



MATAN

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Major Report Calls On Jewish Community To Close Gap in Disability Inclusion As Department of Education Cuts Loom

Report urges Jewish community to take action, offers recommendations to increase belonging with people living with disabilities: ‘True inclusion is not optional - it is a religious and communal obligation’

NATIONWIDE – As U.S. Department of Education cuts to special education oversight and disability-related programs risk deepening the already stark disparities in inclusion across Jewish communities, a groundbreaking report released Tuesday from nonprofit organization Matan urges the American Jewish community to take immediate action to close the widening gap in disability inclusion across Jewish communal life.

Drawn from Matan’s Inclusion Community Assessments conducted between 2018–2025 and from evaluation data collected by Dr. Beth Cousens – through surveys, interviews, and focus groups with educators, leaders, and families – the report finds that while secular institutions have advanced accessibility through policy, funding, and accountability, Jewish communal spaces remain inconsistent and fragmented in meeting even basic inclusion standards. The main problem: disability inclusion across the Jewish landscape has become a siloed issue, rather than a shared, systemic commitment woven throughout the community.

With one in four American adults and one in six children living with a disability, the report underscores a sobering and urgent truth: the gap between Jewish values and Jewish practice on inclusion is wide, and closing it requires structure and a commitment to systemic change.

Surveys [have indicated](#) that participation barriers in the Jewish community remain high, with less than one in five American Jews with disabilities reporting that they feel Jewish institutions are doing “very well” in including them. Over 20% report they have been turned away from Jewish activities due to lack of accommodations, while only 15% of Jews with disabilities can name a disabled leader in their faith institutions.

Matan’s research has shown that while good intentions abound across the Jewish communities to commit to practices that foster inclusion, implementation often remains ad hoc and fragmented.

Key findings include:

- Fewer than one-third of Jewish schools employ a dedicated inclusion coordinator.

- More than 70% of institutions have no formal policies or systems for inclusion.
- 70% of communities rely on external service providers or temporary paraprofessional support rather than building long-term internal capacity.
- 80% of Jewish communities lack centralized oversight or accountability for disability inclusion, with inclusion often being fostered by individual champions rather than organizational structures.
- Families frequently leave Jewish institutions because their needs cannot be met, resulting in a loss of engagement, leadership, and belonging.

Moving personal accounts from Jewish professionals, lay leaders, parents and individuals with disabilities illustrate the real-life impacts that this lack of inclusion has had across American Jewish communities, leading many who felt unsupported by their communities to drift away from Jewish life.

“When we lose out on engagement with the Jewish community, it stings,” shared one Jewish parent of a child with disabilities. *“Families are being pushed out of the Jewish community,”* said another.

“I’ve never met so many people who were unaware of equal access,” said one Jewish individual living with a disability.

“I was told, ‘Students with special needs’ are not who we cater to. We don’t have the resources,” shared another parent.

“The default in our community is not inclusive. This is not intentional; it’s just habitual; this is how it’s always been done. This creates ‘otherness,’” said a Jewish professional.

The report notes that people with disabilities continue to experience exclusion from Jewish spaces and systems, not because of lack of care, but because of lack of structure.

“At a time when national infrastructure for disability rights is weakening, the Jewish community has the opportunity - and the obligation - to lead,” the report contends. *“We can demonstrate that inclusion is not only possible but powerful: a force that renews Jewish life, expands leadership, and strengthens every institution it touches. When we design our communities with every person in mind, we not only fulfill the promise of accessibility - we fulfill the promise of klal Yisrael itself, where everyone benefits, and everyone belongs.”*

From Problem to Progress: Concrete Recommendations

The report calls for a shift from goodwill to governance, embedding inclusion into the systems, budgets and training pipelines of Jewish life. It identifies clear, actionable priorities that communities can implement immediately:

- **Establish Community Inclusion Navigators:** Create funded professional roles with federations, JCCs, or partner agencies to coordinate accessibility, connect families to resources, and guide institutions in inclusive planning.

- **Require Ongoing Professional Training:** Implement mandatory disability inclusion training for all clergy, educators, and community staff. Trainings should include strategies for classroom inclusion, accessible event design, and communication with families.
- **Adopt Inclusion Accountability Measures:** Incorporate accessibility audits, annual progress reporting, and measurable goals in every organization’s strategic plan and grant applications.
- **Integrate Inclusive Design in Every Budget:** Designate line items for accessibility improvements, accommodations, and staff training, treating inclusion as infrastructure, not charity.
- **Build National and Local Data-Sharing Networks:** Collect and share data on inclusion efforts to track communal progress, identify gaps, and coordinate resources across institutions.

*“Goodwill alone cannot close the inclusion gap,” says **Meredith Polsky, co-founder and executive director of Matan.** “While our community has the moral clarity to prioritize inclusion, what’s needed now is willpower: to align our systems with our values and our values with our actions.”*

Matan has empowered Jewish communities to create inclusive environments where individuals of all abilities can learn, grow, and belong. Through its *Inclusion Community Assessment, Planning & Strategy (I-CAPS)* program and nationwide partnerships, Matan has guided organizations toward meaningful, systemic inclusion across schools, synagogues, camps, and community spaces.

Matan’s suite of programs and resources – including its Institute for Education and Youth Directors and Lieberman Fellowship, which provide one-of-a-kind professional development experiences and supports for professionals and organizations, and its Resource Development and Curriculum Consultation, which creates tools and lesson plans used in classrooms and programs – equip professionals and community leaders alike to make inclusion an everyday reality.

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About Matan

For more than two decades, Matan has worked alongside Jewish schools, synagogues, and organizations to build sustainable systems of inclusion. Through professional training, consultation, and community-wide assessments, Matan equips leaders to translate values into action — creating Jewish spaces where people of all abilities can learn, pray, and belong.