

## **Making the Inside Count**

by Stuart S. Kurlander and Steven A. Rakitt

A few months ago, we sent out some friendly videos to the community and received a few angry emails. That's nothing new. But this time they were from members of the deaf community who wanted to know why we had not made the videos close-captioned. And they were absolutely right. Why hadn't we thought of it before? Why did we have to wait for the call to do the right thing?

We live in a much more inclusive time in world history, and yet it will only truly be inclusive when we think preemptively and proactively about accessibility instead of apologizing for our after-the-fact mistakes. And although we live with greater consciousness about disabilities, we still focus on acts of inclusion rather than creating a culture of inclusion.

February is National Jewish Disability Awareness month. It presents a great time to do the necessary thinking and reflection in our Jewish organizational world about how inclusive we really are. We live in an area with a special Hillel at Gallaudet University, with a remarkable network of Jewish group homes for disabled adults, with a national award-winning social club for individuals with Asperger's syndrome and related disorders, with a JCC inclusion camp that serves as a national model and with programs in our day and congregational schools to mainstream children with learning differences.

But are all these wonderful institutions and programs enough to change a culture? We can put up a handicapped ramp outside our buildings and still not be inclusive because it's really about making the inside count. When we plan events, do we think about providing sign interpretation the same way that we naturally think about providing refreshments? Unfortunately, we are not there yet.

As a Jewish community, we need to be on the forefront of inclusion. We open Genesis and read that we are all created in the divine image. There are no exceptions. A passage in the Talmud reflects that when humans mint coins, one mold serves to shape every subsequent coin in the same image. But, the text states, when God created the world, we were all "from the mold of the first human and each one of us is unique."

For us, inclusion is not a politically correct set of behaviors and use of language. It is foundational to our culture. It begins in the very first chapter of the book that has formed and informed the Jewish people for millennia.

This month, from February 1-9<sup>th</sup>, all of our area JCCs have partnered in making the “Reel Abilities: Disabilities Film Festival” a reality. The festival is in its fourth year in New York and its first time in the DC Metropolitan area. It presents a host of award-winning films that celebrate the lives, stories and art of people with disabilities. The showings present an opportunity for us to come together as a community to explore and celebrate the diversity of what it means to be human. Whether it’s a film on the bar mitzvah of a boy with Down Syndrome or a look at the journey through mental illness, these movies put us at the center of a powerful experience that may only reside at the margins of our awareness.

February has its parallel in the Hebrew month of Shvat, a time when we celebrate nature and think about our role as stewards of the environment. In Deuteronomy, a tree is compared to a human being. Like trees, we enjoy the fruit of our labor and have that which roots us and that which we grow and shed. Being stewards of the environment is not only about how we treat nature but how we shape human nature. It’s time to move beyond individual acts of inclusion. It’s our responsibility to create a culture of inclusion.

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