HAVING TOURED THE HAUNTING collection of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., dozens of times, I didn’t think it could get more sobering. But there I was on a September morning standing in the main entry hall, a study in brick, steel and marble. I was following along as Mitchell Kraus, a volunteer of nearly a decade, led an elderly woman, blind in one eye and losing sight in the other, and her family on an accessible tour.

“I want to paint a picture for you mentally,” he began. “If I don’t do it right, tell me; my feelings won’t be hurt.” The warning, however, wasn’t necessary.

Kraus described every object in such painstaking and effective detail that other visitors started to tag along, only realizing several minutes later that they were inadvertently joining a special tour for a visually impaired patron. The poignance of the objects that Kraus touched on—artifacts, images and other items—was amplified by his solemn descriptions. “There are a significant number of burnt bodies,” he said of a wall-sized image taken in April 1945 of American soldiers viewing the remains of prisoners at the Ohrdruf concentration camp in Germany. Though I was familiar with the image, through Kraus’s recitation, I realized for the first time that there were in fact too many charred corpses to count.

Almost 30 years after the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, the nation’s Jewish and Holocaust museums offer a wide, if uneven, range of programs for visitors with varying disabilities. Of the 50-some institutions that Hadassah Magazine contacted, roughly half responded. Some described extensive initiatives that went far beyond fundamentals like fully ADA-compliant buildings and Braille captions. Others—the least-funded, typically—only had elevators and audio tours.

A number of Holocaust museums have accessibility offerings that go beyond the basics. The newly opened Dallas Holocaust and Human Rights Museum, for example, has audio tours, Braille floor maps and interactive captions in English and Spanish. And in 2019, the Florida Holocaust Museum in St. Petersburg, whose displays already have Braille signage and whose tours come with sound-amplifying “wands” for visitors with hearing loss, began working with the University of South Florida’s Center for Autism and Related Disabilities to create programs for visitors on the autism spectrum.

As an institution that teaches each person’s inherent worth, said Kelsey Jagneaux, the Florida museum’s outreach coordinator, meeting the needs of these visitors is “central to our mission, and we will continue to make it so.”

Not surprisingly, the Holocaust museum in Washington, the premier Holocaust center in the country, has a particularly robust accessibility suite: American Sign Language interpreters are available for programs upon advance request. Trained staff and volunteers lead special tours for those with visual and hearing impairments, and most of the multimedia displays, all of which are captioned, are telecoil-equipped to reach hearing aids.

At the beginning of his tour, Kraus, the guide, handed the woman who was visually impaired a 3D model of the museum for her to feel. Later, in front of a striped concentration camp uniform in a glass case, he passed around a soft graying cap, a replica of the one on display.

The museum is strategic in which replica items it provides. Young visitors, for example, may have no idea what a vintage milk can is, said Tim Kaiser, deputy director of the museum’s education institute, so the museum procured a replica for guides to share when describing the Ringelblum Milk Can, in which clandestine records of the Warsaw Ghetto were hidden by Emanuel Ringelblum and other members of the secret group Oyneg Shabbot.

A Night at the Museum for All

Moving beyond accessibility to real inclusion for visitors

By Menachem Wecker
The Jewish Museum in New York City is another accessibility leader. Its most recent project is a series of ASL video shorts, available on YouTube with English captions, that show Jewish members of the deaf community discussing pieces from the museum’s collection. The series debuted in September with Jewish performance artist and poet Douglas Ridloff. Standing before contemporary artist William Anastasi’s 1987 oil on canvas Untitled (jew) in one video short, Ridloff adopts a scholarly posture. He signs that he “was struck by the power” of the minimalistic painting with the word “jew” in the corner, and then compares the positive and negative historical and cultural connotations of the words “Jew” and “Deaf.”

In February, for Jewish Disability Awareness and Inclusion Month, actor and educator Alexandria Wailes is slated to be at the museum to discuss an intricately carved Torah ark from Adath Yeshrun Synagogue in Sioux City, Iowa, and paintings by contemporary artists Kehinde Wiley and Mel Bochner.

The Jewish Museum’s first accessible programs, tours for visually impaired visitors, date back to 1993. Over the years, options have expanded to include assistive listening devices at public events and telecoils transmitting directly to hearing aids. A local partnership brings 450 students with disabilities annually to the museum. And the Supporting Transitions internship, created for adults on the autism spectrum, is now in its third year.

About once a month, JM Journey evenings bring people with early-stage dementia and Alzheimer’s and their caregivers to explore the galleries on a special guided tour. And for those who are homebound with some technological knowledge, the museum offers interactive online classes on its collections, in partnership with Self-help Community Services.

“Every museum needs a program for people with disabilities,” said Jake Waltuck, who is on the autism spectrum and was a Supporting Transitions intern in 2018. The programs “not only make people with disabilities feel like they’re wanted,” the 20-something added, but that we “are part of a community and part of a family.”

For his internship, Waltuck assisted in art workshops and greeted museum patrons. He also learned how to research objects in the core exhibit, “Scenes from the Collection,” including a wooden menorah created in Theresienstadt and hidden from the Nazis. That object impressed Waltuck as “it meant the Jews would never give up hope,” he said.

Jewish cultural institutions are addressing the needs of children with sensory disorders and developmental delays, too. Philadelphia’s National Museum of American Jewish History, which allows free admission for personal care attendants, provides sensory backpacks filled with items to calm children and reduce potentially overwhelming stimulation—from noise-reducing headphones and fidget tools to weighted shoulder pads.

Los Angeles’s Skirball Cultural Center has sensory friendly hours several times a month at its award-winning Hollywood Bowl park.
A Demon, a Golem and Golda: Films to Watch

Both genre lovers and serious students of Israeli history will find something to enjoy at Jewish and Israeli film festivals this winter and spring held across the country, including in Atlanta, San Diego, Miami, Houston, Phoenix and many other cities. Among the best-reviewed and most buzzed-about offerings from Israel is the drama Incitement, a profile of Yigal Amir in the year leading up to his assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995. The film won the 2019 Ophir Award for Best Picture. Lighter fare such as the buddy comedy Forgiveness is also getting spotlight treatment at many of the screenings. (Check your local Jewish and Israeli film festival website for specific dates and movie listings.)

Make Me Laugh, Make Me Cry: Comedies From Israel

The farce Tel Aviv on Fire follows winning Noah’s Ark playground experience. During these designated times, developed for children with autism spectrum disorders and sensory sensitivities, the center admits fewer visitors into its floor-to-ceiling wooden ark gallery, which is filled with handcrafted animals and activity stations. Soothing music plays in the background while specially programmed storytelling stations attract these young visitors. Sensory bags are available, too.

“These offerings are certainly guided by the Jewish tradition of welcoming the stranger, which is core to our mission,” said Nina Silver, assistant director of Noah’s Ark and family programs at the museum.

Even among Jewish museums with extensive options, the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco is a rarity: It has had a full-time access and community engagement manager since 2010, when Cecile Puretz was hired to reshape the ways people come together within the museum. Instead of talking about passively “including” people with disabilities, she has worked to bring their voices and their ability to enrich conversation into the museum. “That’s really core to our mission and to my own Jewish values,” said Puretz, who is also co-founder of the Bay Area Arts Access Collective, a network dedicated to promoting accessibility in local arts programs.

In 2018, the museum, with the help of educator Georgina Kleege, who is legally blind, created haptic (touchable) encounters and six audio recordings integrated into the exhibit “Jewish Folktales Retold: The Artist as Maggid.” Puretz asked the 16 artists who created large-scale works based on Jewish folklore to share materials from their sculptures, or create something new, for the encounters.

According to Puretz, there are many things museums can do—including,
takes place over one long night when Yakov, a lapsed Hasid from Borough Park, Brooklyn, is hired to act as a shomer, someone who keeps a vigil over the recently deceased until they are buried. This being a horror movie, of course the body is possessed by a demon.

The Golem retells the story of a mystic who creates an artificial being to protect the Jewish community. In a Lithuanian village in the 17th century, Hanna clandestinely learns how to create a golem to defend her family and neighbors from locals who blame the Jews for a plague. But instead of the expected hulking man, the form she creates is one of a small boy who reminds Hanna of her deceased son, Joseph. The golem naturally wreaks havoc in its overzealous protectiveness, forcing Hanna to decide if she can bring herself to kill her creation.

Israeli Documentaries
Golda is a deconstruction of the iconic prime minister, who is beloved in the United States but has a less positive reputation in Israel.

Aulcie tells the story of American-born basketball legend Aulcie Perry. Recruited by the fledgling Maccabi Tel Aviv team, he famously helped lead the iconic Israeli squad to victory against the powerhouse Soviet team in the 1977 EuroLeague championships—a win still celebrated as one of Israel’s greatest sports victories. The film captures the athlete’s career heights, his conversion to Judaism, his downfall following his addiction to drugs and his eventual redemption.

Picture of His Life reflects on the career and choices of renowned Israeli wildlife photographer Amos Nachoum, considered one of the best underwater photographers in the world and known for the risks he takes to get the perfect shot. The documentary follows Nachoum as he travels to the Canadian High Arctic in order to photograph polar bears—while swimming beside them.

The Power of Music
In her documentary The Mamboniks, filmmaker Lex Gillespie traces the rise of mambo from its birth in Cuba to the height of its popularity in 1950s New York City, Miami Beach and the Borscht Belt. In the years following World War II, Jewish musicians and dancers used the mix of Latin rhythms and Jewish melodies to help banish the horrors of the Holocaust and encourage joyful living. Set to the Afro-Cuban sounds of Tito Puente and Celia Cruz, the film features interviews with musicians, club owners, record company executives and dancers, now in their 80s and 90s, recalling the upbeat rhythms of their youth.

For full reviews of ‘Incitement’ and ‘Golda,’ go online to hadassahmagazine.org/arts.