

Shul joins community effort to increase inclusion

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Drum maven David Malchman leads a Saturday evening Havdala/Melava Malka Drumming Madness program at the Feb. 5-6 Shabbat Shalem Weekend at Congregation B'nai Israel in Millburn. The weekend also included a Friday night family service.

by [Eta Levenson](#)

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Feb. 6 was Shabbat Shalem — Shabbat of Inclusion — at Congregation Ahawas Achim B'nai Jacob and David in West Orange. Our goal was to sensitize the community to the concept of “*Kol Yisrael areivim zeh l'zeh*” — “All Jews are responsible for one another.” It was particularly fortuitous to come as it did on Shabbat Yitro — when we learn in the Torah portion that *all* of *b'nei Yisrael* were given the Torah at Har Sinai — and when National Council of Synagogue Youth was holding its regional junior convention at our shul. Even the weather cooperated, as the snowstorm projected for that day missed us almost completely.

The program was cosponsored by MetroWest ABLE; the NAIM program of Yachad, The National Jewish Council for Disabilities; and the National Council of Synagogue Youth, through the Orthodox Union.

During the course of Shabbat, congregation members were exposed to the topic of “Inclusion” through the Friday evening Leil Limud, sermons during Shabbat services, and, for those who made it to shul for Minha Saturday afternoon, two amazing and inspiring presentations from our own young members, Avi Jacob and Jeremy Lichtman, on what it means to them to have a disability.

Speeches and announcements were sign-interpreted — with the interpreter underwritten by MetroWest Able — as an accommodation to people with hearing challenges who cannot usually fully participate in our services.

Congregants noticed, probably for the first time, the four areas of wheelchair seating available in various sections of the main sanctuary. We were also able to show that the *bima* can be made *more* accessible. We are conducting explorations to see how we can make the *bima* completely accessible to people with motor challenges.

We have also purchased additional large-print and Braille *siddurim* and Humashim to help people with visual challenges participate more fully in the services.

In February, designated as National Jewish Disabilities Awareness Month, we are trying to increase our sensitivity to members of the shul who have scent allergies. We have added scent-free soaps in the bathrooms and will try to use scent-free cleansers throughout the synagogue building. (We are also asking members to please be sensitive to people with such aroma allergies.)

We have arranged with the congregation's youth department to have page-turners in the main sanctuary at all times — not just for Shabbat Shalem — so that people who cannot hear the page announcements or have difficulty following the services will be able to follow along. We offer thanks to the youth department and the young people who recognized this need and volunteered to assist.

As part of our ongoing endeavors to make our shul more inclusive, we will add lighting in the parking lots, particularly around the handicapped parking spaces, so that everyone can feel safe coming to our building, even at night. We will also be designating two additional spots reserved for people who need to park closer to the entrance. These changes are also aimed at making our synagogue more user-friendly to the many seniors who join us during the day, but may not feel otherwise included. Even small initiatives like offering car pools for individuals who don't drive at night so that they may attend evening programs can make the difference between their feeling part of the community and feelings of exclusion.

Our efforts are ongoing. We do not see this Shabbat as a once-a-year attempt to include everyone in our community who wishes to participate. These considerations should always be in play — and we welcome suggestions by our members as to how we can continue to make our shul, our home away from home, more inclusive to everyone.

For their involvement in Shabbat Shalem, I would like to thank the members of the AABJ&D inclusion committee, Rabbi Eliezer Zwickler and assistant Rabbi Michael Kakon, congregation president Kenny Saibel, and members who are on the board of MetroWest Able and/or its affiliates: Randee Rubenstein, Larry Rein, Bob Lichtman, and director Rebecca Wanatick, and as always, our

Eta Levenson, ACSW, is chair of the AABJ&D inclusion committee; other members are Felice Blank, Joel Daner, Jeremy Goodman, Harold Kestenbaum, Batya Jacob, Paula Peikes, Mindy Saibel, and youth director Chanie Kirshner.

‘Whole and complete’

Shabbat Shalem — a Shabbat that is “whole and complete” — was held Feb. 6 in conjunction with National Jewish Disability Awareness Month, originating from The National Jewish Council for Disabilities.

Participating in MetroWest's second annual Shabbat Shalem were 28 area congregations and a regional junior convention of National Council of Synagogue Youth.

The aim of the program, said MetroWest ABLE community coordinator Rebecca Wanatick, “is the inclusion of individuals with disabilities and their families in every aspect of Jewish life. To create a truly inclusive community, we are offering opportunities for those with special needs to fully engage in a meaningful and productive Jewish life.”

Shabbat Shalem and MetroWest ABLE (Access, Belonging and Life Enrichment for People and Families with Special Needs) are funded by the UJA Campaign, the Linda Bunis Haller Foundation, the Gary Aidekman Family Foundation, and The Healthcare Foundation of New Jersey.