

FEBRUARY 2026: PHYSICAL ACCESSIBILITY

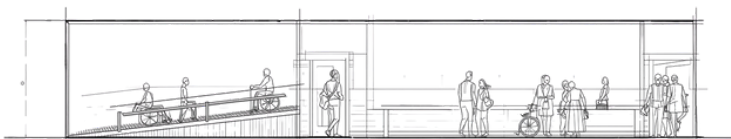
BELONGING BEGINS WITH **US**





Daniella Neifeld

US Community
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As we enter the month of Shevat, a time in the Jewish calendar associated with renewal, growth and possibility, we turn our attention in this issue to a topic that sits at the heart of genuine belonging: physical accessibility in our communities.

Accessibility is often spoken about as a specialist concern, something technical or architectural. But as I've been reminded throughout the process of preparing this issue, accessibility is fundamentally about people. It is about dignity, independence and the quiet yet profound message that says: you are welcome here, and this space was made with you in mind.

February is also JDAIM – Jewish Disability Awareness, Acceptance and Inclusion Month – a global initiative inviting Jewish communities to reflect, learn and take action to ensure that every person can participate fully in Jewish life. It feels especially meaningful to be exploring physical accessibility now, aligned with a wider communal moment of attention and intention.

This month's issue brings together voices from across the community. Our Organisation Spotlight looks at the Board of Deputies' new Disability Inclusion Commission, a national effort to gather best practice and lived experience. Our Belonging Builders feature highlights what local shuls are already doing to make their spaces easier to enter and navigate. And our take-away tips and Kiddush conversations offer small, practical ways for every one of us to expand our awareness.

Accessibility is not a project with a finish line; it is a mindset, a culture and a commitment to removing barriers wherever they appear. As we nurture new growth this Shevat, may we continue building communities where every person can enter, move freely and feel fully at home.

Warmly,
Daniella

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Rabbi Jack Cohen
Rabbi of Mill Hill East

Value, Access and Belonging

No conversation about the approach of Torah to disability can begin without reference to the fact that each and every human being is made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). As such, each of our lives is of incalculable worth (Sanhedrin 4:5), and each of us is loved by God and should know it (Pirkei Avot 3:14). Indeed, every individual ought to remind themselves that "the world was created for my sake" (Sanhedrin 37a).

However, in 2026, the struggle within Jewish communities is not over the inherent value of those with disabilities, but rather with the reality of inclusion. It is part of our wiring as human beings to form groups based on similarities and connections. In these settings, those who are different, in whatever way that may be, can feel isolated; "apart from" instead of "part of". This can lead to feelings of exclusion and loneliness that can be, quite simply, soul-destroying.

The job of any Jewish community centred around values of care, dignity, and respect is to ensure that no one feels "othered", to ensure that everyone feels that they fit and that there is space for everyone to belong. In a beautifully worded Halacha, the Rambam calls on us to make space at our social events for those who risk being marginalised, thereby transforming self-indulgence into true joy and the service of God (Yom Tov 6:18).

Being mindful of those with physical disabilities means ensuring our communities provide the infrastructure necessary for full participation in communal life. Yet, it also requires a collective mentality to ensure that no one is made to feel like an outsider. We must remember that we are all created in the image of God, and that we are all in this journey of life together.





Adam Goodman
Member of Mill Hill East

When Community Comes to You:

Adam shares how small acts of accessibility at Jewish Blind and Disabled and Mill Hill East Jewish Community help build a sense of belonging

For Adam, a resident at Jewish Blind and Disabled (JBD), community is something that has slowly come back into his life. After years of feeling disconnected from Jewish spaces, it was the proximity and genuine outreach of Mill Hill East Jewish Community that helped him rediscover a sense of belonging.

Adam lives with a visual impairment, has the use of one hand, and also navigates learning disabilities. Physical accessibility plays a major part in how he engages with Jewish life. What has made a real difference, he says, is when the community responds practically and sensitively: providing large-print siddurim when he needs them, offering support with following services, and checking in to make sure he's able to participate. "They listen," he says. "If I mention something I need, they try to act on it."

One of the most meaningful points of connection for Adam is the monthly Friday-night service held inside the JBD building. For him, the fact that the community comes to the tenants rather than expecting the tenants to come to them sends a powerful message about inclusion. He describes these visits as "amazing" and wishes they could happen more often. Even when only a small group attends, the consistency matters.

Transport and independence are ongoing challenges, and Adam hopes for a volunteer rota to help disabled members reach events more easily. He'd also love to see more social opportunities that aren't centred around families or religion - spaces where disabled adults can meet, socialise, and feel part of community life.

Despite the challenges, Adam is clear about what keeps him connected: It gives you a sense of who you are - and that you're not isolated.



Small Changes, Big Welcome



Anthony Broza
Chair of Belmont United
Synagogue

When discussing physical accessibility in communal spaces, many imagine large scale architectural projects. At Belmont United Synagogue, Chair Anthony Broza and a small team of volunteers have shown that meaningful inclusion can be achieved through practical, thoughtful adjustments that are simple to implement yet deeply impactful. Belmont's accessibility journey began not as an inclusion initiative but as a response to a building that no longer suited the needs of its members.

The synagogue was built sixty years ago, and as Anthony explains, the structure required updating for a community with an increasing number of older congregants. What followed was a careful rethinking of how people move through the space, guided by the belief that everyone should be able to participate with ease and dignity.

A central focus of the refurb was lowering the bimah and the Aron Kodesh. Traditional designs required climbing several steps, which posed a barrier for many. Inspired by synagogues in Israel, Anthony sketched a new vision with a more accessible layout that allowed congregants to ascend with just one or two steps. The result was a beautiful, modern space that feels open, welcoming, and physically manageable for all.

Belmont also secured a portable wheelchair ramp, donated by a charity, which can be placed over the steps of the bimah whenever needed. Although the ramp has rarely been used, its presence sends a powerful message that participation should never depend on mobility. As Anthony put it, "You are not doing anything complicated, but you are making people feel wanted."

The improvements also extend to the exterior of the building. Belmont releveled all pathways around the synagogue so that anyone, including wheelchair users, can enter easily without encountering steps or temporary ramps. Inside, traditional tall bookcases were replaced with waist height shelving built into a movable mechitzah. This simple idea ensures that siddurim, machzorim, and talleisim are accessible to everyone without reaching or climbing.

Perhaps the most remarkable part of Belmont's approach is the mindset behind it. The community prioritises anticipating needs and removing friction wherever possible. Anthony summarised it simply: "Our approach is to make things easy for people. That is what it is all about."

Belmont demonstrates that belonging is built through practical actions and a culture of care. Their example shows that accessibility is not only achievable, but transformative.



Mechitza/Bookcase:

- Saves spaces
- Aesthetically pleasing
- More accessible than tall bookshelves



Bimah

- Spacious to allow for movement
- Low and wide steps
- Ramp available when needed





How Central Office Supports Accessibility in Synagogues

The overarching goal remains the same: enabling every member to navigate and participate in community life with dignity and ease.



Lali Virdee
Property Director

Creating physically accessible spaces across the United Synagogue is an ongoing journey shaped by varying building types, architectural limitations and a clear commitment to supporting members with diverse needs. Property Director Lali Virdee explains that central office approaches accessibility through three categories: existing buildings, those undergoing refurbishment and major redevelopments or new builds.

For existing buildings, improvements are focused on what is reasonably achievable. Many synagogues were constructed long before accessibility legislation existed and can be difficult to adapt. In these cases, central office supports communities to make thoughtful, practical adjustments such as suitcase ramps, assistance bells at entrances and small engineering changes that allow members to continue attending with dignity. Lali highlights a recent example in the Rabbinic couple's house in Bushey, where a new front entrance ramp was installed and access around the back was reconfigured to meet the needs of a members who would benefit from level or ramp access. These kinds of targeted changes embody the principle of enabling participation wherever possible.

When synagogues undertake moderate refurbishments, accessibility becomes a formal project requirement. Updated regulations often necessitate improved wayfinding, clearer colour contrasts, textured surfaces and safer step nosings to support visually impaired members. Central office works closely with architects to ensure designs remain practical and safe, occasionally pushing back on aesthetic preferences that reduce clarity.

For major refurbishments and new builds, accessibility is non-negotiable. These projects must include full step free access, lifts that accommodate plus sized wheelchairs, safe fire refuge points and clear routes through the building. A strong example is the large scale refurb at Chigwell United Synagogue, where the entire entrance sequence was redesigned. The new layout allows congregants to enter from the car park level and move throughout the building without encountering any steps. Increasingly, new builds also incorporate sensory friendly rooms to support members experiencing mental or emotional distress.

Across all scenarios, Lali expresses the guiding principle simply: new buildings must be fully accessible, and older ones must be improved wherever it is physically and financially possible.

Beyond Requirements of Equality Act 2010 and consulting the BS 8300

NEW BUILD OR REFURBISHMENT Accessibility Considerations



ACCESSIBILITY OF INFORMATION

Information regarding the weight limit of ramps and lifts should be readily available and easy to access. Ideally, it should be in a place where the user can access the information themselves*.

CLEAR SIGNAGE

Consider planning for signage at the entrance and around the building to clarify where to find different areas and accessible features. Consider large, clear and dyslexia-friendly font. Information referring to emergency procedures and who is who in the community should be displayed in either PECS or Easy Read format.



ACOUSTICS

Consider the acoustics of the space. Spaces with high ceilings, no carpets or curtains, hard floors and surfaces can be really noisy, as they reflect the sound, creating extra challenges for people with hearing loss.



LEVEL ACCESS/LIFT ACCESS

Consider making all spaces for men and women level access including access to the Bimah and Aron. Also consider investing in a reader's table that can be accessed by someone in a wheelchair. If building has more than one level, consider a lift or wheelchair lift.



QUIET ROOM

A quiet room is helpful for those who may become overstimulated in a shul environment. It is a space to decompress until the person is ready to rejoin the other space. Quiet rooms should have low, dimmable lights and if possible, be furnished with soft furnishings such as bean bags.



LED LIGHTING

Many people with sensory issues, light sensitivity and sight loss would benefit from LED lighting (and they help cut energy costs).



ASSISTIVE LISTENING DEVICE

Assistive listening devices enable those with hearing loss to engage by enabling them to hear their surroundings. The current recommended assistive listening device is a hearing loop, however, technology changes quickly. Please contact us prior to your build/refurb to discuss the best assistive listening technology for your site which may be better for the users as well as more cost-effective

DESIGNATED WHEELCHAIR AREA

Consider allocating designated space for wheelchairs in both men and women's sections. Modular seating is recommended for this reason.



COVERED "PARKING" AREA FOR MOBILITY SCOOTERS AND BUGGIES

A covered area designated to park mobility scooters, wheelchairs, and buggies will encourage those who use them to attend synagogue/events, knowing they and their very expensive equipment have been considered.

DESIGNATED FRONT ROW

Consider putting in a row in front of where the rabbi gives his sermon for those who would benefit from moving closer when he addresses the community. Consider how this will be done for the Ladies' section as well.



CHANGING PLACES TOILETS

Consider installing a Changing Places Toilet. These toilets are essential for those with restricted mobility who need equipment to help them either get on the toilet or be changed.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR PARENTS WITH BABIES

Consider including a nappy changing space that both men and women can access. Consider including a designated space for nursing mothers.



FIRE DOORS

All doorways should be wide enough for a wheelchair to comfortably fit through. Fire doors are very heavy and therefore difficult to open for some. They should therefore remain opened until activated by an alarm. Consider weight of bathroom doors for this reason as well.



ACCESSIBILITY CONSULTANT

Consider hiring an accessibility consultant. While it may mean more upfront costs, hiring a professional who can navigate the legal requirements and standard best practices will enable you to do the job correctly the first time and not have to spend money later to make changes (i.e. ramps that were the wrong incline or accessibility features not fit for purpose). Please contact us regarding potential grants from external charities.





Michael Wegier
CEO of the Board of
Deputies of British Jews



BOARD OF DEPUTIES OF BRITISH JEWS

ADVOCACY | DEMOCRACY | COMMUNITY

This month, we spotlight the Board of Deputies of British Jews and their newly launched Disability Inclusion Commission. Chief Executive Michael Wegier discusses why the Commission is being created, how it will work and the partners who will help shape its impact.

Q: Why launch a Disability Inclusion Commission now?

"The Board has access to an extraordinary range of communities across all four countries of the UK." He explains that following Commissions on antisemitism and racial inclusivity, disability inclusion emerged as the next area where communal change is urgently needed.

"There is excellent practice in places, but overall there is a great deal of work still to be done... If we can draw together best practice and give people simple guidelines to make their synagogue or organisation more welcoming, that would be a great thing to do."

Q: What will the structure of the Commission be?

"We are in the final stages of confirming the Chairs. We will consult practitioners, experts, academics and people with lived experience, as well as their families."

Working groups will gather evidence over several months, and the goal is to complete the report within the year.

Q: What is the aim of the final report?

"The goal is straightforward: to give communities a roadmap for making their synagogue or organisation a more accessible and welcoming place for people with different types of disability."

Q: How central will lived experience be in this process?

"We will consult practitioners, experts, academics and of course people with lived experience, and their families."

Michael emphasised that this input is essential, not optional.

"We have several Deputies who have both physical and neurodiverse disabilities. They are the ones who put this idea in our minds, and they will be absolutely central to what we do."

He described these Deputies as "great" and crucial in shaping the tone, priorities and realism of the Commission's recommendations.

Organisation Spotlight

(continued)



Q: How will success be measured?

Drawing on the Board's experience with the racial inclusivity report, the plan is to revisit progress a couple of years after publication.

"We don't want to overcomplicate this... but after a couple of years it will be important to take a breath and have a look at what has changed."

Who will implement the recommendations?

"Each organisation will need to identify its own agents of change. Formal leaders like rabbis or chairs are important, but often the best drivers of change are not the people with official titles."

Q: What makes this Commission unique?

Michael highlights three challenges: the need for sensitivity in language, the broad range of disabilities to be addressed and the reality of national funding limitations.

"This is not aimed at frontline care providers... It is about synagogues and communal organisations and helping them do the best job possible."

Q: Any final thoughts?

Michael emphasised the importance of communal partnership, noting that the United Synagogue's recent focus on inclusion has helped bring disability access to the forefront. The US is "a key partner" in this work and he acknowledged its role in elevating the issue nationally.

Kiddush Conversations



ASK EACH OTHER

What might be the "stumbling blocks" in our buildings that we no longer notice, but others still struggle with?

How can we design our physical spaces with intentionality - balancing dignity, beauty, and practical needs?

What forms of dignity do accessible spaces offer that we might take for granted?

ASK THE CHILDREN

If you were building a brand new shul, what would you include to help people who move or sense things differently?

Have you ever noticed something in shul that might be tricky for someone else?

What rules would you make to help everyone feel welcome in shul?

Take Home Tips



Avoid foot-pedal bins which require strength, balance or fine motor control, and use of feet.



Review furniture layout to ensure clear pathways for wheelchairs, walkers and people who need space to manoeuvre.



Provide chairs at kiddush for anyone who cannot stand for long periods.



Offer some seats with arms to assist people who need extra support when sitting or standing.



Have a small supply of accessibility aids such as large-print siddurim, reading glasses, portable ramps or spare wheelchairs.



Encourage people to share their access needs in advance for simchas or events so arrangements can be made calmly and kindly.



Place siddurim, chumashim and tallitot at reachable heights so no-one needs to stretch or climb.

Resources



JEWISH CARE

Jewish Care

Jewish Care is the largest provider of health and social care services for the Jewish community in the UK.



Jewish Blind & Disabled

Jewish Blind & Disabled is the ONLY Jewish charity providing housing and support for people from the age of 18 upwards who have physical disabilities and/ or vision impairments



Ezra U'Marpeh

Ezra Umarpeh's mission is to provide patient support services for those challenged by illness and disability, whether at home or in hospital.



Up!

Changing the way people think about cerebral palsy. Up, formerly known as The Adult Cerebral Palsy Hub is designed to promote better medical services for adults with Cerebral Palsy.

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Thank you to everyone who contributed to this edition of Belonging Begins with US