

What Does An Open Door Look Like?

By Yael Zelinger

Slowly, the passengers – Sharon and Scott from California; Steve from D.C.; and Martin from New York – tumbled out of the cramped SUV, tired from their long trip to the Pearlstone Center for the biennial Deafblind Shabbaton.

Two people dressed in black (Caucasian interpreters wear dark clothing to contrast with their skin so that their signing is more easily visible) immediately ran out to greet them with warm hugs, and carefully led them into the dining room.

Inside, attendees who had arrived earlier reached out to say hi and express their warm welcome in tactile sign language. (Tactile Sign Language is used by people who cannot see enough to read visual sign language; receivers place their hands lightly upon the back of the hands of the signer to read the signs through touch and movement.)

It looked like a flurry of hands: hands touching hands, hands feeling the hand shapes that form letters and words, hands reaching out to read Brailled nametags, hands holding elbows for guidance, hands flying in excited discussion.

It was neither quiet nor noisy in the room. Rather, the steady hum of Deaf speech, expressive grunts, and laughter sounded just like what it was: 18 Deafblind adults gathered for a Shabbos experience during a weekend in June. For them, it was a chance to walk through an open door – a door into the world of Judaism.

Being Deafblind means living with some degree of both hearing and vision loss, the permutations of which are multitudinous. The communication methods of the Deafblind community are as varied as the individuals themselves. Some people use their residual hearing if they are standing close by. Some use sign language within close range. Some speak. Some use sign-supported speech. Some use tactile sign language, in which they place their hands on top of those who are signing to feel the signs.

All Deafblind individuals require close attention in order to communicate, essentially preventing them from participating in Jewish lifecycle events, synagogue services, Jewish classes, and programs, unless they have a one-on-one interpreter. The costs of hiring interpreters, who are professionals and should not be asked to volunteer, can add up quickly.

Because this dual disability is uncommon – only one in 600 people live with both vision and hearing loss, and even fewer identify as Jewish – the logistics involved in finding and funding the necessary manpower too often overshadows the value of including an individual who yearns to partake of the Jewish community.

The need for this Jewish *neshamah* to be included becomes “too expensive” and “too hard to figure out.”

As a result, Judaism frequently becomes something unknown to these individuals, hidden behind a closed door.

Sarah, of Maryland, a trained pastry chef who is Deafblind, led the group in cookie making, a satisfying tactile experience. With interpreters and SSPs (support service providers – deaf or hearing people who are trained in communication and mobility techniques for people who are Deafblind) at their side, the participants followed Sarah’s instructions to cut out little gingerbread men and women and decorate them with sprinkles, licorice, and chocolate chips.

The theme of the weekend was “Building a Jewish DeafBlind Community,” and Sarah, communicating in American Sign Language (ASL), told the attendees, “These represent each unique Deafblind individual.” Then, instructing the participants to arrange the sugar cookies on the large baking pans as if they were holding hands, she concluded, “This represents our unique Jewish Deafblind community.”

The grown men and women were smiling and taking pride in their creations. They found new friends to connect with as they molded their cookies together.

Later, after lighting candles (using long skewers for safety) people piled into the makeshift synagogue. As in a beginners minyan, the context of the prayers was explained before each segment: *Minchah*, *Kabbalas Shabbos*, and *Maariv*. The explanations were spoken by a hearing rabbi. To make sure everyone could follow, an interpreter stood in front of the room throughout the service.

Watching the platform interpreter, individual interpreters imparted the message to the individual he or she was helping. Steve, of D.C.; Jeff, of Illinois; Robert, from Washington; Mordy, from Israel; and Allen, from Illinois each received the explanation right in his own hands through tactile sign language.

Sara Leah and Sarah from Maryland along with Shlomo and Yaara from Israel watched interpreters, who sat right in front of them, repeating everything clearly in spoken English or American Sign Language. Mark, from Arizona; Karen, from Canada; and Kit, from New Jersey, sat up front and listened to the speaker.

Throughout the service, the interpreters guided their consumers when to sit, stand, or bow. A boy in front raised a red flag to help non-religious interpret-

ers or those Deafblind participants with some vision to know when to say or sign *amen*. As Karen attested, “It was a powerful beginning to the Shabbaton.”

In addition to the Deafblind participants, 70 trained volunteers flocked to Pearlstone by car, plane, and rail from all over the country to assist with communication and guidance. It was they who made all the communication possible: from prayers to announcements to conversation about the weather.

“It feels holy here,” said one non-Jewish Certified Deaf interpreter (CDI) as she waited for her consumer to come out of the bathroom: “I’m very impressed with the Jewish community and I want to come back in two years for the next Shabbaton.”

At the designated times, *Kiddush*, *Hamotzi*, and *Havdalah* were simultaneously recited in Hebrew by hearing rabbis, then signed in ASL by Deaf rabbis. Doors were opened as the Deafblind Jews soaked in the information, the spirituality, and the camaraderie. Sharon Segal, an SSP who flew in from Las Vegas, expressed it well. “This is not called ‘access,’ because there were no ‘barriers.’ It is not about pity. It’s about letting them be like everyone else.”

Two Deafblind men celebrated their long-awaited bar mitzvahs on Shabbos morning. After being gently pelted with candy, Jeff, of Illinois, expressed his joy at being able to celebrate with friends. “When I was 13, my parents said it would be too hard to make a bar mitzvah for me, but I knew God wanted me to do this.”

Throughout Shabbos, the Deafblind participants facilitated sessions about building community. They left with several vlogs (video blogs), articles, Facebook groups, and promises to support each other and remain connected between the Shabbatonim. “We all felt connected to each other because of our shared experiences living with deafblindness,” said Karen. “This Shabbos, we were a community of Deafblind Jews.”

This is what an open door looks like.

The DeafBlind Shabbaton takes place every two years and is the only event of its kind in North America. Primarily sponsored by the Louis D. and Morton J. Macks Center for Jewish Education in Baltimore, the program is run by local Deaf, hearing, and Deafblind volunteers and one part-time professional. The group would like to catapult this event into a group trip to Israel that caters to the specific needs of Deafblind Jews. Here is a link to our DeafBlind Israel Dream: <https://youtu.be/bR2riVrTv-4>.

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Rabbi Fred Friedman (A Deaf rabbi) puts *tefillin* on Martin, a Deafblind participant from New York.

(Photos by Sheryl Cooper)



Mordy Weis from Israel listens to a lecture through his interpreter.

Rav Kook

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ots were caused by Arab fears of Jewish immigration, and the infamous British restrictions on Jewish immigration to Palestine soon followed.

Rav Kook, however, “lambasted [the commission] members for their cold-blooded sadism in the face of wanton [Arab] bloodshed and rapine, along with the official [British] treachery that had made such anarchy possible. The appeal he addressed to the shocked and distressed Jewish community, bidding it stand fast for the sake of Israel as a whole and the destiny that awaits it, is a classic.... He never tired of dwelling on the certainty of Israel’s vindication and

rehabilitation.”

Rabbi Feldman also notes Rav Kook’s work with converts, Bible criticism, *shemittah*, and Holy Land *etrogim*, as well as his sublime conceptions of repentance, freedom, social justice, and more.

For instance, he cites the Rav’s “dictum” that repentance “does not estrange [one] from the world. Rather, it is [the penitent] who raises the world’s moral standard along with his own.” Feldman adds that “while this adumbrates an ideal desideratum, it is at variance with a familiar passage in *Berachot* 31b which raises the merit of the penitent on so high a pedestal that the normally righteous and conforming is considered unable to come near him.”

I leave it to the reader to resolve the “contradiction.”

Just as Rabbi Feldman could not have hoped to do justice to Rav Kook’s life and thought in a five-part lecture, I cannot hope to do the same even just to his lecture in this limited forum.

May this brief article serve as a testament to a scholarly rabbi who so deeply appreciated Rav Kook, and as a springboard for those who would delve further in Rav Kook’s works – studies of which continue to be published even now, more than 80 years after his death.

(Rabbi Feldman thanked his son Rabbi David Feldman for his help in preparing the series in 1961, and I similarly thank the latter’s son Rabbi Daniel Z. Feldman; and Menachem Butler, for discovering it in 2017; as well as Rabbi Chanan Morrison.)