman Inclusion Action Steering Committee:

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## Executive Summary

Beginning in 2010, Beth El Congregation of the South Hills has promoted what has been referred to as its Inclusion Agenda. This agenda seeks the transformation of our community to one which is fully inclusive of all those who wish to be a part of this Conservative Jewish kehilla.

For us, this agenda means many things, including affirmation of those with physical and/or mental disabilities, as well as inclusion of constituencies who may not have previously looked to a Conservative congregation. Whether speaking of a child or adult with special needs, a member with a physical disability, an interfaith family, a single-parent family or a same sex union, Beth El is a Modern Conservative congregation that seeks to be a community within which all of its members are affirmed for who they are, and welcomed as friends and members.

As discussed in the State of Inclusion at Beth El below, this organization is proud of the strides it has made to date in this area. In 2010 we formed a new Inclusion Committee which is active and involved in synagogue life. We have talked the talk to constantly imbue in our membership a culture of inclusion. We have walked the walk, to back up those words with action, providing the programs and services that are necessary to achieve true inclusion.

In 2015, Beth El applied to become a participant in the Ruderman Inclusion Action Community sponsored by United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism, in partnership with the Ruderman Family Foundation. This cohort of approximately 15 Conservative kehillot from across North America is working together to share experiences, challenges and solutions to our common issues.

The immediate goal of our participation in the Ruderman Inclusion Action Initiative is the creation of this Action Plan. While Beth El is justifiably proud of the steps taken to date to transform ourselves into an inclusive community, the analysis of strengths and challenges that has ensued has enlightened us to the fact that we have a long way to go.

While the term “inclusion” means many things at Beth El, this initiative and this Action Plan are designed to address our needs with respect to inclusion of those with physical and mental disabilities. As discussed in detail below, our plan is laid out along three general tracks. We intend action: (1) to do the needful to make our facility accessible to all; (2) to address inclusion in our Spiegel Religious School; and (3) to truly transform our

congregation into a community of affirmation. Some of the things reported in this plan are immediate, some are medium term, and some remain dreams for the future. Some require funding, while others require transformation of the way our members think about themselves and their fellow congregants. With appreciation to USCJ and the Ruderman Family Foundation, however, this process has moved Beth El along the road to being the inclusive community of our dreams.

## **State of Inclusion at Beth El – where do we stand today with respect to inclusion of those with special needs**

### **Culture and Leadership:**

Beth El is a community of affirmation. Our lay leadership, clergy, professionals and staff promote Beth El as welcoming to all. For us, inclusion is not only about those with physical and intellectual disabilities but also welcoming those who may not have previously viewed a Conservative synagogue as a home. We believe this is the path to the Jewish future.

Beth El offers programs and a culture that promote understanding and welcome of interfaith families. Our active Inclusion Committee has led in programming annually for Jewish Disabilities Awareness Month, including Disability Awareness Shabbat. In the past two years our congregation has twice hosted community wide Children & Youth Disability & Mental Health and Senior Fair summits, drawing more than 1,000 people, showcasing services available in the community.

A recent fundraising drive commissioned our "Inclusion Torah," a lightweight Torah scroll, permitting those smaller, younger or older to perform the mitzvah of carrying the Torah, and an easy-read font which allows more of our members to participate in our Torah service. The mantle covering this scroll contains a message of inclusion.

Beth El is proud of our synagogues leadership role in community planning and joint inclusion efforts through Federation planning, with other Jewish congregations and in our broader community.

### **Education:**

Beth El's Spiegel Religious School, under the leadership of our Education Director Rabbi Amy Greenbaum, consults with learning specialists to create inclusion plans for students.

Up to four aides are provided annually to allow inclusion of all students. Classes have special programs annually on sensitivity to differences and disabilities.

Our religious school is piloting the Dynamic Vision for the Active Study of Hebrew (DVASH), a new multi-sensory method to teach Hebrew reading built on best practices in reading instruction and addressing dyslexia. Students are not only taught the Hebrew alphabet, but also draw, feel and experience each letter. Similarly, our "Hands on Judaism" program brings arts, nature and other sensory experiences into Jewish education. Our school employs an Alladin telesensory unit which enlarges text for those who are sight impaired.

In a first-of-its-kind program at Beth El, our school has responded to the needs of a non-verbal child with autism by creating the "Steam Team", named for Thomas the Tank Engine, a favorite character of the child. The Steam Team consists of every other child in the class. The class has bonded as a group since commencing religious school. Each member of the team partners with the involved child to work with him on an aspect of the Bar Mitzvah celebration. When the event occurs, we will not only have a child with autism able to fully experience the joy of Bar Mitzvah, but just as important, will have an entire class that has grown together, sharing and understanding inclusion as an everyday, natural state of affairs.

Beth El works to ensure transitions for children from Religious School to USY, allowing full participation for students with special needs in our youth programs, and our Rabbi has worked to provide the resources needed for our students requiring aides to participate in our community Hebrew High School.

**Facilities:**

Beth El's Main Sanctuary is fully ADA compliant including ramps to the Bimah. This year we installed a railing from our parking lot into our sanctuary to assist those with mobility issues. Both our main and small sanctuaries are equipped with hearing assistive technology. We have installed an elevator to make the entire facility ADA compliant and we have two wheelchairs on site. We purchased a complete set of braille prayer books and Torah texts.

## Challenges – where does our review suggest that Beth El can do better

While Beth El is proud of its efforts to transform itself into a truly inclusive community, our steering Committee has endeavored to engage in an honest assessment of those areas where we can do better. Broadly stated, we have identified three different areas which must be addressed by this Inclusion Action Plan. These include: (1) further addressing the needs of those with physical disabilities, including the aged in our congregation; (2) building upon the existing foundation to enable us to offer a quality Jewish education to those with both physical and mental disabilities; and (3) continuing the transformation of the community itself. While it is certainly a good thing to offer programming and services because others in our community are in need, we recognize that the root of the word “inclusion” is to “include”. Our goal is to complete the creation of a kehilla kadosh (a holy community). We strive to go beyond the mere providing of programs and services, to become a community which values all of its members where and who they are.

### Action Plan

#### A. Addressing the needs of those with physical disabilities

##### i. *Accessibility in the Sufrin Chapel*

Beth El’s Sufrin Chapel is the location where we hold a majority of Shabbat and Festival services throughout the year. This prayer space is smaller and more intimate than our Main Sanctuary, providing both a place for religious services, as well as a location for remembrance of loved ones who have passed away.

In our assessment of needs, however, we could not help but notice that the Sufrin Sanctuary is not accessible to those with physical disabilities. This space was built at a time when the prayer services in the Conservative Movement were more performance based than participatory. The existing Bimah in this sanctuary is an elevated stage, approximately four feet above the floor where the pews are located. This has proved to be distinctly problematic in our community. Though Beth El prides itself on being a lay led congregation, those who are older, or who have physical disabilities have a real challenge in ascending to this bimah to participate

Further, there is no accommodation in the Sufrin Sanctuary for those who may require wheelchairs for mobility. Currently, if a person visits this sanctuary in a wheelchair, he/she has no option but to transfer to a fixed pew, or position that chair in the midst of

an aisle, in a location which is inconvenient, and which may draw unwanted attention to that person. Finally, while there is hearing assistance technology currently in place in this chapel, it is of an older vintage.

Initially, we considered ways to remedy these deficiencies within the structure of the existing sanctuary. We considered building a ramp to the Bimah; removing existing pews to create a handicapped seating area; and even bringing our reading table off the Bimah to the floor. An exchange of email with Rabbi Greenbaum, however, changed our thinking in this regard.

Our committee asked the Rabbi to address the question of whether a bimah needs to be elevated? The Rabbi's response stated:

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*"Bimah" does mean raised platform. But, no, it is not halacha (Jewish law). I believe accessibility is more important, the mitzvah gedolah (the greater mitzvah). Also, the whole idea of the clergy looking down on the people from above is antithetical to Judaism. Everyone on the same level is "more Jewish".*

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Based on our needs assessment, and on this response from Rabbi Greenbaum, Beth El's leadership has been persuaded that the single most visible and significant project to arise from this Ruderman Inclusion Action Plan will be to remake the Sufrin, into a new and truly inclusive prayer space. While we will keep those things that make this sanctuary special, including re-purposing the four windows behind the current bimah, the existing stained glass windows, and the venerated Yahrtzeit plaques, almost everything else about this sanctuary is about to change.

This is the way we do things at Beth El. We start with a challenge, and then through positive action turn it into strength. As of the date of submission of this Action Plan, Beth El's architect has provided us with a rendering providing a preliminary view of a synagogue in the round; intimate and accessible to all; and compatible with the concept of modern Judaism. Two generous Beth El families have already made leadership pledges to make this project a reality. Our leadership expects to complete the funding through a combination of grants and contributions, which will allow this renovation to be completed without impact on the synagogue's operating budget.

The time line for this project is this program year. From the rendering that presently helps us conceptualize this project, through its funding and construction, we envision completion in the winter/spring of 2016. Leadership for this project will come from Beth

El's President, Vice-Presidents and Executive Committee. Implementation will be the responsibility of our Executive Director.

*ii. Accessibility in the Balk Chapel*

Inclusion in the Balk Chapel is a smaller problem, primarily because of the fact that the elevation of the bimah in this room is only 8". In making its needs assessment, our committee has considered engaging in a second project to remove the bimah from this space. Given our focus on complete reconstruction of the Sufrin Sanctuary this year, we will continue to monitor whether the existence of this 8" elevation presents a true accessibility issue for us. As such, we are aware of this issue, but this Action Plan does not call for any immediate renovation of this room.

*iii. ADA Compliance throughout our facility*

Our committee's needs assessment recognized that we have accessibility issues, some minor and some more significant throughout our facility. Some of these rise to the level of actual ADA compliance issues; while others are matters of comfort and practicality for those members with physical challenges. Although our facility underwent a major renovation and expansion in 1996-97, and although all new spaces were designed and constructed to be ADA compliant, the same cannot currently be said for our facility as a whole.

The second realization made by our committee in this regard is that while we strive to create an accessible facility, we are not experts in this area. For this reason, Beth El will work with its architect and if necessary with an ADA Compliance Specialist to help us identify those areas where upgrades and renovation is required. It is noted that ADA compliance, including both the identification of existing issues and remediation, are matters that may give rise to costs. This action plan asks the Board of Trustees to act with fidelity, balancing the need to maintain fiscal responsibility with the need to match our rhetoric regarding inclusion with action.

**B. Addressing the needs of those with special needs in the Spiegel Religious School**

*i. Implementation of the DVASH Hebrew learning curriculum*

Beginning with a pilot program implemented in the past two school years, and continuing with full implementation for this 2015-2016 school year, Beth El's Spiegel Religious School is revolutionizing the way in which Hebrew is taught to our children. No longer will we engage in rote recitation of the Aleph Bet or mindless repetition of words and letters that our students do not understand. Rather, DVASH provides a multi sensory method for the

learning of Hebrew letters, and from this beginning, to a true understanding of the language.

Funding for DVASH is already in place. Our teachers are trained and/or are currently in the process of being trained in this method. The time line is now. All of our members are encouraged to view the promotional video created to highlight this curriculum, which is posted on our website at [bethelcong.org](http://bethelcong.org).

*ii. Hiring of a part time, professional Special Needs Coordinator*

When asked to dream about how our school could do a better job with respect to inclusion of those with special needs, our administration responded by requesting that Beth El recruit and retain a part time, professional special needs coordinator. Our staff currently do an outstanding job of meeting every child and every family where they are at, but because they are not professionals trained in this specific field, and because there is a school full of children to be operated, there is a need for a person who can focus on this issue.

Funding for this position is anticipated to require between \$5,000 - \$10,000 per school year. As of the publication of this action plan, Beth El is in the process of trying to identify a funding source or sources to meet this need. We may look to the existing Stern Family Foundation Grant to begin to fund this initiative, but if this is something that will take hold on a long term basis, other sources will be needed. It is hoped that this position can be funded and filled during the upcoming school year.

*iii. Create more "Steam Teams" – meeting every child and family where they are at.*

This action plan item is Beth El's version of creating individualized educational programs for children with special needs in our Religious School. Our school administration has come to realize that every child has his or her own requirements, and that there must be a way to meet those requirements in a way which enables each kid to be a part of a mainstream class, and to receive the best possible Jewish education. At the same time, meeting the needs of these individual classmates, can and should be a means to educating the neuro-typical children in the class about inclusion.

Beth El's first "Steam Team" was created to address the bar mitzvah training of an autistic, non-verbal child currently in our school. Fortunately, with the assistance of in class aides this child, now twelve years old, has been a student in our school since his class first matriculated. His class mates long ago came to know him and to appreciate his place as a member of their group.

The concept of the Steam Team is fairly simple. Many of the children in this class have agreed to partner with the child in question, to work with him on specific aspects of his bar mitzvah celebration. Religious school time is devoted to this class project. One of the favorite characters of this child is Thomas the Tank Engine; hence the name of the “Steam Team.”

When this bar mitzvah is observed in shul, we will have accomplished two equally important goals. First, the special needs child in question will have the opportunity, not otherwise possible, to fully participate in and experience his own bar mitzvah celebration. Second, by reason of seven years of exposure and almost two years of actively working together on this project, the other children in this class will have grown up in an atmosphere where inclusion is an everyday reality. They will not need to have their attitudes toward special needs individuals transformed; rather inclusion will be imbued in them as a normal, accepted, everyday way of life.

This “steam team” concept has proved to be just right for the involved child and his class. Our school administration recognizes, however, that every child, in particular every special needs child is different. This action plan item is therefore a plan to look for individualized ways to meet the needs of special needs children in our school. When our plan to hire a special needs coordinator is realized, the implementation of the steam teams of the future will be under his/her job description. Beth El is becoming known as a place where all children can realize a meaningful Jewish education, and this program is designed to develop this single positive experience into a sustainable, while individualized program.

**C. Continuing Beth El’s transformation into a true community of affirmation**

*i. Fostering of the “Inclusion Agenda” already a part of the culture of Beth El*

Inclusion is one of those areas where talking is sometimes just as important as doing. While our words must always be backed up with action, it is important that our kehilla declare itself to be an inclusive community.

This process is already well underway at Beth El. For approximately five years, we have spoken repeatedly of our Inclusion Agenda. We scribed the Inclusion Torah, not only to provide a physically lighter weight and easy read scroll, but also to serve as an every-Shabbat reminder that inclusion is a way of life for us. Similarly, our Inclusion Committee sponsors Disability Awareness Shabbat, which has become an annual celebration of the abilities of so many in our congregation. As an action plan item, the fostering of the Inclusion Agenda is a plan to continue to talk this very important talk.

- ii. *Conducting a congregational survey, with the dual goals of (a) increasing the awareness of Beth El's congregants with respect to inclusion related issues; and (b) identifying those areas where further attention is required.*

This fall (2015) under the leadership of Committee Chair Joan Charlson, we plan to conduct a congregational survey at Beth El on inclusion related issues. This survey will be designed to highlight inclusion as an area of importance in our congregation, to identify existing attitudes and how they might be developed, and to identify other potential action items which may not be considered in this current plan.

Again, this is an area where simply talking the talk can have a positive effect. By providing the broad cross-section of Beth El membership with an opportunity to think about inclusion, we will foster the transformation discussed by our Rabbi in his Rosh Hashanah sermon this year, and in this action plan. The true purpose of this survey, however, will be to gauge where we are at today and how to go about completing our transformation to a true community of affirmation. One of the issues that can be addressed in this survey is the congregational attitude regarding streaming of religious services discussed below.

- iii. *Commitment by Rabbi Greenbaum to repeatedly address inclusion issues from the Bimah*

As part of its application to join in the Ruderman Inclusion Action Community, Beth El agreed that its rabbi will speak from the bimah on inclusion related issues on not less than two occasions per year. At Beth El, we consider this to be an easily attainable goal, which sets out a minimum but certainly not a maximum. Disability Awareness Shabbat provides a perfect opportunity for such topics.

This year, on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi Greenbaum challenged the congregation with a thoughtful d'var Torah on the issue of inclusion of those who may appear different or problematic in our community; for example a child who has a "melt down" on an airplane, or who becomes uncontrollable in the synagogue sanctuary. How does one act toward this child or to his/her parents? While our rabbi began his discussion with the proposition that this family should not be shunned, he went on to explain that mere tolerance is not enough. We learned that we do not transform ourselves into an inclusive community until we accept this family for who they are, and ask the four simple words "how can I help."

iv. *Internet Streaming of Beth El's religious services*

All of the inclusion strategies discussed in this action plan presume one underlying fact – that the members of our congregation are able to come to Beth El to pray. In reality, however, there are those who, for reasons of illness, physical disability, or geographical location, cannot come to shul. Another way in which to include all who wish to experience our religious services is to utilize easily available technology to stream these events online.

Our committee has consulted with Rabbi Greenbaum on the halachic implications of streaming our services. He has assured us that this is something that can be done in a manner which is consistent with Conservative notions of Shabbat observance and with Beth El's minhag (traditions). The recording equipment that is needed to effect this service is no different, from a halachic point of view, than the devices with which we have recorded b'nai mitzvah services for many years. Further, this equipment can be installed in our sanctuaries in a way which is unobtrusive and does not interfere in any way with ongoing services.

Our committee has also been made aware of potential privacy concerns which would inevitably accompany the streaming of our services online. While the camera equipment can be placed in such a way as to avoid imaging those seated in the congregation, it is certainly true that the images of those who participate in the service will be broadcast, albeit in this semi-private medium.

It is the consensus of the Committee that the time has come for Beth El to make this service available to its members. The benefits are palpable. Those who are ill, physically unable to travel to shul, or who are out of town are presently unable to participate in or experience our services in any way. Further, although not strictly an inclusion related reason, the streaming of services can be an important tool in educating those who do not yet know about Beth El about the nature of our services. For example, a family which is new to Pittsburgh can watch our service online, and determine whether we are a good fit for them.

Despite the potential privacy concerns, our Committee is recommending that Beth El purchase, install and employ the equipment necessary for streaming of Shabbat services in our Main and Sufrin Sanctuaries. (The installation of streaming equipment can be planned as part of the above-referenced renovation of the Sufrin Sanctuary.) These concerns can be addressed by the use of signage and other means to clearly notify those who participate in services that streaming is occurring.

The time frame for implementation of this strategy can be immediate. As discussed herein, our Committee believes that the potential benefits of streaming our services far outweigh the potential privacy concerns. While this action plan contains this recommendation, the ultimate decision as to whether to implement this program should properly lie with the Board of Trustees.

**D. Dreams for the future**

- i. *Creation of a “clubhouse” to provide safe and appropriate afternoon programming for South Hills teens with special needs.*

As part of its community assessment, our Committee has learned of a need for safe and constructive afternoon / after school programming for special needs teens in our community. We have become aware that the Jewish Community Center of Pittsburgh does provide this service in its Squirrel Hill facility, but not in the South Hills. Unfortunately, this program, which requires drop off and pick up on a daily basis, is practically inaccessible to South Hills families.

The providing of such an afternoon / after school “clubhouse” is a needed service in Pittsburgh’s South Hills Jewish Community. Unfortunately, however, our analysis has determined that: (a) Beth El alone does not have the number of individuals who may require this service to support its implementation; and (b) the expense and practical considerations, including employment of qualified staff, insurance and housing, make this a project that is beyond our current means.

We have consulted with the Jewish Federation’s South Hills Initiative, with the South Hills JCCC and with our partners at Temple Emmanuel, regarding ways in which the community may provide this service. The South Hills initiative would be willing to provide seed funding to get the program off the ground, but would not run the program. While the JCC would support this program, they have advised us that they do not have the space or facilities to house it in their Kane Boulevard location. While Temple Emmanuel was interested, its leadership did not indicate a current willingness to join with us in funding or implementing this program.

For these practical reasons, our Committee has identified the providing of a South Hills “Clubhouse” for special needs teens as something that is needed in our community, but not presently within reach of Beth El as an individual organization. Committee member (and Beth El Vice President of Administration) Nancy Langer is advocating for the initiation of this kind of program in the South Hills. Accordingly, this is something in the category of

dreams of necessary inclusion related programming, but not presently a part of this action plan.

## **Conclusion**

Our participation in the Ruderman Inclusion Action Community has caused Beth El to be justifiably proud of the strides we have made towards inclusion of those with physical and mental disabilities to date; to recognize multiple areas where we can be doing better; and to develop specific strategies for implementation. Our congregation appreciates the opportunity provided by the Ruderman Family Foundation and by United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism to engage in this analysis, and to move us forward in our quest to make Beth El the inclusive community of affirmation that it seeks to become. Our Steering Committee respectfully submits this plan to the Beth El Board of Trustees with the recommendation that it be approved, and that the action items identified herein be pursued and funded as necessary.