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 with dark hair 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 thwarted in finding its context.)

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 movement.

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 over those 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 cost of providing for their individuals and funding the necessary manpower too often overlooks the value of including an individual who yearns to partake of the Jewish community.

The need for this Jewish nehemah 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 Community of Deafblind Jews,” 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, Kabolas 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 by finding an 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 interpreters 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 conversations 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 Shabbaton took place every two years and is the only event of its kind in North America. Primarily sponsored by the Louis D. and Morton J. Marks Center for Jewish Life, 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 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. It was conceived by Rabbi Fred Friedman, who was inspired to do so after he participated in a five-day trip to Israel. He wanted to bring the experience back home and share it with others.

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

(Photos by Sheryl Cooper)

Rabbi Feldman has not been able 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 lectures in this limited forum. In addition to Rav Kook’s works—studies of which continue to be published even now, more than 80 years after his death.

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.