

“My house will be called a house of prayer for all people.” —Isaiah 56:7

INCLUSIVE GREETING & USHERING GUIDANCE FOR THE WHOLE COMMUNITY

“Our synagogue is already warm and welcoming. Why do we need to do anything differently?”

If that is what you are thinking, you are not alone.

Even when our intentions are 100% good, we sometimes say or do something that is inadvertently offensive or off-putting to people whose experiences differ from our own. Perhaps we are just trying to be friendly or say something we think is funny to put someone else at ease. It may be surprising when someone is put off by something we consider neutral or benign, yet that is exactly what happens.

We may believe our words and actions are inclusive. However, research says otherwise about the experiences of marginalized populations in Jewish spaces. Jews are a diverse people, including different races and ethnicities. However, our behaviors do not always reflect this fact. For example, most Jews of Color report that they have experienced discrimination in a synagogue community because of their race, assumptions about their Jewish status, or another aspect of their identity. The dominance of Ashkenazi heritage in American Judaism also can make Jews who don’t have that background feel out of place. People who were not born or raised Jewish, are disabled or are gender non-conforming have likewise reported being excluded (however inadvertent it may have been).

What we say and how we say it really matters. No matter how warm, welcoming, and inclusive our congregations already are (or think we are), there is always room for growth and improvement.

Now is the time to ensure that Jews and our beloveds of other faiths and/or cultural backgrounds, Jews of Color, LGBTQ+ folks, people of all disabilities, and unpartnered adults (including divorcees and widows/widowers) are not marginalized in Jewish communities. Unintentional biases exist in all communities.

Our greeters at services and programs are a key “first encounter” for newcomers and guests in our communities. This resource is designed to support greeters and ushers in making your community’s space a truly inclusive one for *all* who enter. However, it is also intended as a refresher for the whole community to ensure that all who enter our doors are treated *b’tzelem Elohim* (created in the divine image). Celebrating diversity and encouraging belonging strengthens Jewish peoplehood.

On the following page are “Do’s” and “Don’ts,” followed by brief explanations. Should you have any questions or want to discuss this further, contact Dr. Keren R. McGinity, USCJ’s Director of Inter marriage Engagement and Inclusion, at kerenmcginity@uscj.org, to schedule a consultation.

DO

Say something when people first enter – e.g., “Shabbat Shalom!” / “L’Shana Tovah” / “We’re so glad you’re here.”

Why? Because it signals that they are seen, that this space is their space, too, and that belonging happens here.

Offer details about an aspect of the community that is important to you and ask what is important to people.

Why? People look for different things, and offering one’s own perspective followed by a question creates an opportunity for people to weigh in without being put under a microscope.

If someone offers a piece of information, such as where they live or what they do professionally, reciprocate with similar information about yourself.

Why? Reciprocal sharing of personal details builds relationships without seeming nosy.

Respect a person’s appearance, identity, self-label, chosen name, and pronouns.

Why? Everyone deserves to be treated *b'tzelem Elohim*, created in God’s image. Engage people in conversation and get to know them on their terms. Share something about yourself to encourage dialogue.

Before asking a question, ask yourself, “Am I asking to satisfy my curiosity or for their engagement?”

Why? Conversations build relationships, and relationships build belonging. A conversation is a reciprocal exchange between people of equal power, not a questioning of someone’s identity or behavior.

Before saying anything beyond the initial greeting, ask yourself: “Would I make this comment if this person were white/non-disabled/gender-conforming, etc.?”

Why? Our inherent biases are informed by our own identities and experiences. If you wouldn’t say or ask yourself something, it’s possible that the comment or question will offend someone else.

Let the person know that you are available if they have any questions or need anything to feel welcome.

Why? This gives the person control over letting you know what brings them to the service or event, what knowledge or accommodations they might need, or other information they want you to know about them.

DON'T

Ask someone, "Are you Jewish?"

Why not? It implies that you suspect that they are not Jewish (or Jewish enough) or that you think they do not belong.

Make assumptions about gender identity, sexual orientation, religious identity, Jewish background, disability, race, marital status, children, or reasons for joining us.

Why not? People's identities are personal and complex. They are much more than meets the eye, and it's up to them to reveal or talk about them.

Comment on whether someone looks Jewish or not.

Why not? Jews look many different ways, and this comment denies that diversity.

Ask, "Is this your first time here?" or "What brought you here?"

Why not? It might not be their first time; they may belong, and your question sets up the impression that you belong and they don't.

Comment about whether a name sounds Jewish.

Why not? It is judgemental and exclusionary because it prioritizes "Jewish-sounding" names (whatever those might be) over other ethnic groups' surnames.

Assume people want to speak about their identity or someone to immediately become your resource for understanding their identity.

Why not? No one should be expected to represent their identity group or to serve as a resource when they are coming to participate in community programming.

Educate someone about Judaism unless they ask.

Why not? It assumes they don't know when they might or that they want to know more when they may not want to at that particular moment.

Ask someone how many children they have.

Why not? They may not want or be able to have kids.

Ask, "How far along are you?" or "When is the baby due?" if someone looks visibly pregnant.

Why not? They may have already given birth, had a miscarriage, been dealing with infertility, or their physical appearance could be unrelated to pregnancy. They may not want or be able to have kids.