

ACCEPTING THE CHALLENGE

How a Jewish Community Hears and Shares The Needs of Jewish Deaf Members

LOUISE COHEN-SILVER,* PH.D.
and

BARBARA GOTTSCHALK†

*Mental Health Counselor, and †Department Supervisor, Special Services,
Jewish Social Service Agency of Metropolitan Washington, D.C.

Special efforts must be undertaken to make the Jewish community accessible and inviting to the Jewish deaf. Currently, the rate of intermarriage and conversion to Christianity among the Jewish deaf community is much higher than in the community as a whole. This article describes the steps taken by the Jewish Social Services Agency in the Washington area to increase the accessibility of the Jewish community to the Jewish deaf.

This article presents information gained from clinical and community contact with Jewish people who have the "invisible handicap," deafness.¹ There are few relevant statistical data on this special needs population. The only published statistics available on the numbers of deaf Jewish community members are based on a survey done in one small geographic area in 1968 more than 20 years ago (Schein, 1968). However, today we estimate that there are approximately 24,000 deaf Jewish people residing in the United States. The rate of intermarriage among Jewish deaf people has apparently risen during the past two decades (Fleischman, A., personal communication).

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1. The term "deaf" is used in this article to identify a population of people who do not have sufficient residual hearing to enable them to communicate entirely by auditory means, even with the most powerful hearing aids available. This term is also meant to include the 16 million persons in the United States who have a hearing impairment of sufficient severity to interfere with social, vocational, and educational endeavors. We are aware that some individuals prefer other terminology, such as "persons with hearing impairments." Both to avoid wordiness and to use a non-derogatory term, we chose to use the word "deaf."

This article begins with a brief review of the historical impact of deafness on Judaism. It then identifies several factors that seem to affect the developing identity and commitment of deaf Jews. Finally, it describes the methods used by the Jewish Social Service Agency and its sister agencies in the metropolitan Washington area to make the Jewish community accessible, as well as inviting, to deaf community members. This examination of the early stages of bridging the Jewish deaf and hearing cultures is presented in the hope that further discussion and creative ideas will follow.

First, consider this oral testimony from several deaf Jews.

Roy is 24 years old now and reflects upon his early years of Jewish education vividly, with disdain and resentment. Roy explains to the interviewer how foolish he felt at his own Bar Mitzvah, reading out loud from the Torah, not hearing himself speak because he is deaf and not understanding the words being enunciated from his own mouth. Today, Roy does not identify himself as Jewish; in fact Roy has accepted many Christian tenets in his lifestyle. Although Roy acknowledges that he cannot change the fact that he was born a Jew, he chooses to affiliate with only non-Jews.

Marissa is 21 years old and also deaf. Marissa was raised in a Conservative Jewish home in the Midwest, where the family observed and celebrated holidays and Shabbat together regularly. Marissa and her younger deaf brother attended a variety of deaf Jewish groups together. Marissa communicated orally at school, at home, and at her Bat Mitzvah, too. Most of all, Marissa recalls the love of Judaism her parents instilled in her. Today, Marissa admits she is not as observant as she would like to be if she were still living at home with her parents. However, her commitment and love for Judaism are ever present.

Tammi is 29 years of age and has been deaf since age 10. She also comes from a Conservative Jewish family that kept kosher and celebrated all holidays. With her parents and grandparents, she attended shul often. Tammi recalls the long walks taken with her "Bubbi" and grandfather and the impressive stories her grandfather shared with her about his life in Nazi Germany. Although her grandfather is long gone, Tammi remembers "those little important rituals" they shared. Tammi was confirmed with a group of other girls during her school years. During college, Tammi felt fortunate to have joined a volunteer service group that led her to Israel. After studying with deaf Jewish people in Israel, Tammi was determined to return to the United States and pursue a career that focused on both cultures, the deaf and the Jewish cultures.

Zelda, a deaf Jewish woman in her early thirties, comes from a Reform Jewish family where religion did not play an important role in the family; however, being Jewish was very special and Zelda always knew it. Zelda reports that she could observe the love of Judaism in her parents. Because Zelda comes from a family whose members are all deaf, Jewish customs and favorite rituals were easily communicated. Zelda today can explain how bored she was in Sunday School classes. Although the day Zelda quit Sunday School was a grand day, she clearly states that she never doubted the rewards of being Jewish.

Sandy, a 50-year-old hearing-impaired pastor of a Hebrew-Christian congregation

of 20 followers, recalls growing up in New York knowing his Orthodox Jewish grandparents well. He purports that his life was changed a decade ago when he embraced the Messiah at a deaf church group. He regrets his family's rejection of his beliefs, but firmly believes that he is no longer living in the "smokescreen" he feels Judaism represented to him through much of his life.

HISTORICAL IMPACT OF DEAFNESS ON JUDAISM

The ancient rabbis were perplexed by the deaf, the "heresh." They assumed that the deaf person's inability to speak and hear was in some way related to mental incompetence, thus prohibiting prayer, participation, and education in the Jewish faith (Feldman, 1986). Hearing families with deaf members were given no choice regarding the degree or extent of Jewish education the deaf members would receive for they were deemed incompetent to learn. Therefore, instruction was not offered.

It was not until the 1800s that successful efforts to educate Jewish deaf persons in some religious institutions of Europe— notably Holland, Germany, England, and Austria—were documented. As a result, the rabbinical laws and the definition of "heresh" were modified. Deaf people who could speak were eventually permitted to participate in "certain" physical actions that the rabbis believed they might understand, but the normative view was that they were not fully responsible adults.

In the United States, religious education and services for Jewish deaf followers were first offered around 1900 in New York City, which remained the hub of deaf Jewish life in the United States until the 1940s and 1950s. The formation in 1956 of the National Congress of the Jewish Deaf provided the impetus for deaf leadership to foster deaf Jewish living across the United States. Congregations led by deaf individuals were formed during the 1960s and early 1970s. The desire to foster Judaism became an international interest when the

World Organization of Jewish Deaf was formed in 1977.

Today, there are a handful of hearing-impaired rabbis and fewer than 20 Hebrew congregations of the deaf in major American cities (Fleischman, 1986). Having a rabbi who is deaf affords deaf people the same ease and comfort that hearing people experience when they listen to their rabbi in their native language(s). Unfortunately, this ideal arrangement is only available to a relatively small number of deaf people.

Given the shortage of rabbis who use American Sign Language (ASL), alternative ways of making the beauty of the Jewish lifestyle accessible to deaf Jews need to be found. Without these alternative accommodations, many may choose a comfortable niche in a Christian lifestyle because more hearing pastors and priests than rabbis have learned American Sign Language.

FACTORS INFLUENCING JEWISH IDENTITY

The childhood experiences of many deaf Jews have had a great impact on their subsequent decision either to identify with or, in many cases, to reject their Jewishness, the Jewish community, and Jewish values and beliefs. Many report being more comfortable identifying themselves as Americans or as members of the deaf culture and often acknowledge their Jewish heritage as incidental if they mention it at all. At a 1989 forum hosted by the Washington Society of the Jewish Deaf and the Board of Jewish Education on the topic, "Interpreters in the Jewish Cultural and Religious Setting," several deaf Jewish adults mentioned that an integral part of their sense of self and belonging is related to the use and beauty of language—American Sign Language, a visual/gestural language based on concepts, not on the English language. It is seen by many deaf people as a first language choice. The strong sense of deaf identity is jeopardized by the loss of their visual/gestural language at Jewish syna-

gogues and Jewish activities, which are usually interpreted in a sign system that represents orally/aurally based English language (Schein, 1984).

Many deaf Jewish children have spent the greater part of their lives with other deaf non-Jewish children in special day and residential educational programs. Their time at home with family has been limited to weekends or vacations. If the children are more comfortable using sign language than struggling with oral communication, but face a stone wall of resistance at home to the use of sign, then resentment and alienation surface to interfere with the normal acceptance and learning of religious teaching. This situation seems to be very common. Although Jewish parents of deaf children often seek the best "deaf education" possible to provide for their child's future success in society, they generally have less success obtaining equally exceptional "deaf Jewish education" as part of their child's total educational plan. The combination of a missed Jewish education and a comfortable welcome from the Christian society reduces the value of Jewish identity. Added to that is the indifference of Jewish agencies and synagogues to the needs of deaf children and deaf adults.

As a result, many deaf Jewish-born adults either convert to Christianity, marry out of the Jewish faith, and/or follow Christian-oriented lifestyles. At the time when many young adults become independent and define their own lifestyle, they are attracted to the warm welcome of the Christian or missionary churches that have leaders fluent in sign language or provide regularly interpreted services for deaf members. Major Protestant denominations in the United States have made organized efforts to serve and sometimes to proselytize deaf people. Nonliturgical Protestant churches encourage hearing persons with signing skills to become coordinators of deaf ministries to facilitate communication with the hearing church. This, too, may help explain the rapid growth of deaf church units, partic-

ularly within the Baptist, Assemblies of God, and the Churches of Christ denominations.

Jewish communities face this challenge: can we acknowledge deaf Jews, unite with them in the mutual goal of enjoying our Jewish heritage, and maintain ongoing contact and learning experiences in the Jewish community, without insult or injury to either the deaf or hearing members? In other words, can an integrated deaf/hearing Jewish community be as successful as deaf segregated communities are said to be?

Henkin (1987), in his review of *The Deaf Jew in the Modern World*, discussed the issue of segregated versus integrated synagogues and argues, "Until the Messiah comes to break down the fears that hearing Jews and deaf Jews harbor for each other, we will have to settle for segregation." Yet, in many communities there are either too few deaf Jewish people to form their own Jewish deaf community or deaf Jews prefer to participate in the mainstream. In these situations, the organized Jewish community can try to meet the challenge of welcoming deaf Jews.

SERVICES TO THE DEAF IN THE WASHINGTON AREA

The Jewish Social Service Agency (JSSA) of Metropolitan Washington, D.C. provides a full range of mental health services for deaf residents through the Montgomery County Department of Addiction, Victim and Mental Health Services. Initial "seed" funds were available for the program through a federal community block grant. Because of this government funding, the program offers services on a nonsectarian basis. Overall funding for the agency comes from the United Way and federation. JSSA is able to offer its services on a sliding fee scale basis to all deaf residents, regardless of religious affiliation.

Three therapists—two who are deaf and one who is hearing—offer short- and long-term individual, couples, marriage, and

group counseling. A variety of support groups are held on a regular basis, as are periodic workshops. Psychological exams are provided by a psychologist who is deaf, and psychiatric consultations are held regularly with psychiatrists who are knowledgeable about the field of deafness.

The installation of a 24-hour accessible private TDD line (telecommunication device for the deaf) in the secretary's office and the availability of trained administrative staff and therapists to respond to incoming calls give deaf people the opportunity to make initial contacts, as well as handle ongoing communication with the agency. After-hour emergencies are handled by a TDD answering machine that refers callers to the local Crisis Center, where trained volunteers respond to TDD calls.

Because JSSA has a close working association with the Jewish Community Center and other Jewish agencies, it can provide interpreters on an as-needed basis for group meetings and educational programs throughout the Jewish community through a special fund for sign language interpreters at the federation. General interest groups being offered within the agency are available to deaf Jewish and non-Jewish clients of the agency; for example, deaf clients have participated in groups for recently divorced and widowed adults with the aid of an interpreter. Mediation services for divorcing couples have also been utilized successfully by deaf clients of JSSA. Likewise, all staff meetings and events are fully accessible to the deaf social workers and deaf interns training with us on a temporary basis.

Guidance from a hearing-impaired lay committee assists JSSA's Department of Special Services in providing an equitable environment where deaf people may feel comfortable with their deafness and with their Jewishness. The Washington Society for Jewish Deaf, whose membership presently numbers 82, works together closely with JSSA.

Both Jewish day and overnight camps in

the Washington area have welcomed and accommodated deaf children. Most of the major Jewish agencies now have TDD telephone capability, so that the deaf community has ready access to information and services. Deaf Jews are already responding to the signs of welcome. Many eagerly volunteer to solicit funds on the TDD phones for the annual campaign.

MAKING THE JEWISH COMMUNITY ACCESSIBLE TO THE DEAF

Many of the overtures to deaf Jews that have been made successfully in the Washington area are replicable in any community. TDD telephones are relatively inexpensive and readily available. Sign language interpreters can be found in most metropolitan areas. Merely informing deaf people through written advertisements that an interpreter can be provided if requested can be sufficient to change the climate from one of indifference to one of welcome.

Hillels should reach out to deaf college students by employing deaf leaders to model deaf Jewish leadership within the college environment, by installing TDDs phones, and by providing interpreters for all their programs. Synagogues should begin to reach out in the same way by investing in a TDD and by hiring interpreters, at least for the High Holidays. Sign language and deaf awareness courses should be offered to all congregants to encourage greater community understanding and sensitivity. Synagogues might also offer reduced membership fees for deaf families, thus taking into consideration that the average income of deaf adults is well below that of their hearing counterparts (Jacobs, 1980).

Rabbinical colleges should offer sign language courses, train rabbis about the special needs of Jewish deaf people, and, most important, encourage deaf Jews to become rabbis themselves. Schools, synagogues, and rabbinical colleges should invest in the newest Jewish sign language text written by Adele Kronick Shuart:

Signs in Judaism: A Resource Book for the Jewish Deaf Community.

Some effort should be made to reach out to the many residential schools for deaf children, where there is rarely even the smallest Jewish input. These schools should be included in the rounds of Jewish chaplains.

These and other recommendations on bridging the hearing and deaf Jewish communities are provided by Alexander Fleishman in his article, "The Deaf and the Jewish Community" (Schein & Waldman, 1986). He sets forth an eight-point program to create a religious and cultural environment that is equally accessible to both deaf and hearing Jews.

1. An improved deaf awareness program within the Jewish community
2. Better rapport between the Jewish community and deaf leaders
3. More qualified teachers in religious education across the nation for youths as well as adults, including Torah studies and youth counseling
4. Appointment of deaf paraprofessionals to work with rabbis
5. Inclusion of deaf adult leaders as speakers at meetings of the Jewish community
6. Establishment of sign language classes with deaf teachers
7. Consideration for the needs of deaf Jews in Jewish community projects
8. Encourage hearing children of deaf parents to become rabbis and/or community leaders and serve the deaf

Most of all, we need to help Jewish families who have deaf family members to become part of all aspects of Jewish life. The families need to be counseled to keep the lines of communication and acceptance open, just as they do with hearing family members, even if it means learning sign language and providing interpreters at major family events, such as Seders, weddings, B'nai Mitzvot, etc. The cost can be shared by synagogues, families, and the

community. After all, consider what it costs when we do not make communication possible? Families lose their deaf Jewish children to other communication-accessible communities all too often. This is unnecessary and tragic. The hearing Jewish community must accept this challenge: show a "sign" of acceptance by reaching out and opening its doors to fellow Jewish neighbors, the ones with the "invisible handicap."

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WORLD CONFERENCE OF JEWISH COMMUNAL SERVICE

LAROME HOTEL, JERUSALEM
JULY 2-7, 1989

Theme:
RESPONDING TO THE CRISIS IN JEWISH UNITY
AND CONTINUITY: THE VITAL ROLE OF JEWISH
COMMUNAL SERVICE

The Challenge of Transmitting Jewish Knowledge,
Values and Experience in a World of Dramatic Change

Seventh Quadrennial Program



Program Highlights

SUNDAY, JUNE 2, 1989

OPENING PLENARY

JEWISH IDENTITY, COMMITMENT AND UNITY: A VISION OF OUR TIMES

Co-Chairs: YEHUDA DOMINITZ, Israel
Associate President, WCJCS
Director, Israel Office, New York-UJA Federation

PROF. FLORENCE MITTWOCH, Israel
Associate Program Chair, WCJCS
School of Social Work, Bar Ilan University

President's Message: IRVING KESSLER, USA
President, WCJCS
Executive Vice President Emeritus, United Israel Appeal

*Introduction of Program
and Keynote Speaker:* THEODORE COMET, USA
Program Chair, WCJCS
Director, International Affairs, Council of Jewish Federations

Keynoter: RABBI ADIN STEINSALTZ, Israel
Editor, *Steinsaltz Talmud*; Author, *Authority on Mysticism*

MONDAY, JUNE 3, 1989

PLENARY

RESPONDING TO THE CRISIS: RESPONSIBILITY OF JEWISH COMMUNAL
WORKERS FOR STRENGTHENING JEWISH UNITY AND CONTINUITY

Chair: ODED ELDAD, France
Director, European Council of Jewish Community Services

Greetings: DR. DANIEL THURSZ, USA
President, Conference of Jewish Communal Service
(North America)

"The Jewish World at a Time of Dramatic Change"
MENDEL KAPLAN, South Africa
Chairman, Board of Governors, Jewish Agency

"The Challenge of Jewish Communal Professionals"
PROF. GERALD B. BUBIS, USA
Director, School of Jewish Communal Service,
Hebrew Union College

PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITY SESSIONS

Coordinators: DR. ALVIN SCHIFF, USA
Executive Vice President, Board of Jewish Education
of Greater New York

SAUL LILACH, Israel
Director, Israel Association of Community Centers

Concurrent Sessions

- **SERVICES TO THE AGED**
"Transmitting and Enhancing Jewish Knowledge, Experience and Unity Through Professional Practice"
- **JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTERS**
"Responding to the Crisis in Jewish Unity and Continuity: The Role of Communal Service"
- **COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION / COMMUNITY RELATIONS**
"Inreach: Reaching Jews on the Fringe"
- **SERVICES FOR FAMILIES, CHILDREN AND DISABLED**
"Future of the Jewish Family in the Year 2000"
"Jewish Family Service Agencies As an Instrument for Jewish Continuity"
- **JEWISH EDUCATION**
"Jewish Education's Role in Responding to the Crisis in Jewish Unity and Jewish Continuity"
- **JEWISH VOCATIONAL SERVICE**
"Responding to the Crisis in Jewish Unity and Continuity: The Vital Role of Jewish Communal Service"

LUNCH AND LEARN

EXPLORING JEWISH ISSUES FROM HISTORICAL AND TRADITIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Coordinators: DR. DANIEL LEVINE, Israel

Director, Melitz Center for Jewish Zionist Education

DR. SAMUEL COHEN, USA

Executive Vice President, Jewish National Fund

Concurrent Sessions

- Jews and Non-Jews—Interpersonal Relationships and Responsibilities
- Early Zionist Philosophies and Modern Israel
- The Changing Role of Women in the Jewish Family and Community
- Israel-Diaspora Relations: Historical Perspectives

ISSUES SYMPOSIUM

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN JEWISH LIFE

FORUMS

- **LAY LEADERS AND PROFESSIONALS—ELEMENTS INVOLVED IN CREATING AN EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIP FOR BUILDING JEWISH UNITY, COMMUNITY AND CONTINUITY**
 - **1990 GLOBAL JEWISH DEMOGRAPHIC STUDY: A VITAL TOOL FOR COMMUNITY PLANNING**
-

TUESDAY, JUNE 4, 1989

PLENARY

SHOAH: MEMORY, MEANING AND AFFIRMATION— A FIFTY-YEAR PERSPECTIVE

Chair: ALEX SKLAN, England
Deputy Executive Director, Jewish Welfare Board, London

Speaker: DR. SONNY HERMAN, Netherlands
Psychotherapist; Director, Jewish Pastoral Services to
Holocaust Survivors; Associate Professor of Clinical Psychology,
Amsterdam University

Comments: SHALMI BARMOR, Israel
Education Director, Yad Vashem

SHOSHANA COMET, USA
Survivor; Psychoanalyst; Jerome Riker International Study of
Persecution of Children

SHOAH WORKSHOPS

- WORKING WITH SHOAH SURVIVORS
- WORKING WITH THE SECOND GENERATION

FORUM

ABSORBING JEWS JEWISHLY—PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR
JEWISHLY ABSORBING NEW IMMIGRANTS IN THEIR NEW COMMUNITIES

PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITY SESSION

Concurrent Sessions

- SERVICES TO THE AGED
Site: Housing Project, Gilo
Topic: "Family Responsibility to the Elderly"
 - JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTERS
Site: JCC in Jewish Quarter, Old City
Topic: "The Center Movement in Israel"
 - COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION / COMMUNITY RELATIONS
Site: Elwyn Institute-Millie Shine Center, Kiryat Hayovel
Topic: "Jewish Community Services at the Crossroads: Shifting Relationships with
Government, Voluntary Agencies and Citizen Organizations"
 - SERVICES FOR FAMILIES, CHILDREN AND DISABLED
Site: Children's Home—RAI-IM, Jerusalem
Topic: "The World Jewish Community—An Interlocking Network"
 - JEWISH EDUCATION
Site: Kibbutz Tzora
Topic: "Hanhalot Halashon—Hebrew Language as a Resource for the Transmission of
Judaic Values"
 - JEWISH VOCATIONAL SERVICE
Site: Vocational Training Center, AMAL Kiryat Mencahem
Topic: "Serving the Needs of Disadvantaged Jews Through Vocational and Technical
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-

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GLASTNOST: NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR MAINTAINING
JEWISH IDENTITY IN EASTERN EUROPE

AUTHOR'S FORUM

Coordinators: MARK HANDELMAN, USA
Executive Vice President, New York Association
for New Americans

DR. HOWIE LITWIN, Israel
Director, school of Education, Paul Baerwald School of
Social Work, Hebrew University

Concurrent Sessions

- THE JEWISH DIMENSION IN JEWISH COMMUNAL SERVICE
- STAFF DEVELOPMENT
- INTERGROUP
- COMMUNITY
- ISSUES OF HEALTH, MENTAL HEALTH, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND DISABILITY IN THE JEWISH COMMUNITY
- SPECIAL GROUPS

LUNCH AND LEARN

- Jewish Communal Leadership in Times of Crisis
- Rabbinic Responses to Poverty in Jewish Societies
- The Jewish Family in Flux
- Jewish Responses to the Disadvantaged

CLOSING PLENARY

ISRAEL AND THE DIASPORA: WORKING TOGETHER TO STRENGTHEN JEWISH
UNITY AND CONTINUITY—PROSPECTS AND PROBLEMS

Chair: JOHN FISHEL, Canada
Executive Director, Allied Jewish Community Services, Montreal

Special Guest Speaker: NATAN SHARANSKY

Conference Overview: PROF. FLORENCE MITTWOCH, Israel
Associate Program Chair, WCJCS

Nomination of Officers: RALPH GOLDMAN, USA
Chairman, Nominations Committee, WCJCS
Executive President Emeritus, JDC

Closing Remarks: IRVING KESSLER, Outgoing President, WCJCS
YEHUDA DOMINITZ, Outgoing Associate President, WCJCS
ARTHUR ROTMAN, Incoming President, WCJCS

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