

CONGREGATION KOL AMI in WHITE PLAINS

Receives North American Award for Outstanding Inclusion of People with Disabilities

[December 2015, White Plains, New York – Congregation Kol Ami is one of twenty-seven Reform Jewish congregations from all across North America recognized by the [Union for Reform Judaism](#) as an [Exemplar Congregation](#) for having made great strides in [inclusion of people with disabilities in all facets of congregational life](#). Exemplar Congregations were honored with a certificate of merit in inclusion at the URJ Biennial 2015 in Orlando, Florida.

Each Exemplar Congregation has excelled in one or more areas of inclusion, focusing on important initiatives such as architectural and physical accommodations, transportation, religious school, *b'nai mitzvah*, worship, and beyond. Exemplar Congregations have agreed to serve as mentors to other Reform congregational professionals pursuing specific areas of inclusion.

All of the Exemplar Congregations are featured on the [Disabilities Inclusion Learning Center](#) site, launched in partnership with the [Ruderman Family Foundation](#) as part of the [URJ Ruderman Disabilities Inclusion Initiative](#). An online portal designed to better enable congregations to become more inclusive, the site is a vital component of the Reform Movement's ongoing work to ensure the inclusion of people of all abilities in congregational life. The site, which features skill-building webinars, videos, and print resources, also provides a platform to connect staff members, lay leaders, and congregants from Reform congregations across North America. These connections offer congregations opportunities to learn from and educate one another on issues of inclusion.

Congregation Kol Ami is an inclusive congregation in every way, valuing members with appreciation for their individual differences. On our website, www.nykolami.org, you may read about initiatives by our Early Childhood Program and our Religious School.

Kol Ami has an active Inclusion Committee, chaired by Marci Frankenthaler and Beth Tomkiewicz, which is comprised of congregants with specific areas of expertise who proactively address the different issues of inclusion. We have dozens of members being supported by myriad accommodations designed to ensure their full engagement in all worship services, programs and activities.

Just this year at the urging of our Inclusion Committee our seating was re-arranged in our main sanctuary and smaller chapel to better enable someone in a wheelchair to more comfortably sit among the rest of the congregation and for someone using a walker to more easily walk to a seat. Further, we provide hearing devices to ensure that adults with hearing difficulties are able to fully participate in our worship. It is also important to note then when our sanctuary was redesigned in 2012 the full inclusion of congregants with physical disabilities was of paramount importance in our planning. For example, a beautiful ramp affords someone in a wheelchair or using a walker easy access to the Bima. Further, our ark opens wide, again enabling someone in a wheelchair to wheel himself/herself into the ark as easily as another congregant might walk into it.

We are also sensitive to, and fully supportive of, congregants challenged by mental illness. Through a partnership with Westchester Jewish Community Services (WJCS) we offer courses and provide free counseling services. Also through WJCS Shelanu, young Jewish adults ages 18–35 with Autism regularly worship with us and work with us in our Food Pantry. The work in our food pantry provides these young adults many skills needed in an office environment and supports the development of social skills.

Moreover, we have a robust Adult Education Committee, which brings innovative programming to Kol Ami. Through a partnership with Westchester Adult Jewish Education (WAJE) we offer a variety of courses covering issues of mental health and wellness designed to keep adults with mental illness involved in temple life in a positive way. Similarly, we are proud to be the home to an active AA group and new Al-Anon group enabling Jews to seek support within a temple as opposed to a church or community center.

In addition, we ensure our staff and our High Holy Day ushers are appropriately trained in proper etiquette when addressing someone with a disability. For example, we train our ushers to speak with the person in the wheelchair and not the person pushing the wheelchair. Similarly, we ask someone with a

disability if he/she would like assistance, instead of assuming assistance is required.

Most recently, a LGBTQ committee was formed and a LGBTQ Bulletin Board was installed in our main hallway. For years, we have proudly hosted an annual LGBTQ Pride Shabbat. We have hosted several transgender speakers and have revisited the language we use in our programs to ensure all feel welcome to participate. We look forward to new offerings in this area.

“At Congregation Kol Ami, we have always worked hard to provide for all facets of our community, so it is very gratifying to have been recognized as a URJ Exemplar Congregation. Our focus is on all of our congregants' needs, and we are proud of what we have accomplished to ensure that every member, regardless of their age, race, religion, sexual preference or identity, physical abilities or intellectual or social capabilities, feels embraced at Kol Ami. This recognition is just one more step in our continuing growth, as we look for other ways, physically, emotionally and spiritually, to open up our community to anyone and everyone who wishes to join us,” said Congregation Kol Ami President Hank Rouda.

“These Exemplar Congregations are advancing what must be our highest priority—helping more people feel at home in Jewish experiences. The URJ calls this work Audacious Hospitality, which encompasses the core Jewish values around having an open tent (*ohel patuach*), loving kindness (*chesed*), and respect (*kavod*). We applaud these creative approaches toward helping the entire Reform Movement create an inclusive and open Judaism that brings more people closer to the core of Jewish life,” said URJ President Rabbi Rick Jacobs.

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About the Union for Reform Judaism

The Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) builds community at every level—from the way we collaborate with congregations, organizations, and individuals to how we make connections across North America to advance contemporary and inclusive Jewish life. Providing vision and voice to transform the way people connect to Judaism, we help congregations stay adept and agile, motivate more young Jews to embrace Jewish living, agitate for a more progressive society, and foster meaningful connections to Israel.

Founded in 1873, URJ has grown into the most powerful force in North American Jewish life, with almost 900 member congregations and work that inspires millions of people. Our legacy, reach, leadership, and vision mean that we can unite thousands of years of tradition with a modern, evolving Judaism to strengthen Jewish communities today and for future generations.

Visit us at www.URJ.org to learn about our social justice initiatives, camps and programs for young Jews, services for congregations and communities, and how you can work with us to create a more just, whole, and compassionate world. Enjoy related content at ReformJudaism.org and connect with URJ on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).