THE TORAH OF INCLUSION
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Opening
For over 15 years, Judaism Your Way has been meeting Jews and loved ones with unconditional love, joy, acceptance, empathy, and respect. While key in providing people with an experience of a Judaism that cared about them, these qualities were not sufficient to build and sustain a Judaism of maximal inclusion. Judaism Your Way was created specifically for those whose experience with Judaism was one of marginalization or a lack of welcome. Underneath the marginalization and exclusion experience lay assumptions about who is Jewish, who belongs in Jewish space, what Judaism is, and who it’s for. Challenging and replacing those assumptions is the purpose of the Torah of Inclusion.

What is the Torah of Inclusion?
The Torah of Inclusion joins two terms: Torah + Inclusion. Torah means both the foundational sacred text of Jewish wisdom, as well as the process by which Jews and loved ones discern insights, meaning, goodness, and connection to what we hold sacred in our lives.

Inclusion means expanding who belongs within the tent of Judaism, with particular attention to those who have felt hurt, invisible, and on the margins of Jewish life. Inclusion is shorthand for the way we aspire to treat and be with each other, the kind of community we want Judaism Your Way to be, and the kind of society of which we want Judaism Your Way to be a part.

The Torah of Inclusion therefore is a Torah-inspired vision of a maximally inclusive Judaism. Today, the Torah of Inclusion is the ground upon which Judaism Your Way stands. Our vision is that one day, the Torah of Inclusion will be the ground upon which all of Judaism stands.

The Five Bold Ideas that Inform the Torah of Inclusion

Meeting people where they are with love, respect, and generosity.

“One human being was originally created to teach that one who destroys one person’s life is considered to have destroyed a whole world, and one who preserves one person’s life is considered to have preserved a whole world… When a person mints coins from one mold they all appear identical, but the Holy Blessed One “minted” every person from the mold of the first human being, not one identical to another. Therefore, a person should say, the world was created for me.” Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

Judaism Your Way has been described as a Jewish outreach organization, but this is not who we are. The term “outreach” suggests a fixed Jewish center that reaches out to marginalized Jews and brings them back towards the center. However, the very name Judaism Your Way turns this image on its head: engaging the individual, couple, or family where they are, rather than try to bring them to wherever we imagine Judaism is.
The practice of meeting people where they are is a foundation of The Torah of Inclusion and illustrated by one of the most ancient and powerful sacred Jewish ritual items – the tallit (prayer shawl). What distinguishes a tallit from any ordinary shawl is the presence of tzitzit or specially tied and knotted strings on the four corners of the cloth. It is the tzitzit that one pays attention to. What gives the tallit Jewish sacred power is not what’s in the center but what’s at the fringes and on the margins, the tzitzit of the tallit. In other words, the center is not the center. The fringes are the center.

The difference between an approach to Jews and loved ones defined as outreach and the Torah of Inclusion approach of meeting people where they are is powerfully articulated by Dr. Crystal Jones: “There is a huge difference between ‘all are welcome’ and ‘this was created with you in mind.’”

Judaism has always held the potential for full inclusion. The Torah of Inclusion makes it real.

You stand this day, all of you, before the Eternal your God – your tribal heads, your elders and officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp...

Deuteronomy 29.9-10

Throughout Jewish history, the potential for full inclusion has been aspirational, rather than a lived reality. Judaism Your Way’s Torah of Inclusion brings this aspiration to life in real time.

Seeds of inclusion were planted from the very beginning of Judaism. Over the course of Jewish history, when given the opportunity, these seeds have germinated and bloomed with respect to both who gets to participate and who gets to lead in Judaism. The Torah of Inclusion models full inclusion in both ritual participation and spiritual authority.

**Ritual Participation**
In the late 20th century, liberal Jewish denominations expanded Jewish identity to include individuals whose only Jewish parent is their father. In addition, growing numbers of communities now offer ritual access to people of other or no faith identities. For example, parents of a Be Mitzvah (conventionally known as a Bar or Bat Mitzvah) who identify with other faith traditions are commonly given an Aliyah to the Torah (blessing over the reading of the Torah during services). Additionally, in communities with the practice of a group Aliyah, people of other backgrounds routinely come up to the Torah as part of the Jewish group offering and receiving the blessings.

**Spiritual Authority**
In Biblical times, spiritual authority was restricted to the males of the Levite tribe. After the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in the first century CE, sacred authority expanded to include every Jewish adult male. In the 20th century, Jewish rabbinic authority expanded further to Jewish women, and later to openly LGBTQ+ Jews. At Judaism Your Way, the rabbinic team currently includes three women and one man, straight and LGBTQ+ rabbis ordained in three different denominations.
The Torah of Inclusion builds community, from “me” to “we.”

_Love your neighbor as yourself._ Leviticus 19:18

In its early years, Judaism Your Way offered disenfranchised Jews and loved ones experiences of full Jewish recognition and inclusion by meeting them where they were. Today, Judaism Your Way is a community and home for thousands of people. The Torah of Inclusion has become a philosophy and practice with the potential to transform how people care for one another in speech and action. The Torah of Inclusion can guide us to create a truly inclusive, kind, and just community.

The words “your way” in Judaism Your Way communicate a commitment to helping people discover their unique path into and within Judaism. _Your way_ was originally offered as a corrective to people’s experience of not being recognized by Judaism. But _your way_ contains a limitation – the message is centered only on the participant. _Your way_ can be perceived by the participant as _my way_. Call it Judaism in the first person – a Judaism of “I” and “me.” _My way_ alone is insufficient to creating and sustaining a community with a common bond among members.

The Torah of Inclusion offers a second understanding of _your way_. _Your way_ expresses the need for each participant in the community to practice the Torah of Inclusion towards themselves and towards each other. As a community member, I am not only concerned with experiencing Judaism _my way_. I am also encouraged to understand and respect what Judaism might be as _your way_, even if it conflicts in some part with _my way_. A strong and caring community emerges when members become concerned with and protective of each other’s ways.

In this way, the Torah of Inclusion provides a spiritual glue strong enough to bond the diverse members of a community together. It offers a vision that community stakeholders can point to when describing what makes Judaism Your Way special. It offers a vision of Judaism that, hopefully one day, all Jews, loved ones and allies will practice and celebrate.

The Torah of Inclusion is a practice within and beyond the Judaism Your Way community.

_A Divine Voice proclaimed: “Both these (the school of Shamai) and those (the school of Hillel) are the words of the living God. However, God’s will is in accordance with the opinion of the School of Hillel.”_

_Why? The reason is that they were agreeable and forbearing, showing restraint when affronted, and would teach both their own statements and the statements of the school of Shamai. Moreover, they prioritized the statements of the school of Shamai to their own, in deference to their adversaries._ Talmud Bavli, Eruvin 13b

Inclusion can be challenging, an opportunity for personal and collective growth. Inclusion is an ongoing ethical value and spiritual practice. People’s natural tendency to form groups that privilege agreement and comfort have resulted in the exclusive communities that have kept so many Jews and loved ones disengaged and unaffiliated. People who are used to things being a certain way may feel uncomfortable when pro-inclusion changes are introduced. People who are not used to being welcomed into Jewish spaces may feel uncomfortable walking through the door. _The Torah of Inclusion calls upon each and all of us to develop our own skills and capacity for including others and including ourselves._
The Torah of Inclusion is grounded in mitzvot* in the Torah that support the building of inclusive community. Central among them are:

- We preserve and lift human dignity, because we see the image of the Divine in every human face.
- We do not oppress the stranger because we too were strangers.
- We love our neighbor as we love ourselves.
- We protect and care for those who are vulnerable.

*mitzvot: plural of mitzvah; the term mitzvah can be variously translated as commandments, spiritual and ethical principles, acts of spiritual connection, ways to show we care about important relationships

While inclusion requires acknowledging multiple perspectives, it does not imply unanimity, agreement, or consensus. Inclusion does mean that everyone gets a seat at the table, that everyone has a voice, and that those voices are heard. Moving towards a community of greater inclusion will sometimes require centering voices and perspectives of those who historically have had no place at the Jewish table.

The Torah of Inclusion is a prophetic voice, speaking both to the Judaism Your Way community, and beyond to our wider society. The level of inclusion in the broader community influences the degree to which we can create maximally inclusive Judaism within our own community. The Torah of Inclusion supports policies that promote inclusion and dignity for all people.

The Torah of Inclusion evolves and changes.

I make this covenant, not with you alone, but with both those who are standing here with us this day and with those who are not with us here this day. Deuteronomy 29: 13

Religions are most compelling and useful when they respond to the spiritual needs of their times. Post-Biblical Judaism emerged as a response to the oppression, dispersion, and social isolation of the Jewish people. Today, most Jews are deeply integrated with people of other cultures and faith traditions. Growing numbers of Jews and loved ones locate their Jewish identities among many other complex and fluid identities. For Judaism to be compelling, it must respond to these realities as deeply as older forms of Judaism responded to their social realities.

The remarkable growth of Judaism Your Way testifies to an evolving understanding of and capacity to practice the Torah of Inclusion. In 2004, the most pressing mandate of Judaism Your Way was to provide a maximally inclusive Judaism to interfaith and mixed-heritage couples and families. In short order, Judaism Your Way expanded to serve additional groups: LGBQ Jews and loved ones, those who identify as spiritual but not religious, secular, agnostic, atheist, “Jewish-plus”, and people without Hebrew literacy.

Although we’ve become increasingly aware of the diversity of Jewish populations, we’ve barely begun to consciously and effectively include people of color, non-binary Jews and loved ones, people with disabilities, and people returning to Judaism after generations (if not centuries) of oppression (for example, the descendants of conversos, a significant population in the American southwest).

There are Jewish identities and populations not mentioned here, who have yet to emerge from the margins, out of the shadows of invisibility. Inclusion is an evolving practice, requiring openness, generosity, compassion, and humility.
The Torah of Inclusion in Practice

Many Jewish communities and organizations present themselves as inclusive. However, few articulate specifically what inclusion means, by what metrics inclusion is measured, and how the organization is accomplishing the work. Placing the Torah of Inclusion in the center of personal and community practice communicates a commitment to pursuing inclusion, and to holding the Judaism Your Way community up to this standard. Different stakeholders in Judaism Your Way will experience and express this standard in different ways.

Community Leaders

Community leaders at Judaism Your Way include our Board of Directors, committee members, co-leaders of services, and organizational ambassadors. Recognizing that many community leaders do not commonly use the term “Torah” in describing their relationship to Judaism in general, the term “Torah of Inclusion” may initially feel too religious or otherwise awkward. We encourage community leaders to adopt the term “Torah” as the universally recognized Jewish term for a vision of a better world and the means to achieve that better world. Community leaders informed by The Torah of Inclusion will:

• Reflect and promote the diversity of the Judaism Your Way community as an expression of the Torah of Inclusion.
• Grow their own appreciations of the wide varieties of Judaism and Jewishness they get to steward, including their own.
• Recognize that inclusion might sometimes feel uncomfortable. Trust that this discomfort can potentially lead to insight, empathy, relationship, and transformation.
• Recognize that inclusion means centering the voices and perspectives of those who historically have had no place at the Jewish table.

Rabbis and teachers

Recognizing that Jewish sacred literature features both inclusive and exclusive voices, Judaism Your Way’s rabbis and teachers:

• Support people on their Jewish journey to find transformative experiences and answers that speak to their needs.
• Privilege Judaism’s sacred sources that speak to inclusion and attempt to reframe those that don’t.*
• Explicitly communicate the wide variety of human experiences that comprise the Judaism Your Way community, in particular Jewish identities that have been historically marginalized or ignored.
• Embody an awareness of Jews as a global people, committing to the elimination of unaware cultural biases and assumptions about what Jewish is, and learning best practices with respect to the inclusion of Jews, and loved ones, of color.
• Commit to learning best practices for including non-binary Jews and loved ones, including developing facility with the emerging field of non-binary Hebrew.
• Use an expanding repertoire of metaphors for the sacred.
• Help people reframe the Jewish “no’s” they may have experienced into Jewish “yesses.”

* Love and empathy live at the heart of the Torah of Inclusion. Judaism Your Way’s rabbis and teachers will take this seriously, listening deeply to the stories and needs of people who seek Jewish connection. By listening to how people have been hurt and how they want to connect Jewishly, Judaism Your Way’s rabbis and teachers model empathy for one another, listening to the needs and yearning first, and meeting people where they are. The path forward is discerned and built together in partnership.
Staff
Recognizing that Judaism has historically been experienced as exclusive and non-welcoming by too many Jews and loved ones, all staff at Judaism Your Way will:

- Commit to understanding and communicating to the Jewish community through the lens of the Torah of Inclusion.
- Examine their own relationship to Judaism (and religion in general) and work to heal the effects of any exclusive messages they have experienced and internalized.
- Support people on their Jewish journey to find transformative experiences and answers that speak to their needs.

Judaism Your Way Participants
There are multiple opportunities for belonging in the organized Jewish community. Most participants in the Judaism Your Way community have not chosen those opportunities because the meaning of membership has not yet been compelling to them. The Torah of Inclusion is a vision of beloved community and a practice of moving towards that vision that they haven’t found and might not find anywhere else. Judaism Your Way community members are the people who have found a home in the Torah of Inclusion. This means that Judaism Your Way Participants will:

- Grow in their appreciations of the wide varieties of Judaism and Jewishness they witness and practice, including their own.
- Recognize that inclusion might sometimes feel uncomfortable. Trust that this discomfort can potentially lead to insight, empathy, relationship, and transformation.
- Understand that inclusion means prioritizing the voices and perspectives of those who historically have had no place at the Jewish table.
- Remain open to new artistic expressions of Judaism.
- Take on the Torah of Inclusion as a Jewish practice, not only a Jewish experience.
Conclusion

YHWH, YHWH compassion and tenderness
Patience, forbearance, kindness, awareness
Bearing love from age to age.
Lifting guilt and mistakes and making us free.

Exodus 34:6-7

We’ve been here before. The destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in the year 70, and the dispersion of Jews throughout the Middle East and the Mediterranean, meant that the Biblical model of Judaism could no longer speak to the vast majority of Jews. The emergence of Rabbinic Judaism out of Biblical Judaism can serve as a model for the emergence of The Torah of Inclusion out of the many forms of Judaism that exist today, forms that no longer speak compellingly to growing numbers of Jews and loved ones. The Torah of Inclusion is a growing edge of Judaism, offering sacred experiences and understandings that open people up to wonder, joy, gratitude, insight, and connection.

More than race or ethnicity or culture, the Torah of Inclusion is an invitation to the felt experience of belonging; you belong to Judaism and Judaism belongs to you.

In Parashat Nitzavim, Moses speaks a final time to the assembled Israelites on the eastern bank of the Jordan River. Because the text of his speech is so well known, it is easy to lose sight of how expansive and embracing is his invitation to belong: “You are all standing here,” he begins, and then describes a maximally inclusive vision of the Jewish people, including even all those who are not there yet (Deuteronomy 29:9-14). Perhaps Moses was issuing the Jewish people a challenge: The Torah you have received is a Torah of inclusion. Who is not here and wants to be? Who is not yet recognized? Who is still excluded? Who is still excluding? We must find a way to meet you where you are. Until we can and do, our vision of Judaism and Jewish community is not large enough.

Finding ways to that larger vision of Judaism and building that community together is the purpose of The Torah of Inclusion and the mission of Judaism Your Way.
Definitions

1. **Outreach**: Judaism Your Way’s mission has historically been described as outreach. Outreach is the work of reaching out to people in order to bring them back in to Judaism. The responsibility of the movement is on the part of the people being reached out to. The Torah of Inclusion is based upon the assumption that it is Judaism that needs to move to the people, and while there is always the invitation for people to grow and change, it is Judaism that must make the first move. Judaism is at its best when it is evolving and expanding to where populations who were previously not recognized within the Jewish embrace now experience Judaism as being fully theirs.

2. **Torah**: The term “Torah” has multiple intersecting meanings within the Torah of Inclusion:
   a. Like all authentic expressions of Judaism, the Torah of Inclusion is grounded in Jewish Scripture.
   b. Like all authentic expressions of Judaism, the Torah of Inclusion understands Torah to be the evolving spiritual and ethical insights of the Jewish people.
   c. Torah is a spiritual and moral foundation for Jewish community. Its voice is mitzvah – a term that can be understood in several ways: good deed, commandment, an act of spiritual connection or care about an important relationship, and an act of responsibility.
   d. The root of the Hebrew word Torah means “to aim.” This means that:
      i. Inclusion is an original aspirational Jewish spiritual and moral value (mitzvah) toward which the Jewish people, at its best, has always aimed.
      ii. Inclusion is a dynamic unfolding process – a behavior in the present, a consciousness that changes over time, and a goal never quite achieved.

3. **Inclusion**: People’s natural tendency to form groups that privilege agreement and comfort have resulted in the exclusive communities that have kept so many Jews and loved ones unaffiliated and disengaged. Inclusion does not mean consensus, nor does inclusion require that everyone agree. Inclusion is hard work and at times can and should feel challenging and uncomfortable. Any position or policy that undermines the ability of Judaism to include all Jews, loved ones, allies, and seekers is not a full expression of the Torah of Inclusion.

4. **Alternatives for the term “non-Jews”**: This is a work in progress as our consciousness and language evolve over time. The problem with the term “non-Jew” is that it refers to a person in terms of who they are not, but not in terms of who they are. And the Torah of Inclusion is all about recognizing, meeting, and honoring people where they are and for who they are, not for who they are not.

   However, the problem with referring to a person in terms of who they are, is that no one term exists for referring to groups of people who only have in common that they are not Jewish. Currently we use many words: loved ones, allies, seekers, spiritual explorers, and beloved friends of Jews. We also use the somewhat cumbersome, if accurate, phrase “people of other faith traditions and cultural backgrounds.”