**A Minority Within a Minority Within a Minority…**

For over two thousand years, Jews have migrated and entered most nations throughout the world. Except for the modern state of Israel, Jews are a minority in all other areas in the world, including the United States. Among people who identify as Jewish, there is a minority of persons with disabilities and within that group are a minority of people who are blind and low vision. A minority within a minority within a minority. You get the picture.

Judaism is more than just a religious faith. It is history, culture, family connections and community. Like many other religious and ethnic groups is made up of different denominations. Examples of different denominations include Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, and many others. This is no difference than what you find in Christianity (e.g., Protestant, Catholic, Greek and Russian Orthodox). Each denomination has different traditions, practices and approaches to what it means to be Jewish.

When it comes to people with disabilities the first thing that people think about when it comes to inclusion or accommodations in synagogues and other Jewish institutions, they think first of making physical changes such as putting in wheelchair ramps. When it comes to persons who are blind or have low vision, the one thing people always think about is magnifiers as a “one size fits all” solution. In many synagogues the prayer book used is not available in braille or even an electronic format for people with braille notetakers. This is also the case that materials in alternate formats are not available for bible study and other learning opportunities. We as blind people wish to be included and an equal participant in all aspects of Jewish life.

The National Federation of the Blind (NFB) in Judaism was formed many years ago so that members and other blind people who happen to be Jewish can share concerns and ideas, and work to be part of their Jewish communities. In addition to meeting during national convention, the group has begun to meet via zoom during the year.

One area of discussion for this group has been ways to reach out to other blind persons who are also Jewish, encouraging more Jewish people to become active in the NFB. In thinking about being as inclusive as possible, it is suggested that NFB national divisions, committees, state affiliates, and local chapters should consider the practices of observant or traditional Jews.  A traditional or observant Jew is an individual who observes the practices of traditional Judaism.  This includes most Orthodox, many Conservatives, and some Reform Jews. However, these practices will vary from individual to individual.  Here are general examples of traditional Jewish practices:

* Observance of Shabbat (the Sabbath).  Shabbat traditionally runs from just before sunset Friday evening to just after sunset Saturday evening.  This time is considered holy by observant Jews and is therefore differentiated from the rest of the week.  During this time, some people will not drive or use any motorized transportation, will not use electronics, or attend to regular business activities.  Again, these practices will vary from individual to individual and from denomination to denomination.  (There have been some changes in practices due to the pandemic.)  these same practices are followed during major holidays which include the following:
  + Rosh Hashanah (The Jewish New Year)-This is celebrated for either one or two days.
  + Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement)
  + Sukkot (Feast of Tabernacles)-the first two and last two days of an eight-day holiday)
  + Pesach (Passover-first two and last two days of an eight-day holiday)
  + Shavuot (Feast of Weeks)
* Special dietary practices, referred to as Kashrut or keeping Kosher.  In general, this includes separation of milk and meat, not eating pork or shellfish, and eating meat that is produced in a special way.  Some people who keep kosher will eat out fish and vegetarian dishes out, others will not.

What is described above is very basic and does not include everything, nor is it possible to go into detail of the thinking behind all of these practices.  There are many Jews who do not follow all or even part of the practices that are described above.

Here are some suggestions that could make NFB activities more inclusive to observant Jews:

* Particularly, in an area of the country with a relatively high Jewish population, consider not holding chapter or affiliate activities on Saturday, choosing instead either Sunday afternoon or during the week.  At the very least, when possible, avoid having activities on Saturday morning, as this is when services are held.  (This would be the same as holding activities on Sunday morning when many people attend church services.) Consideration should be given to not holding NFB activities on major Jewish holidays.
* If meals are a part of any activity, offer either to arrange for kosher food or at least a fish, vegetarian or vegan option.  For those people who choose not to eat out in non-kosher settings, allow them to arrange or bring in their own food to enjoy with others.
* If invocations are a part of a NFB activity, such as a state convention, Jewish members may be invited to lead some of the invocations as other religious groups are invited.
* The NFB should stand ready to advocate for our Jewish members to be full participants in the activities of the Jewish community.

Jews are a minority in our country and in the NFB. Therefore, these suggestions for inclusion are simply suggestions, realizing that it would not be always possible to follow these practices.  For example, a local chapter may not be able to meet on any other day than Saturday due to transportation issues. If a meeting is required to take place on a Saturday, then having it in the afternoon would allow some potential members attend following morning services. Another example if a national division, committee, or group is having a meeting that takes place during a major Jewish holiday, having a second session not on that holiday would be a good idea and by having more than one meeting or session, this could increase participation.

The NFB has a lot to offer to blind people who happen to be Jewish. At the same time those people have a lot to offer to our organization. We need to reach out to people who are a minority with a minority.