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עור בעולם רואה Blind in a Seeing World:

Jewish Perspectives on Blindness from Biblical Times to Present Day

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Thank you so much for taking the time to read my rabbinical thesis. This topic is very close to my heart as I am legally blind as a result of Retinitis Pigmentosa. I grew up watching my dad lose his eyesight and remain as involved and engaged in synagogue life as he could be. As the first blind rabbinical student at Hebrew Union College - Jewish Insitute of Religion, I believe it is imperative to look at what our ancient sources say about different disabilities and take what we can and learn from it.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In the ancient world, blindness was seen as one of the lowest degradations.[1] In the Tanakh the blind are forbidden from offering sacrifices and are often paired with other classifications of people who are second-class citizens.[2] However, there are still protections in the biblical laws for blind individuals such as not placing a stumbling block before the blind[3] and not misdirecting a blind person.[4] The Talmud often casts blind individuals as second-class citizens [5] or people whose life, is akin to death.[6] However, there are also moments where blind individuals are respected by elites[7] and given opportunities to lead.[8] Today, we have a more inclusive understanding of blindness and disabilities as a whole than we had in the past. Progressive Judaism values including every Jew as a full member of the Jewish community regardless of ability.

At least 2.2 billion people have near or distant vision impairment. Of those diagnosed with a vision impairment, the visual impairment could have been prevented for at least 1 billion people[9]. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), vision impairment is defined as, the partial or total inability of visual perception. Every country defines what level of vision is a visual impairment differently. In this thesis, we will focus on the classifications in the United States where legal blindness is defined as any vision that is 20/200 or worse corrected, meaning

[1]"BLIND, THE, IN LAW AND LITERATURE - JewishEncyclopedia.com," n.d., https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/3374-blind-the-in-law-and-literature.
[2] Leviticus 21:18.
[3] Leviticus 19:14
[4] Deuteronomy 27:18
[5] Babylonian Talmud Chaggiah 5b
[6] Babylonian Talmud Nedarim 64b
[7] Babylonian Talmud Chaggiah 5b
[8] Babylonian Talmud Pesachim 116b
[9]World Health Organization: WHO, "Blindness and Vision Impairment," August 10, 2023, https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/blindness-and-visual-impairment.

that the corrected vision the person can see at 20 feet away is what the person with normal vision sees at 200 feet away. One other way that a person can be classified as legally blind in the United States is through their visual field. In this case, legal blindness is defined as anyone with a visual field of 20 degrees in diameter or less. Vision loss impacts people of all ages, but the majority of people with a visual impairment are above the age of 50. The main conditions that cause vision impairment are cataracts and refractive errors including nearsightedness, farsightedness, presbyopia, and astigmatism[10]. As we experience increasing longevity, the WHO predicts that there will be an increase in the number of people experiencing visual impairment due to aging.

In the United States, legal blindness means that a person is eligible for disability classification and possible inclusion in certain government-sponsored programs. Eyesight of 20/200 or worse or a visual field of 20 degrees or less became the definition of legal blindness in the 1930s to determine who was eligible for New Deal state and federal services and entitlements for the blind. Before the New Deal, there was no national initiative to define who was blind or not. If someone was unable to see and function in society they were considered to be blind. The New Deal began programs to help people who were blind to receive government support. This was part of the shift in attitudes towards people who were blind or had other disabilities.

Between 1867-1913 city ordinances were enacted around the country making it illegal to be disabled in public. The first ordinance was in San Francisco and was titled “Order No. 783. To Prohibit Street Begging, and to Restrain Certain Persons from Appearing in Streets and Public Places. Approved July 9, 1867.”[11] Similar laws were introduced in other cities in increasing

[10]World Health Organization: WHO, “Blindness and Vision Impairment.”
[11]Susan Schweik, “The Ugly Laws,” in *New York University Press eBooks*, 2020, https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814708873.001.0001.

frequency, with Portland, OR, and Chicago, IL in 1881. These laws stated that any person who is diseased, maimed, mutilated, or in any way deformed so as to be unsightly or a disgusting object shall not expose himself or herself to public view.[12] Included in these ordinances were people who were blind. There are many reasons why these laws became so popular at this time, including an influx of disabled veterans after the Civil War, industrial capitalism, urban growth, immigration, eugenics, charity organizations, and emerging state institutions for defectives including almshouses and asylums. Punishment for breaking these laws ranged in different areas from incarceration to fines up to $50 for each offense. These city ordinances began to be referred to as Ugly Laws in 1975 as a response to the newspaper article title regarding the final arrest under one of these laws.[13] The Ugly Laws remained in effect until the 1970s when the final arrest was made in Omaha, NE in 1974.

Disability rights emerged in the United States in the 1980s. In 1990 the Americans with Disabilities Act, or ADA, was signed into law. This added another layer of needing to define disabilities similar to the New Deal in the 1930s. The ADA defines a disability as someone who "has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, has a history or record of such an impairment (such as cancer that is in remission), or is perceived by others as having such an impairment (such as a person who has scars from a severe burn)."[14] The ADA protects people with disabilities from discrimination based on their disability. Within Jewish circles, the signing of the ADA shifted how synagogue leadership thought about the accessibility of their spaces and their responsibilities to the members with disabilities in their

[12]Schweik, "The Ugly Laws."
[13]Schweik, "The Ugly Laws."
[14]"Introduction to the Americans With Disabilities Act," *ADA.Gov* (blog), February 27, 2024, https://www.ada.gov/topics/intro-to-ada/.

communities. For example, in 1992 Reform Responsum, TFN NO. 5752.5 297-304 *Disabled Persons*, goes into detail about what a synagogue's responsibility is to those who have various types of disabilities.

Another response to the growing awareness of the need to address attitudes toward people with disabilities was in 1994 when disability theology was introduced as a new field of study with the publication of Nancy Eiesland's *The Disabled God.* Also in 1994 the Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion hosted a roundtable about disability theology. They held collaborative critical investigations and imaginations and used disability as an entry point into inter-religious justice collaboration to discuss the topic of women with disabilities as a challenge to feminist theology. As a result of the roundtable, religion and discussions around disability came together to form disability theology. In this field there is discussion around depictions of God as an entity with a disability, and also how religions respond to people with disabilities. This thesis will look at how Progressive Judaism responds to changes in disability inclusion and disability theology.

This thesis will analyze the historical attitudes towards people who are blind and look at the shifting paradigms of inclusion found within progressive Judaism up to today. It begins with a chapter focused on perceptions of blindness in the Tanakh, looking at some key texts ranging from how people become blind to what blind people are permitted or prohibited from doing ritually to stories about blind individuals. Next, the thesis will explore some texts from the Talmud looking both at what laws a blind person is obligated to follow or not as well as perceptions and attitudes towards blind individuals from the Rabbis. Chapter 4 presents an analysis of responsa from the last 60+ years. These responsa, while mostly from the Reform

Movement, also include a responsum from the Conservative Movement as well as an Orthodox Responsum. Chapter 5 describes the perspectives of a handful of individuals who are blind and Jewish regarding what support they have received, what has felt welcoming and unwelcoming, and what the Jewish community can do to improve their support of visually impaired congregants. Lastly, the thesis concludes with a proposal of a new responsum for the Reform Movement regarding blind members of our communities.

Chapter 2: Biblical Context of Blindness

In biblical times blindness was seen as a weakness. While there are several stories in the Tanakh of people who either go blind or have weak or dim eyes, the focus here is on the attributes ascribed to blind people and what they are or are not able to do according to the text. People who were blind were often lumped together with other people who would have had difficulty getting by in life. Blindness is also seen as a punishment during biblical times. Biblical sources often describe blind people as naive and unable to fend for themselves. This chapter is arranged by categories represented in the text. First is an analysis of a selection of stories in the Tanakh that depict blindness in a specific character. Second, is an analysis of sources that articulate laws about blind individuals. Third is an exploration of sources that use blindness as a punishment. Fourth is an understanding of the obligations of the seeing community towards blind individuals. Lastly are depictions of God curing blindness.

Stories Depicting Blindness in the Tanakh

In the Tanakh there are several stories of people being struck with blindness or blindness occurring as they age. Two of the biblical patriarchs, Isaac and Jacob, are described as going blind in old age. In Genesis 27:1 and Genesis 48:10, each patriarch is described as losing their eyesight. However, two different words are used to describe their conditions.

The stories are very similar. In both situations, the patriarch is trying to bless a future generation and cannot see well enough to know who is who in the blessing. In the case of Isaac, because of

his "dim" eyes, Jacob can deceive Isaac into thinking he is blessing Esau.[15] In Jacob's case, Joseph tries to correct his father's hand placement while Jacob blesses his grandchildren thinking that Jacob was confused because of his poor eyesight, often translated as "dim with age."[16] Though both patriarchs have poor eyesight, two different words are used to describe their condition. The word used to describe Isaac's eyes is וַתִּכְהֶיןָ. The root of the verb is כָּהָה, which translates to grow weak, grow dim, grow faint, falter, be weak, be dim, be darkened, be restrained, be faint, or fail. This verb appears only eight times in the Tanakh.[17] Of those eight times only two of them are in the Torah. It is used here to describe Isaac's eyesight, and in Deuteronomy 34:7 to describe Moses' eyesight as לֹא־כָהֲתָה, NOT dim. Each of the eight times the verb occurs it is in a different form. Five of the eight times the verb is used to describe the state of someone's eyes or eyesight.[18]

Alternatively, the verb used to describe Jacob's eyesight in old age is כָּבְדוּ from the root כָּבַד, meaning to be heavy, be weighty, be grievous, be hard, be rich, be honorable, be glorious, be burdensome, or be honored. This verb is significantly more common, appearing in the Tanakh 115 times.[19] This is however the only time it is used to describe eyesight. We know that the verb is describing blindness because the verse continues לֹא יוּכַל לִרְאוֹת, and he cannot see. Based on this definition of the root, however, a better translation of וְעֵינֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כָּבְדוּ מִזֹּקֶן would be "Israel's eyes were heavy from time."

[15] Genesis 27:1
[16] Genesis 48:10
[17] "Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible," n.d., https://biblehub.com/strongs.htm.
[18] "Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible."
[19] "Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible."

While Jacob uses his father's blindness to his advantage to steal Esau's blessing, Joseph tries to help his father when he believes that he is confused due to his eyesight. Our patriarchs show two different ways of interacting with a person who is blind. In the first instance, we learn later in the Tanakh that deceiving a person who is blind is frowned upon. In the second case, we see how people tend to react around a person who is blind, jumping in to help when there is a perceived error. This too is not the best way to interact with someone visually impaired. In Genesis 48:17 Joseph assumes his father was making an error due to his inability to see his grandchildren clearly, however, Jacob responds יָדַעְתִּי בְנִי יָדַעְתִּי, "I know my son, I know."[20] Jacob is fully aware of what he is doing and is consciously giving the greater blessing to the younger son. One lesson we can learn from Joseph and Jacob's interaction is that it is often better to communicate with someone and ask if they need help or describe what it is a person who is blind is doing out loud rather than jump into trying to correct a perceived error. We cannot know someone's intentions or needs without communicating with them. I think of when my dad is feeling around the table looking for something, we do not just start handing him random objects, rather we ask what it is he is looking for and then hand him the object or use directionals to help him navigate where he needs to feel for it.

Perhaps the difference between the words used for Isaac and Jacob's eyesight in these verses is articulated because of their different life experiences. Isaac is seen as a much more passive character in the Tanakh and as such his eyes are described as dim or weak. It is not that his eyesight has gotten challenging with old age perhaps, but more that his ability to see what is in front of him is diminished, weakened. Jacob on the other hand, plays a very active role in his life

[20] Genesis 48:19 All direct translations from Tanakh are from The Contemporary Torah, JPS 2006 unless otherwise noted

trajectory over time. He faces several challenges and hardships throughout life. As a result, Jacob's eyes are described as heavy, they are heavy with the difficult life he has lived. Using two different words for Isaac and Jacob's loss of sight shows us that there are different ways in which people can lose their sight and those different ways manifest differently. Jacob, while unable to see well, was able to know which grandchild was which while Isaac was unable to tell that Jacob was fooling him by wearing fur on his arms.

Metaphorical Blindness

Within the Tanakh there are several instances of blindness or laws concerning a person who is blind that can be interpreted as metaphorical blindness. One specific example is particularly useful in helping us to better understand biblical attitudes toward people who are blind. Isaiah 56:10 says, צֹפָ֥יו עִוְרִים כֻּלָּ֖ם לֹ֣א יָדָ֑עוּ כֻּלָּם֙ כְּלָבִ֣ים אִלְּמִ֔ים לֹ֥א יוּכְל֖וּ לִנְבֹּ֑חַ הֹזִ֥ים שֹׁכְבִ֖ים אֹהֲבֵי־נָֽוּם׃ "The lookouts are blind, all of them, They perceive nothing. They are all dumb dogs; That cannot bark; They lie sprawling, They love to drowse." Here, the word for the blind lookouts is עִוְרִים, from the root עִוֵּר, meaning blind either physically or figuratively. This word is used 26 times in the Tanakh to describe someone as being blind either to a situation or in sight.[21] In this instance, the blind watchmen are compared to "dumb dogs," כְּלָבִים אִלְּמִים, from the adjective אִלֵּם meaning mute, silent, dumb, unable to speak. The watchmen are not seen as helpful or useful people, but rather compared to someone completely unable to do the job they are tasked with. In using the word blind to describe the watchmen in Isaiah 56:10 the author depicts blind people as not capable of basic responsibilities. The Rabbis understand this blindness to be a metaphorical one

[21] "Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible."

emphasizing the writer's point that the watchmen are useless in their job. However, this comparison demonstrates one of the attitudes of the biblical writers towards blindness, that of them being unable to do basic tasks and be beneficial to the people around them.

Restrictions for Blind Individuals

The major laws concerning blind individuals in the Torah pertain to the Priesthood.[22] Priests who have any defect are unable to offer לֶחֶם אֱלֹהָיו, literally "bread of his God," however understood to mean any type of food offered to God. Rashi points out that for food to be counted as a meal, in Judaism it must include bread. As such, לֶחֶם אֱלֹהָיו refers to a meal being offered to God. The Hebrew word used for a defect in these verses, Leviticus 21:17-23, is the word מוּם from the noun מוּם which means blemish, spot, or defect either in a physical sense or in reference to a moral stain. מוּם appears only 21 times in the Tanakh. Fifteen of those times are in the Torah.[23] The first occurrence of the noun is in Leviticus 21:17 and another five times in this short six-verse section The next three occurrences of מוּם are in Leviticus 22:18-25 which describes the types of defects prohibited in an animal being offered for a sacrifice.

Leviticus 21:18-20 defines "a defect as any person who is blind, or lame, or has a limb too short or too long. No man who has a broken leg or a broken arm; or who is hunchback, or a dwarf, or who has a growth in his eye, or who has a boil-scar, or scurvy, or crushed testicle." What is important to remember about these restrictions is they are only applied to the ancestors of Aaron, only to Kohanim. The word used for a blind person in Leviticus 21:18 is the same adjective that

[22] Leviticus 21:17-23
[23] "Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible."

is used in Isaiah 56:10 discussed above. However these verses do not only say someone who is blind by the biblical definition of blindness, but rather they also say תְּבַלֻּל בְּעֵינָיו, "who has a defect in their eye."

Interestingly, in Leviticus 21:20, Rashi understands several of the words to be related to the eyes in some way. או גבן, defined above as a hunchback, Rashi describes as one whose eyebrows have their hair long so that they lie over his eyes, citing Berakhot 43b as his explanation. או דק, defined above as "or a dwarf," Rashi defines as "one who has in his eye a membrane which is called 'toile' (web) in old French. The word is similar in meaning to (Isaiah 40:22) 'It is He that stretcheth out the heavens like a web (כַּדֹּק)'" citing Berakhot 48a. Finally, we get to Rashi's explanation of תְּבַלֻּל בְּעֵינָיו. Rashi explains that this means,

Anything that causes a mingling in the eye, e.g., a white line which extends from the white of the eye and intersects the סירא (the iris), which is the ring that encloses the black of the eye which is called prunelle in old French. This white line intersects the circle and runs into the black (so that the white and the black of the eye mingle). The Targum rendering of תבלל is חילוז, connected in meaning with חלזון (a kind of worm); he translates it thus because that line resembles a worm. Thus, too, the Sages of Israel name it (the white line) among the blemishes of first-born animals: חלזון נחש עינב (worm, snake, wart).[24]

Ultimately a defect of the eye is understood by Rashi to be a cosmetic occurrence in someone's eye, not something impacting their sight necessarily. The line breaks the boundaries that are "supposed to " exist in someone's eye and therefore, as Ibn Ezra states, the word is connected to corruption or mingled. Rashi is not the only one who understands the other descriptions in Leviticus 21:20 to be connected to the eyes in different ways. It is interesting to note just how many ways something connected to one's eyes can prevent a priest from offering sacrifices.

[24] Rashi on Leviticus 21:20

Leviticus continues to explain that the food a person with these defects offers up will not be accepted by God. However, this defect that the priest holds does not impact what the priest is allowed to consume themselves. They may eat of the choice fruits of God not just of the holy, but also of the most holy. However, they cannot enter behind the curtain or come near to the altar due to their defect. God explains that for them to enter these spaces would be profane because God sanctified them. The word used here for profane in Hebrew is יְחַלֵּל from the Hebrew root חָלַל meaning to profane, defile, pollute, desecrate, or begin; all either ritually or sexually. In this case, it is a ritual profanity that would ensue, but why these specific defects? Why do we see them as defects at all? Why do these situations lead to a space becoming profane?

While it can be difficult in the 21st Century to understand why people with these minor blemishes were forbidden from performing an integral part of their role as priests, some aspects make sense. Offering a sacrifice, whether animal or not, can take a great deal of physical exertion. While in today's day and age, a blind person is capable of doing anything a sighted person can do with the help of technology, even flying a plane, in biblical times technology was not at the same level it is today. It could have been very dangerous for a blind person to be offering sacrifices. Additionally, the social norms have changed dramatically from the ancient world to today.

However, the attitude of blindness as a defect is not lost on us. In addition to a priest himself being unable to perform the most integral role if they are blind, so too the animal being offered up as a sacrifice has to be free of defect or blemish.[25] A blemish for an animal is defined as

[25] Leviticus 22:18-25

"Anything blind, or injured, or maimed, or with a wen, boil-scar, or scurvy"[26] The word for a blind animal is from the same root as the word for a blind Kohan, עִוֵּר. Unfortunately, we cannot get around the fact that the Torah sees blindness as a defect or a blemish that takes people and objects away from holiness.

Blindness as Punishment

Throughout the Tanakh people either as a group or as individuals are punished with blindness for various actions. Sometimes this blindness seems to be metaphorical, while other times it is quite literal. In a figurative sense, Exodus 23:8 says "Bribes blind the clear-sighted." and Deuteronomy 16:19 states "Bribes blind the eyes of the discerning." Here it is very unlikely that the blindness that is referenced is literal, and is more likely a situation where someone cannot see clearly because their motives are skewed. Several chapters later however in Deuteronomy 28:28-29 we see an example of literal blindness used as punishment. It is written יַכְּךָ יְהוָה בְּשִׁגָּעוֹן וּבְעִוָּרוֹן וּבְתִמְהוֹן לֵבָב: וְהָיִיתָ מְמַשֵּׁשׁ בַּצָּהֳרַיִם כַּאֲשֶׁר יְמַשֵּׁשׁ הָעִוֵּר בָּאֲפֵלָה וְלֹא תַצְלִיחַ אֶת־דְּרָכֶיךָ וְהָיִיתָ אַךְ עָשׁוּק וְגָזוּל כָּל־הַיָּמִים וְאֵין מוֹשִׁיעַ: "Adonai will strike you with madness, blindness, and dismay. You shall grope at noon as the blind grope in the dark; you shall not prosper in your ventures, but shall be constantly abused and robbed, with none to give help." This is listed among the curses that will take place if we do not faithfully follow God's commandments. Having blindness as a curse demonstrates the negative outlook of the Torah on blindness and the abilities of people who are blind. It leads people to understand their blindness as a punishment from God for doing something wrong.

[26] Leviticus 22:22

Similar to Deuteronomy 28:28-29 which uses actual blindness as a punishment for not following God's commandments, Zepheniah 1:17 also refers to blindness as a form of punishment. The verse states, וְהַצַּרְתִּי לָאָדָם וְהָלְכוּ כַּעִוְרִים כִּי לַיהוָה חָטָאוּ "I will bring distress on the people, and they shall walk like the blind because they sinned against God." Here God threatens the people that they will not be able to walk around normally and will instead be lost and confused like a blind person would be because of their sins. Blindness here is seen as a negative quality, one that is a reasonable form of punishment, even if not a literal blindness.

Obligations of the Seeing Community

Even though blindness is generally considered an affliction or defect in the Tanakh, certain protections are reserved for people who are blind. The most familiar text is Leviticus 19:14, לֹא־תְקַלֵּל חֵרֵשׁ וְלִפְנֵי עִוֵּר לֹא תִתֵּן מִכְשֹׁל וְיָרֵאתָ מֵאֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲנִי יְהוָה: "You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind. You shall fear your God: I am Adonai." This text has been used by various communities within Jewish spaces to push for their inclusion and support. Every community interprets the text a little differently to be in line with their cause. In terms of blindness, this text shows the importance of protecting someone who is blind and not taking advantage of their inability to see something. The reasoning given for this protection is that we should fear God. However, the word וְיָרֵאתָ translated here as "you shall fear" can also be translated as "you shall stand in awe" It is God who creates humans with vision impairments or hearing impairments. We see this in Exodus when God is talking to Moses and says וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵלָיו מִי שָׂם פֶּה לָאָדָם אוֹ מִי־יָשׂוּם אִלֵּם אוֹ חֵרֵשׁ אוֹ פִקֵּחַ אוֹ עִוֵּר הֲלֹא אָנֹכִי יְהוָה "And Adonai said to him, Who

gives humans speech? Who makes them dumb or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, Adonai?"[27] We can be both in fear of God and stand in awe of God at the same time. For awe requires a certain level of fear.

Similar to Leviticus 19:14, Deuteronomy 27:18 describes the importance of respecting the blind community stating, אָרוּר מַשֶּׁגֶּה עִוֵּר בַּדָּרֶךְ וְאָמַר כָּל־הָעָם אָמֵן "Cursed be the one who misdirects a blind person who is underway. – And all the people shall say, Amen." Here we see that God not only wants for us to respect and not misdirect a blind person but that if one does, they will be cursed. What is particularly interesting about this passage is that one of the aspects of the curses we saw above was becoming blind. So if one deceives a person who is blind and disrespects and confuses them, they will become blind

In Job 29:12-16, Job describes the many different ways he helped different vulnerable communities. Job does not say that he pitied the blind or talked down about them, but rather says עֵינַיִם הָיִיתִי לַעִוֵּר "I was eyes to the blind."[28] This moment can be interpreted in two ways. First it is another depiction of blind individuals being lumped into a category with other people who need support. However, it can also be understood as an example of how to be a supportive person for someone who is blind. Job's declaration that he was eyes to the blind can be understood as helping meet someone where they are. This is an excellent counterpoint to the deceit and assumed help that we see in the stories of Isaac and Jacob and Jacob and Joseph.
Jewish tradition, starting with the Tanakh, places a big emphasis on protecting and caring for people who are perceived as weak or more vulnerable. Those who are blind are often included in

[27] Exodus 4:11
[28] Job 29:15

as among people who need extra protection from the larger community. One example we see of this is in Jeremiah 31:7-9 where the blind are listed as one of the specific communities that God will include in the gathering of people from the ends of the earth, guiding them with compassion and leading them to water and land they will not stumble on. Here God is saying that even God will protect the blind people among us and hold us responsible to protect them.

In the Tanakh, time and time again blindness is seen as a condition that requires people to need extra protection and care. Blind individuals are listed among others who are typically considered more vulnerable - pregnant women, the lame, and others. The larger community holds the responsibility to look out for the blind individuals among them and make sure to, at the very least, not make their lives more difficult than they already are.

God Can Cure Blindness

Earlier we saw texts where God causes people to go blind as a form of punishment or curse, but what God gives, God can also take away. There are several places in the Tanakh where it says that God will cure the blind as part of messianic-era predictions. Meaning, that when the Messiah comes, one of the things that is believed will happen is that blind people will have their sight restored.

For example, Isaiah 29:17-21 predicts that when the Messiah comes, וְשָׁמְעוּ בַיּוֹם־הַהוּא הַחֵרְשִׁים דִּבְרֵי־סֵפֶר וּמֵאֹפֶל וּמֵחֹשֶׁךְ עֵינֵי עִוְרִים תִּרְאֶינָה: “In that day, the deaf shall hear even written words, And the eyes of the blind shall see even in darkness and obscurity.” Not only does it say that the eyes

of the blind will see, but that even in the moments when it is most difficult for a blind person to see, they will still be able to see. Similarly, in the messianic era Isaiah 35:4-10, predicts: אָז תִּפָּקַחְנָה עֵינֵי עִוְרִים וְאָזְנֵי חֵרְשִׁים תִּפָּתַחְנָה: "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped." Again there is a pairing of blindness and deafness. However, in Isaiah 35 there are other vulnerable conditions listed as well such as the lame and mute. These vulnerabilities have been seen as connected to blindness before, and now they are all seen as being cured by God upon the arrival of the Messiah. We see a similar trope in Isaiah 42:7, where it says לִפְקֹחַ עֵינַיִם עִוְרוֹת לְהוֹצִיא מִמַּסְגֵּר אַסִּיר מִבֵּית כֶּלֶא יֹשְׁבֵי חֹשֶׁךְ: "Opening eyes deprived of light, rescuing prisoners from confinement, from the dungeon those who sit in darkness." Again God is restoring light and vision to those who cannot see. Here the word for blind is still used in addition to the idea of literally (or figuratively) opening the eyes.

Another passage that describes God opening the eyes of the blind is in Psalm 146:8. It says יְהוָה ו פֹּקֵחַ עִוְרִים יְהוָה זֹקֵף כְּפוּפִים יְהוָה אֹהֵב צַדִּיקִים: "God restores sight to the blind, God makes those who are bent stand straight, God loves the righteous." This Psalm also references vulnerable populations such as the widow, orphan, stranger, and prisoner, reminding us that blindness is considered a vulnerable population during biblical times.

There is no shortage of texts about blindness or stories that incorporate blindness in one way or another, however the majority of the time our biblical texts cast blindness in a negative light. As we have seen, blindness is included as a condition that makes someone vulnerable. It is considered a punishment for sin and curing blindness is described in a way that evokes shame. These texts can leave people searching for understanding or meaning in their blindness, lacking

trust in God, or struggling to find a place for themselves in Judaism. Thankfully, we have further textual traditions we can draw on to try to understand blindness and its role in our lives. The next chapter will examine a selection of stories and laws from the Talmud regarding blindness.

Chapter 3: Rabbinic Perspectives on Blindness

Rabbinic literature focuses mainly on what religious obligations pertain to blind individuals. Some passages support blind people being able to participate in rituals and read aloud and have it be counted for the communal reading, whileother passages prohibit blind people from doing certain mitzvot. Below there are several selections from the Talmud that refer to various situations relating to the blind.

A Blind Person's Obligations

According to Babylonian Talmud, Megila 24a a blind person can recite the introductory prayers and blessings before the Shema and can translate the Torah into Aramaic. However, Rabbi Yehuda argues that one who has never seen the luminaries (sun, moon, and stars) cannot recite the introductory prayers and blessings before the Shema as the first of the blessings is over the luminaries, so one who has never benefited from them cannot say the blessing at all. However, the discussion continues on Babylonian Talmud Megila 24b, where the claim is made that, "It is taught in a baraita that they said to Rabbi Yehuda: many have seen enough with their mind to expound up the Divine Chariot, although they have never actually seen it."[29] Therefore, they argue that a blind person can recite the blessings. Rabbi Yehuda tries to argue that a blind person does not receive benefits from the luminaries, but is counteracted again concerning a story about a blind person holding a torch while walking around at night and when asked why, the blind person says so that other people may see him and help him to remain safe. Therefore, it is

[29] All direct translations of Talmudic sources are from The William Davison Talmud (Koren – Steinsaltz)

decided that a blind person can benefit from luminaries and can say the introductory prayers and blessings before the Shema.

According to Babylonian Talmud Pesachim 116b, a blind person is obligated to recite the Haggadah. There is a good deal of discussion regarding whether or not this is the case, but the conclusion they come to is yes, it is an obligation of the blind. The text argues that since the four sons say “this son of ours” and a blind person cannot point to their son therefore the blind person should be exempt from reciting the Haggadah. The Gemara points out, however, that Rav Yosef and Rav Sheshet, both of whom were blind, recite the Haggadah themselves at their seders. They both argue that reciting the Haggadah applies to rabbinic law so therefore blind people can recite the Haggadah for others as well. This shows that a blind person is seen as an equal in the case of rabbinic law for this matter. Even though there are some complications and it may not be as easy for a blind person to recite the Haggadah, they can do it and it counts not only for their own recitation of the Haggadah but also for anyone who is listening.

Babylonian Talmud Baba Kamma 86b-87a starts with a Mishna that teaches that “one who humiliates a blind person is liable to pay compensation.” However, Rabbi Yehuda disagrees with this Mishna, saying in the Gemara that “a blind person who humiliated another does not have liability for humiliation.” Rabbi Yehuda continues that a blind person is also exempt from being exiled for killing unintentionally and is exempt from being liable to receive lashes or court-imposed capital punishment, even if they transgress a prohibition from the Torah that mandates these punishments. The Gemara in working through the arguments from Rabbi Yehuda agrees with some and disagrees with others. They agree that a blind person is exempt from

liability for humiliation, however, in the case of an unintentional killing, a blind person is liable to be exiled for the death.

In a different baraita later in the passage, Rabbi Yehuda says that "a blind person does not have humiliation and so did Rabbi Yehuda exempt a blind person from all judgments of civil law that are in the Torah." Having humiliation refers to receiving compensation for humiliation. The Gemara provides a proof text for this argument concerning unintentional killing, "then the congregation shall judge between the smiter and the avenger of blood, according to these laws."[30] The Gemara explains that anyone subject to the halakhah of a smiter or an avenger is subject to civil law and anyone who is not subject to the halakhah of a smiter or an avenger, including a blind person, is not subject to civil law.

Additionally, Rabbi Yehuda says in a different baraita, "A blind person does not have compensation for humiliation, and so did Rabbi Yehuda exempt a blind person from all mitzvot that are stated in the Torah." According to Rabbi Yehuda, blind people do not have to perform any of the mitzvot that are present in the Torah. Rav Sheisha explains that anyone who is not subject to civil laws, including a blind person, is also not subject to the commandments and statutes. But the Talmud does not simply leave it as blind people are exempt from all Torah commandments. Rather, it continues with the teaching of Rav Yosef, who himself is blind. Rav Yosef said if a blind person is exempt from the mitzvot then he would host a festive day for the sages because he is not commanded to perform the mitzvot but does so anyway. He explains that according to Rabbi Hanina one who is commanded and performs a mitzvah is greater than one who is not commanded and performs it. Rav Yosef concludes the topic by saying if the halakhah

[30] Numbers 35:24

is not in accordance with Rabbi Yehuda, meaning a blind person is obligated to the mitzvot, then he would host a festive day for the sages because he is commanded to and would therefore have more reward. So even though the Talmud says that blind people are not required to perform Torah mitzvot, Rav Yosef makes a point that whether a blind person is required or not they can still perform the mitzvot.

In Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 23a-23b the Mishna denies a blind person the ability to serve as an agent to bring a bill of divorce to a woman. Others who are prohibited from performing this task include a deaf-mute, an imbecile, a minor, or a gentile. It explains that these people are seen as halakhically incompetent and therefore unable to serve as agents. The Gemara provides more detail on why a blind person is excluded. According to Rav Sheshet a blind person is not allowed to bring a bill of divorce "because he does not know from whom he takes it and to whom he gives it, and since he is unaware of this he will not be able to testify about it." However, Rav Yosef disagrees with this reason. He questions that if there is this concern then why would a blind man be permitted to have sexual relations with his wife? He points out that they can use voice recognition to identify people. Rav Yosef does not say that a blind person can bring the bill of divorce, however. He states that a blind man cannot say that the bill of divorce was written and signed in their presence because they are unable to see it being written or signed. Therefore, this text stands by the idea that a blind person cannot be the one to bring a bill of divorce because they are not halakhically competent according to the Talmud.

Commentary on Blindness

While the Talmud is somewhat open about the inclusion of blind individuals in terms of obligations to halakah, overall attitudes towards the blind community are fairly negative. Babylonian Talmud Nedarim 64b states that "it was taught in a baraita: four are considered as if they were dead: a pauper, and a leper, and a blind person, and one who has no children…and a blind person, as it is written, 'He has made me to dwell in dark place, as those that have been long dead.'[31]" To compare being blind to being dead can be extremely damaging for a person who is blind. This seems incongruent with other parts of the Talmud in which there is a push towards blind people being obligated to do the same things as sighted people. Here there is a distinction made that being blind is a bad thing and that one may as well be dead if they are blind.

A little less severe, though still painting blind people in a negative light, Babylonian Talmud Chaggiah 5b has a parable about Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi and Rabbi Hiyya visiting a city. When they ask for a Torah scholar the people of the city tell them there is a Torah scholar, but he is blind. At first, Rabbi Hiyya tells Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi not to go see the scholar so as not to demean his status as Nasi. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi goes anyway and together they greet the blind Torah scholar. Afterward, the scholar blesses them both saying, "You greeted one who is seen and does not see, may you be worthy to greet the One Who sees and is not seen." Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi says "Now if I had listened to you and not gone to greet him, you would have prevented me from receiving this blessing." While this parable ends with a beautiful blessing from the blind Torah scholar and the appreciation of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi and Rabbi Hiyya, there is still the

[31] Lamentations 3:6

aspect in this story that a blind person is of lower status and the idea that seeing him will diminish Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's political status. The idea that a person is of lower status because they are blind is not only seen tangentially here like in many places in our ancient texts, but is explicitly referenced.

In a rather drastic shift, Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 30a gives space and justification for accommodations for people who are blind. It states, — תָּנוּ רַבָּנַן: סוּמָא וּמִי שֶׁאֵינוֹ יָכוֹל לְכַוֵּין אֶת הָרוּחוֹת יְכַוֵּין לִבּוֹ כְּנֶגֶד אָבִיו שֶׁבַּשָּׁמַיִם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: ״וְהִתְפַּלְלוּ אֶל ה׳״ " The Sages taught in a Tosefta: A blind person and one who is unable to approximate the directions and, therefore, is unable to face Jerusalem to pray, may focus his heart towards his Father in Heaven, as it is stated, 'And they shall pray to the Lord.'[32]" This shift in inclusion and understanding can be seen as a proof text for why we should make accommodations for people with various needs to be able to participate in Judaism in a way that is accessible to them. There is no talk here of the blind person being lesser than for this accommodation, rather it is a simple fact that because they are unable to do prayer in the "typical" way they can practice prayer in a way that makes sense for them.

[32] I Kings 8:44

Chapter 4: Responsa Around Blindness

There are many Reform Responsa around the broad importance of inclusion within our prayer spaces. However, only a handful are concerned with the inclusion of people who are blind in various capacities as both leaders and participants. In this chapter, we will look at existing Reform Responsa relating to the inclusion or lack thereof of people who are blind and also take a look at two relevant responsa from the Conservative and Orthodox movements. The responsa below are organized by the date they were published. The progression of the attitudes towards people with disabilities in general and more specifically people who are blind can be seen through the arc of decisions and attitudes present in the responsa.

Reform responsum CURR 74-77 *Blind Person with Dog at Services* published in 1969 addresses when a synagogue asked if a non-congregant could bring her seeing eye dog to high holiday services with her.[33] The response begins by arguing that perhaps a blind person does not need to come to services at all and would be better served reading the service and studying the Torah at home. However, since she wants to come to services it continues to address whether the dog should be allowed at services. The responsum points out the contempt for dogs in biblical literature, but then quotes the head of Yeshiva Mesivtha Tifereth Jerusalem in New York, Rabbi Moses Feinstein, in his responsum allowing someone to bring his guide dog to a synagogue. Rabbi Feinstein argues that the man can come to synagogue with a seeing-eye dog but should sit near the door so as not to disturb the congregation. In other words, Rabbi Feinstein says that yes, the dog should be allowed. However, this responsum rejects Rabbi Feinstein's conclusion and

[33] The Central Conference of American Rabbis, "CURR 74-77 - Central Conference of American Rabbis," Central Conference of American Rabbis, June 18, 2018, https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-responsa/curr-74-77/.

notes the concern that the dog would create a disturbance in the synagogue by getting excited from the sheer amount of people at high holiday services. Therefore, the responsum dictates that a member of the congregation should pick the woman up, sit with her at services, and bring her home after services so that there is no need to bring the dog. It argues that this is a special privilege and a mitzvah to "take complete charge of her on that occasion."[34]

Guide dogs had only been in use for about 30 years at the time this responsum was written, so it is possible that the author did not know a great deal about them. This responsum was also written before the enactment of The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. It was a time when there was much less understanding and support for disabled communities as a whole. The conclusion conveys the sense that blind people are incapable of independence and that those who help them are deserving of praise.

Reform responsum NARR 70-71 from the collection New American Reform Responsa published in 1992, addresses what the responsibility of the synagogue is to those in the community who need handicapped access.[35] While most people who are blind do not require a special entrance or accommodations to enter a space, this responsum sets a precedent for the importance of including people with disabilities in our spaces. It marks a shift in understanding of the importance of inclusion within the Reform Movement from the previous responsum that was written over 20 years earlier. During the time between CURR 74-77 and NARR 70-71, the United States Congress enacted The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), which

[34] The Central Conference of American Rabbis, "CURR 74-77 - Central Conference of American Rabbis," June 18, 2018.
[35] The Central Conference of American Rabbis, "NARR 70-71 - Central Conference of American Rabbis," Central Conference of American Rabbis, July 9, 2018, https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-responsa/narr-70-71/.

prohibits discrimination of people based on disability. In addition, the ADA requires employers to provide reasonable accommodations for disabilities and requires public accommodations to have accessibility requirements. While religious institutions are exempt from Title III, public accommodations and commercial facilities, of the ADA this responsum demonstrates that the Reform Movement still found it important to adhere to the requirements that the ADA lays out.

Reform responsum TFN NO. 5752.5 297-304 *Disabled Persons* (1992) discusses what the community's obligations are concerning people with physical and mental disabilities.[36] Within this responsum is a specific classification for blind individuals. The writers explain that we are obligated to treat a blind person with special considerations based on Leviticus 19:14 and Deuteronomy 27:18. However, the responsum quickly moves into the obligations of a blind person to the mitzvot. I see this transition as articulating that our responsibilities to a blind person are tied to their responsibilities within the community and what they are required to uphold.

While there are a variety of opinions about a blind person's obligation to mitzvot mentioned in the Talmud, this responsum points out that the final word is a blind Torah scholar and determines blind people are obligated to follow all the mitzvot. As a result, blind members of the community are seen as just as obligated and responsible as any other member of the community for upholding the mitzvot. The responsum continues to address specifically deaf people, otherwise physically disabled people, and mentally disabled people before moving on to a section titled The Reform Perspective.

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[36] The Central Conference of American Rabbis, "TFN no.5752.5 297-304 - Central Conference of American Rabbis," Central Conference of American Rabbis, January 16, 2024, https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-responsa/tfn-no-5752-5-297-304/.

In The Reform Perspective, the responsum concludes "We should encourage the inclusion of all disabled persons in our congregations and, where indicated, encourage the formation of special support groups." They state that yes, there is an obligation to our fellow human beings. However, they explain that they cannot obligate a rabbi or congregation to form support groups and so the obligation is to do whatever is possible and serves as a good deed. They further explain that we must, when including someone with a disability in our minyan, fully include them and help aid in their participation in the spiritual community. This could include providing large-print or Braille prayer books or texts, hearing aids, sign language interpreters, and wheelchair access to all parts of the synagogue and sanctuary. Additionally, it is stated, "As Reform Jews, we should allow for a creative interpretation of the mitzvot that would help to incorporate disabled persons into the congregation in every respect." An example of this level of inclusion would be permitting a blind student to read from a Braille Chumash even though it would not be considered a halakhically sanctioned reading of the Torah. The responsum ends by stating, "In sum, our worth as human beings is based not on what we can do but on the fact that we are created in God's image. We should aim for the maximum inclusion of the disabled in the life of our communities."[37]

After seven years without a responsum addressing blindness, in 1999 the CCAR Responsa Committee addressed a question they received regarding a specific mitzvah concerning people who are blind. This is the first time a Reform responsum has been specifically focused on a

[37] The Central Conference of American Rabbis, "TFN No.5752.5 297-304 - Central Conference of American Rabbis."

situation concerning a blind person since the 1960s and continues to demonstrate the shift and focus on inclusion that exists in Reform Jewish spaces.

Reform responsum NYP NO. 5759.8 *A Blind Person as a Witnes*s (1999) inquires into the problem of whether or not a blind person can serve as a witness at a wedding.[38] The short answer is yes, they can. They note, however, that in traditional halakah the answer would likely be no. In his writings, Maimonides lists the blind as one of the ten categories of people who are disqualified from serving as a witness in court. Maimonides states that this prohibition is from Torah as it says in a midrash to Leviticus that to testify one must either have seen or learned of the matter. A blind person cannot see the matter so therefore, according to Maimonides, they are exempt. For a wedding, the witnesses must be able to see the exchanging of the rings of the couple and if one of the witnesses cannot see this, the wedding would be invalid in Jewish law.

The Reform Movement argues that a blind person can serve as a witness for three reasons. First, the halakhah may recognize the validity of marriage even if it is done in the presence of ineligible witnesses. Second, they argue a case that blind people are not disqualified for serving as witnesses to a wedding because based on the discussion of a ghet in Gittin 23a we can understand that a blind person can serve as a witness for matters that they can speak reliably about and do not require eyewitness knowledge. Third, in Reform Judaism, there is a tendency to lean towards the greatest inclusion possible in religious life. This responsum demonstrates a shift in the Reform Jewish ideology to be inclusive of those with disabilities as much as possible. This

[38] The Central Conference of American Rabbis, "NYP No. 5759.8 - Central Conference of American Rabbis," Central Conference of American Rabbis, July 22, 2019, https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-responsa/nyp-no-5759-8/.

shift is something that is occurring not only in Reform Responsa but also in synagogue life as a whole in the Reform Movement.

The Participation of Jews Who Are Blind in the Torah Service is a Conservative responsum from 2003 written by Rabbi Daniel Nevins. In this responsum, Rabbi Nevins addresses whether a Jew who is blind can read from the Torah at services, perform an aliyah, or read Haftarah.[39] While there are determinations made to allow for blind individuals to participate in certain ways in the Torah service, it is ultimately determined that a blind person cannot read from the Torah and have the reading count as the public reading of the Torah for the community. The responsum indicates that a blind person can be given an aliyah to the Torah or can read Haftarah. Rabbi Nevins argues there is no way for a blind person to read from the Torah aloud as there is no technology that allows for someone to read directly from the Torah scroll if they cannot see it. The limitation is that it is not halakhically acceptable for one to read the Torah from memory. Rabbi Nevins states that if future technologies were created that enable a blind person to read from a Torah scroll rather than a Chumash then his position on this matter may change.

The most recent responsum concerning the blind community is a Maharat Teshuva by Rabbanit Aliza Sperling. The executive summary was published in 2019. The question that Sperling addresses is if a blind person can read from the Torah in Braille text whether it can be considered a boy's bar mitzvah, and whether a man doing so exempts the community from the obligation to read the Torah.[40] As part of the responsum, Rabbanit Sperling gives a thorough background on

[39] Rabbi Daniel S. Nevins, "The Participation of Jews Who Are Blind in the Torah Service," *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 10, no. 3–4 (January 2, 2007): 27–52, https://doi.org/10.1300/j095v10n03_04.
[40] "Can a Blind Man Read the Torah for the Congregation? - Matan - the Sadie Rennert," Matan - the Sadie Rennert, January 31, 2019, https://www.matan.org.il/en/online/can-a-blind-man-read-the-torah-for-the-congregation/.

everything from the obligation for a blind person to perform mitzvot to when Hebrew Braille was created.

Hebrew Braille was invented in the 1940s and opened up the world of Torah reading to blind individuals. However, Rabbanit Sperling points out two problems with reading the Torah from Braille. The first is that the reading is performed through touch, not sight. The second problem is that the reading would be done out of a Braille text, not a Torah scroll. So the question Rabbanit Sperling is addressing is if it is halakhically possible for this Braille reading of Torah to still count as the communal reading. In short, she finds that yes, it is permissible for the reading from a Braille Chumash to count halakhically as a communal reading from Torah.

In her reasoning, she cites Beit Yosef Orech Chaim 53:8 and Mishnah Berurah 53:14 which state that blind individuals are required to follow the mitzvot, though it is understood that there are a handful of mitzvot that blindness prevents a person from performing. The responsum addresses the concept of reading the Torah from memory and whether reading from Braille is better or worse than reading from memory in terms of the community requirement to read the Torah. One argument that Rabbanit Sperling raises is that since the community can follow along in their Chumashim they can ensure there is no mistake in the reading of Torah and it should be permissible. Another argument that she brings is that the prohibition from reciting Torah from memory is waived for blind individuals according to Tosafot on Bava Kamma 3b. In her conclusion, Rabbanit Sperling addresses that kavod ha'tzibur, often cited as a reason why we must read directly from a Torah scroll, would be in favor of creating more accessibility in reading Torah by allowing someone to read from a Braille Chumash. Similarly, Rambam argues

that a kosher scroll is not necessary for fulfilling the mitzvah of reading the Torah as a community. As a result, the decision is that a person who is blind can read from a Braille Chumash for the communal Torah reading.

The development of responsa from the various movements shows an increasing motivation to include blind individuals in the mitzvot and the daily lives of our communities. These responsa reflect the general public's push to more fully include people with disabilities and also reflect the Jewish community's push toward valuing the individual and making sure that everyone is included to their fullest extent. We often see this through synagogues' creation of inclusion committees on their boards, finding ways to make everyone feel welcome. In Reform Judaism in particular the push for audacious hospitality supported this push towards an inclusive environment for all. With all the work that has been done recently to help people who are blind feel included and welcomed as part of the community there are still the questions: what else can we do? What is working and what needs improvement still?

Chapter 5: Modern Perspectives From the Blind Jewish Community

The Jewish blind community is small but vocal. There are a handful of leaders within the Jewish community who also identify as legally blind or who have a strong connection to a blind family member. This chapter presents perspectives from a few of these leaders on what is needed and what is going well for those who are blind and Jewish. The chapter includes interviews with Rabbanit Aliza Sperling and her daughter Batya, Rabbi Lauren Tuchman, musician Charlie Kramer, and author Andrew Leland.

When trying to understand what the current strengths and weaknesses of the Jewish community are concerning the inclusion of those who are blind or visually impaired, I conducted interviews with blind Jewish leaders in various denominations as well as a congregant who is blind. Rabbanit Aliza Sperling is sighted and she and her daughter who is blind, Batya, identify as Orthodox. Rabbanit Sperling was ordained from Yeshivat Maharat, the first Orthodox women's yeshiva to ordain rabbis. Her daughter, Batya, is currently in high school. Rabbi Lauren Tuchman, is the first blind woman rabbi and was ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Conservative Rabbinical Seminary, in 2018. Charlie Kramer is a disability life coach and Jewish musician. Andrew Leland is a writer, audio producer, editor, and teacher. He recently published the memoir *Country of the Blind: A Memoir at the End of Sight* in which he discusses his journey into blindness.

In talking with Rabbanit Aliza Sperling and Batya Sperling I learned a great deal about the resources available in the Orthodox world. Rabbanit Sperling wrote the Orthodox Teshuva which was discussed in Chapter 4 regarding blind people being allowed to read the Torah and have it count for the community reading of the Torah. When Batya became a bat mitzvah there were several articles written about her and her mother as she broke ground with the congregational rabbi and community allowing Batya to read from the Torah in Braille at her service. Batya shared that she still reads Torah and participates in Jewish life regularly. At the time of her becoming a bat mitzvah, Batya said that they found that her congregational rabbi was the most supportive person about her being able to read the Torah and encouraged her to become a bat mitzvah and read from the Torah. When Batya was preparing to become a bat mitzvah there was a great deal of support from the people in her community. They were invested in her ability to become a bat mitzvah and read from the Torah in Braille. When asked about how the community responded to the idea of Batya reading Torah in Braille at her service, Rabbanit Sperling declared, “It’s not threatening to say blind people could participate in services.” We discussed how other identities feel more threatening to the traditions of Judaism and the halakhah than blind individuals.

One frustration that we discussed was that people think of blindness as worse than it is. There is a stigma around blindness and many people think that it destroys someone’s life.
Batya still reads the Torah at services today. She reads Torah through Braille in which she prints off using her Braille embosser from Sefaria. She prints the Hebrew text without vowels or punctuation, just as it appears in the Torah scroll. She finds that Sefaria is extremely accessible both with voiceover and Jaws screen readers and also with Braille displays. One of Batya’s

friends even created a Braille trope system so that Batya could learn the trope without simply using a recording.

Rabbanit Sperling explained that her teshuvah on reading Torah from a Braille text raises two main issues that impact the acceptance of reading the text from Braille. The first is that to read the Torah in Braille, one is not using a kosher scroll. Even the Torah that was written in Braille as a scroll is not considered kosher. The second issue with allowing people who are blind to read from a Braille Torah is the general principle that we cannot say the Torah from memory, that it must be read directly from the Hebrew for a public reading. She explained that in her teshuvah the sources point to scenarios of not using a kosher Torah scroll and that there is a responsum from Rambam that addresses this issue and says that the reading does not need to be repeated if it was done from a non-kosher Torah scroll. Rabbi Yosef Karo follows Rambam's responsum. Rabbanit Sperling said that the more people who do something the more it becomes typical. Reading Torah from Braille is just not done enough for it to be considered typical, that does not mean it should not be done or can not be done.

When discussing whether her Jewish community has embraced Batya she expressed a little frustration with a lot of gratitude. She said that sometimes there is no infrastructure in Jewish spaces for people who are blind. For example, almost no synagogues have siddurim (prayer books) for people who are blind. Some may have large print available, but a Braille siddur (prayer book) is hard to come by. Batya is however very involved with the blind Chassidic community. She shared that the community is very supportive of her and she finds herself leaning towards spending more time in the Chassidic community because they are just more

supportive and inclusive. Batya also attends a Jewish Day School which she says has done a really good job of accommodating her needs. They have improved over her time there into seeing disability inclusion as a form of chesed, an act of loving-kindness. In addition to her Day School and the Chassidic community, Batya also participates in Drisha, a Gemara intensive camp during the summer that has been very accessible in accommodating Batya's needs. One other resource that Batya and Rabbanit Sperling shared with me was CSB, Computer Sciences for the Blind. Which provides siddurim, machzorim, and Gemara in Braille or large print. When you request materials from them it arrives the next day. They even have magazines such as Mishpacha Magazine available as a resource in Braille. This organization is run by Rabbi Nachum Lehman.

Rabbanit Sperling and Batya both have the same dream for the Jewish community of the future. They dream of a world in which the Jewish community has more infrastructure so that a person who is blind does not have to do the work themselves to get the basic resources they need. What exactly does this look like? For Rabbanit Sperling and Batya, this would mean that every congregation above a certain size membership should have a Braille prayer book and Chumash available. They also expressed the lack of knowledge of blindness in the larger Jewish community. Basic knowledge such as that blind people will likely need assistance at events such as kiddush and oneg. A blind person is unable to easily navigate a buffet-style set up of food. Additionally, the social aspect of a kiddush or an oneg often presents a barrier for blind people. A blind person may struggle to seek out people to talk to and interact with within these settings. When asked who should be educated on these matters, Batya said the more people that have awareness of the situation the better off everyone is.

The last thing we discussed during our time together was the attitude, as a whole, of addressing individuals as everyone having a unique story. If we approach everyone with an appreciation of and desire to learn about their individual story then we can appreciate and accommodate everyone and all their needs. We also would be able to learn so much about our communities and the people in them if we approached every interaction with this mindset.

Following my conversation with Rabbanit Sperling and Batya, I met with Rabbi Lauren Tuchman and discussed her perspective, as a Conservative rabbi and the first blind female rabbi to be ordained, on what the Jewish community is doing well and what needs to be improved on for inclusion of people who are blind within our communities. We spent a good deal of our conversation discussing resources that are or are not available to the blind Jewish community and what barriers exist to obtaining these resources. Rabbi Tuchman explained that while the work that CSB does is great, it is unclear if they are willing to serve the blind community outside the Orthodox world. Rabbi Tuchman herself struggled with obtaining resources from them as a rabbinical student at JTS.

Rabbi Tuchman believes we need a robust non-denominational resource for blind Jewish individuals and that can be found at JBI, formerly the Jewish Braille Institute. Rabbi Tuchman shared that while JBI is wonderful and has gotten a lot better in recent years, when in rabbinical school she struggled with receiving materials that often had errors in the Hebrew Braille. JBI also is limited in what resources they have available. For example, there is not yet a Braille Talmud. At the same time, JBI provided Rabbi Tuchman with her first-ever Braille luach (Jewish

calendar) this year. She expressed how excited she was to receive the luach and how empowering it felt to be able to quickly and easily look up information on the Jewish calendar in her preferred format. Rabbi Tuchman noted that all of the resources from both CSB and JBI are provided free.

JBI does a Haggadah campaign every year where a person can request their preferred format and version of Haggadah and have it shipped to their home to have and to keep. Any Jewish liturgical resources that JBI provides are for the patron to keep, but the novels that they have in their collection are lent out to patrons just like the National Library Services that are provided for blind or print-disabled individuals.

One challenge Rabbi Tuchman articulated about these resources both at CSB and JBI is that it can feel very burdensome to constantly be asking for resources to be created in Braille just for your individual use. And because the resources are free, when there are errors it feels wrong to ask for the errors to be corrected as there is this aspect, Rabbi Tuchman feels, of just needing to be grateful to have access to the resource.

Another free resource Rabbi Tuchman discussed is something that everyone has access to no matter their abilities. Sefaria is an excellent resource for blind individuals. As mentioned above, Batya Sperling uses Sefaria to print out her Torah readings in Braille when she reads Torah in her community. In addition to Sefaria being able to translate to Braille Hebrew both on a Braille display and printed out, Sefaria is also very accessible to screen reading software such as VoiceOver and JAWS. This opens up the world of Jewish texts to blind individuals who do not know Braille and are unable to read print. Sefaria also has features that allow for the text size to

be increased quite a bit, allowing for visually impaired individuals who are still able to read large print to do so at the print size they need. Rabbi Tuchman mentioned how great this is when she is attending a program where the source sheet was created on Sefaria because she can print out the source sheet ahead of time on her Braille embosser and bring her copy of the texts with her to the program. The trick? Getting the materials in advance.

Every blind person has a different preferred format for reading. For Rabbi Tuchman, it is printed Braille. Rabbi Tuchman said, “It would be great if every synagogue had a Braille embosser and Duxbury, the software used to print materials in Braille so that I wouldn’t have to print my own materials for programs and they could print them for me.”

In short, Rabbi Tuchman wants people to be able to access what they need to access. Whether it is Torah, Tanakh, prayer books, Haggadot, Talmud, or any other Jewish text or resource. The more we make accessible what we are doing, the more the blind individuals within our community can feel like they are truly a part of our community, even outside of Shabbat. We discussed that while it is not her preferred format of reading, the use of tablets and Braille displays in synagogues would mean people with any variety of reading ability, whether large print, Braille, or audio, could participate in programs such as adult education and Torah study more easily. Using sources such as Sefaria, or ebooks, a visually impaired individual would be able to fully engage in programming. The goal, Rabbi Tuchman says, is to get people what they need to be able to feel fully a part of the community and participate fully.

In terms of more pluralistic blind Jewish communities, Rabbi Tuchman shared that the American Council for the Blind has a weekly conference call titled The Jewish Hour that meets every Monday. Rabbi Tuchman shared she has never personally gone to this group, but does know it exists and has been considering checking it out.

In addition to the conversation about resources for blind congregants, we also discussed the 2003 responsum by Rabbi Nevins regarding whether a blind person reading from Braille Torah counts towards fulfilling the mitzvah of reading Torah for the community. Rabbi Tuchman respects Rabbi Nevins and the work he put into his responsum and personally does not hold by it. She explained that in the Conservative Movement, responsa are not binding laws for the rabbis of the Rabbinical Assembly to follow. As a result, Rabbi Tuchman continues to read the Torah from Braille. She prefers to have someone follow along with a yad in the Torah scroll as she is reading, but that may not be the case for everyone. She explained that she follows Rabbanit Sperling's 2019 Responsum stating that a blind person can read Braille from the Torah and have it count as the public reading for the community.

Rabbi Tuchman finds Torah reading to be sacred and holy and for many people is the only opportunity they are given to participate in the service. She says that in a world where many people who read the Torah, especially b'nai mitzvah students, are memorizing the Torah that they chant, the arguments against reading from Braille do not feel as persuasive. That being said, Rabbi Tuchman acknowledges that she does not think it is wise to memorize anything one is leading in front of a congregation. There is too much opportunity to forget what you have memorized. The question Rabbi Tuchman brought up was, given the reality of Torah reading

today, how do we continue to make it meaningful? How can we make Torah reading meaningful even for the blind Torah reader? Often for someone not reading directly from a Torah scroll because they are unable to, there is a great deal of shame in the accommodation of reading from another format. Also, not every blind person can read Braille or large print, so how do we help to engage those who need audio formats for reading? Rabbi Tuchman's goal is to make Torah reading approachable because Torah is a beautiful thing to do and wants everyone to be able to feel a part of the kahal, the community.

We also discussed the Braille Torah scroll that was written in Greensburg, Pennsylvania by Rabbi Lenny Sarko.[41] Rabbi Tuchman explained that the problem is the Torah is not a kosher Torah scroll. She asked Rabbi Sarko about the kashrut of the parchment and was not satisfied with the answer he gave. Rabbi Tuchman also explained that a Torah scroll is supposed to be one continuous piece of parchment but that cannot be done with Braille. Rabbi Tuchman also shared the complication of borrowing the scroll for a weekend to read from it at services. She explained that Braille is very particular about how it is printed, everything in Braille reads slightly differently. The spacing of each dot, while standardized, varies ever so slightly from text to text. In addition, every Braille text is raised, but the amount that it is raised is not standardized so some Braille is not as high off the page as others, this can also change over time. The more a Braille text is read typically the more worn down the Braille cells (letters and numbers) get. As a result, one would want to make sure they can practice and become familiar with the scroll before reading from it aloud at services.

[41]Justin Vellucci, "Local Rabbi Creates Braille Torah for the Visually Impaired," Pittsburgh Jewish Chronicle, June 1, 2021, https://jewishchronicle.timesofisrael.com/local-rabbi-creates-braille-torah-for-the-visually-impaired/.

Rabbi Tuchman also shared with me some points that she wants the seeing community to know about the experiences of the blind community. She wants people to know that the way a blind person uses technology is fundamentally different from how the seeing world uses technology. Sometimes saying you are an inclusive congregation is recognizing that hard copies do not work for everyone and that reading a Kindle at the synagogue as a blind person is completely different from just sitting reading a Kindle on your couch. She also wants people to know that Braille is not weird. It is just a form of reading. Hebrew Braille does exist. JBI, formally the Jewish Braille Institute, does exist and provides free resources to anyone who has low vision. Kiddush and oneg are a nightmare for blind individuals. They physically cannot locate items within the often large rooms. They have difficulty navigating buffets. Socially they have difficulty knowing who is there. So if you see someone sitting by themselves at oneg or kiddush it might not be because they want to be alone, but could be because they are having trouble navigating the space. It's okay to say hi!

Lastly, Rabbi Tuchman shared a positive experience she had as a congregant in a community recently. She was attending a bat mitzvah, and the family forgot to bring benchers to do birkat hamazon, the blessing following a meal. Rabbi Tuchman happened to have her Braille bencher with her, and as a result, ended up being the one to lead the community in birkat hamazon since she was the only one with a bencher. She shared how good it felt to lead the community in prayer. Rabbi Tuchman's dream for the blind Jewish community is for more and more blind people to learn about and be a part of the Jewish community and for them to know that the sky's the limit in regards to how involved you can be!

From the Reform Movement, I talked with Charlie Kramer, a Jewish musician and disability life coach, who travels around to Jewish communities all over the country leading programs and trainings on interacting with the disability community. Whenever Kramer visits a community, he requires that the community include a training session about being more inclusive to people with disabilities as part of his time with them.

One popular program that Kramer leads is called Singing in the Dark. This program, led so far over 150 times, is a blindfolded prayer experience. Sighted guides assist participants in blindfolding and bringing them into a room where they do not know the setup or who is around them. They then get to experience a prayer service in these conditions, helping them to focus more on what is occurring for them internally than what is occurring around them.

When asked what he sees as going well concerning inclusion, particularly of the blind, in Jewish communities he visits, Kramer explained that simply bringing himself and other people with disabilities in to learn from and lead programs is a big improvement. He also observed that more and more congregations are using fully inclusive language, but there is always room for improvement. He pointed out that some communities have provided large print prayer books, sometimes possibly even a Braille prayer book, though this is rare. He said that community members are eager to help but we have to make sure we are helping in the right ways, training our congregants and our leaders on how to offer help without it being offensive.

Kramer expressed several wishes for greater accessibility in Jewish communities. He explained that many large print prayer books are still too small of print for someone who is legally blind to

be able to read. In addition, he would like to see more Braille prayer books and Braille signage for things such as elevators and bathrooms. Kramer dreams of communities that educate on what blindness is and normalize people being blind or low vision.

In terms of feeling welcomed and included in Jewish communal spaces, Kramer explained that he is often being brought in to improve inclusion within the community so is usually very welcomed. In terms of prayer experiences, Kramer feels that because prayer is so oral in Judaism, he feels included and does not feel separated, even if there is not a prayer book he can use. However, he does feel discriminated against in unconscious ways such as people staring at him with his cane or avoiding him.

Kramer wants people to know it is really important to ask for what you need, no matter your disability. Asking for these needs does not make you special or a burden. With regards to the blind community, Kramer says, that if you are struggling talking about your blindness it is okay to feel the way you do. You will come to it in your own time. not every blind person has to be an advocate for the blind community.

The final person I talked to is an author, Andrew Leland, who recently published a book, *Country of the Blind: A Memoir at the End of Sight*, about his experiences losing his eyesight. Leland identifies mainly as culturally Jewish but for the past 4 years he and his wife have become more involved in synagogue life to give their child a Jewish education.

In his book, Leland shares a story of a time when he felt ostracized from the Jewish community. The rabbi of the community read a poem at a children's Shabbat service titled "Fall to Your Knees and Thank God for Your Eyesight" by Billy Collins.[42] In the poem, there is a trope of something not going the way we want, and the response, "Fall to your knees and thank God for your eyesight" over and over, after every struggle. To Leland, this was an upsetting experience, and later his wife emailed the rabbi about their experience with the poem. Unfortunately, this was a situation in which the rabbi did not respond in a way that felt helpful. His apology placed the problem back on Leland saying, "I am sorry that it made you feel uncomfortable"[43] Before this service, Leland had very rarely stepped foot in a synagogue.

Despite feeling uncomfortable with the poem and the rabbi's response, Leland has found himself drawn more and more into the Jewish community because of his son's education. Similar to Kramer, Leland shared that it is hard for many in the sighted community to find a balance between helping someone who is blind versus averting their body and gaze completely. A blind person does not want to be stared at but also does not want to be manhandled. It is important to know how to help someone respectfully. Leland pointed out this is a universal problem but the biggest issue with this appears to be in medical communities and religious communities.

The Jewish community has made significant strides with inclusion in the last 50 years, however, there is still a great deal of work to do. Many synagogues still do not have large print prayer books, let alone Braille prayer books. People do not know how to interact with people who are

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[42] Billy Collins and Billy Collins, "Fall to Your Knees and Thank God for Your Eyesight - Tikkun," *Tikkun - The Prophetic Jewish, Interfaith & Secular Voice to Heal and Transform the World* (blog), February 24, 2014, https://www.tikkun.org/fall-to-your-knees-and-thank-god-for-your-eyesight/.
[43] Andrew Leland, *The Country of the Blind: A Memoir at the End of Sight* (Penguin, 2023). pg. 64

blind. Most synagogue buildings do not have Braille labels on doors such as offices and bathrooms. Even if a synagogue does have large print prayer books, the likelihood of other resources being large print when there are educational programs is very low. Blindness is a disability that affects a large percentage of the population, especially many of our older congregants, some of whom may not be legally blind but could benefit from large print. One possible way to be a little more cost-efficient than getting large print copies of all resources is to invest in some sort of tablet where files can be uploaded and ebooks or resources such as Sefaria can be put onto it. There are so many ways the Jewish community can improve on the work they are already doing.

Chapter 6: A New Reform Responsum

She'elah

Currently a responsum exists that says that guide dogs are not allowed in sanctuary spaces, but this does not seem in line with what occurs in communities or the values that we uphold as Reform Jews. The current responsum was written in the 1960s before the Americans with Disabilities Act was signed and when the use of guide dogs was still relatively new. What does the Reform Movement say regarding the presence of a guide dog in our sanctuaries today?

Teshuvah

In his 1960s responsum, Blind Person With Dog at Services, Rabbi Solomon Freehof outlines the reasoning for why a guide dog should not be allowed at services and presents an alternative solution to a woman bringing her guide dog to high holiday services. In his responsum, Freehof utilizes Rabbi Moses Feinstein's argument from Igros Moses I, 45, saying that "Feinstein permits the blind man to come into the synagogue with the dog."[44] Rabbi Freehof continues outlining in his responsum the arguments that Rabbi Feinstein used to find that an animal, more specifically a guide dog, would be allowed in our worship space.

Rabbi Feinstein began his argument with the Palestinian Talmud, stating, "If a scholar comes with his donkey (for a night's lodging) admit him, and his animal, and his possessions into the synagogue"[45] Rabbi Feinstein argues that if a donkey is allowed inside the synagogue overnight,

[44]The Central Conference of American Rabbis, "CURR 74-77 - Central Conference of American Rabbis," Central Conference of American Rabbis, June 18, 2018, https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-responsa/curr-74-77/.
[45]Palestinian Talmud Megillah III, 3

all the more so should a guide dog should be allowed in the synagogue for a dog is no worse than a donkey. Rabbi Feinstein also argues that it is better to allow the dog in than to deprive a man of saying kaddish and kedusha which need a minyan to be recited. Rabbi Feinstein argues that the blind individual should sit near the door so that the dog does not disturb the congregation. Rabbi Freehof rejects Feinstein's conclusion and says that to prevent a disturbance to the community the dog simply should not be allowed.

Based on Rabbi Feinstein's argument, there is no halakhic standing for why a guide dog should not be allowed in a synagogue or sanctuary. Reform Responsum TFN NO. 5752.5 297-304 *Disabled Persons* written in 1992 points out that the final word in the Talmud regarding whether a blind individual is obligated to the mitzvot is that, yes, a blind person is obligated to uphold the mitzvot. Additionally, it ends by stating, "As Reform Jews, we should allow for a creative interpretation of the mitzvot that would help to incorporate disabled persons into the congregation in every respect."[46]

On February 9th, 2021 The CCAR released a resolution on Systemic Inclusion for Disabled People. In this resolution, the CCAR "requests that our Reform Jewish institutions establish inclusive practices that address the needs of people with both visible and invisible disabilities, as well as transparency around those practices"[47] In light of this new resolution, and the information that there is no halakhic standing for a guide dog to not be allowed in services, I move to replace the responsum that was written by Rabbi Freehof with this new responsum stating that guide

[46] The Central Conference of American Rabbis, "TFN No.5752.5 297-304 - Central Conference of American Rabbis."

[47]The Central Conference of American Rabbis, "CCAR Resolution on Systemic Inclusion for Disabled People," Central Conference of American Rabbis, February 22, 2021, https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-resolutions/central-conference-of-american-rabbis-resolution-on-systemic-inclusion-for-disabled-people/.

dogs may enter sanctuaries and be present in services. Guide dogs are highly well-trained service animals and there is a low likelihood that a guide dog would become a distraction to the congregation during services. They are trained to be around large crowds of people and remain calm.

The Reform Movement and the Central Conference of American Rabbis should welcome guide dogs and other trained service dogs into prayer spaces to allow for the worshiper to fully participate in services and feel welcome and included as part of the community.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

With the increase in the age of the population, blindness is and has become more and more prevalent within our communities. Jewish tradition does not have the best reputation for being inclusive of blind individuals, but there are some key lessons we can learn from our biblical and Talmudic sources regarding how to interact with and respect a blind individual.

The Tanakh mentions blindness, however, blindness is often seen as a defect and people who are blind are seen as second-class citizens not offered the same respect as those who are sighted. In Chapter 2 we looked at places where blindness is shown as problematic as well as passages where blindness is part of the storyline. In Chapter 3 we analyzed passages from the Talmud concerning inclusion of the blind as well as attitudes towards blindness. The Talmud, despite including views from two rabbis who are described as blind, is also not very inclusive of people who are blind. The rabbis debate about what a blind person is obligated to do and some stories place blindness as a status that is less than others. However, we are no longer living in biblical or Talmudic times, in the modern day, there has been a shift in the perspectives toward blind individuals. There is a growing trend within Jewish communities to consider blind individuals as full members of the community despite the historical stigmas reflected in traditional Jewish sources.

In the past 50 years, since the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the overturning of Ugly Laws throughout the country ending in 1974, synagogues and denominational movements have been working to become more inclusive. More and more responsa have been written by movements regarding inclusion of people with disabilities, trying to understand our moral obligation on

various levels. While Progressive Jewish spaces have slowly improved their accessibility, often congregations are not aware of the new responsa as they are published. Several of these responsa connect to blindness and what a blind person can do halakhically. The most recent resolution in the Reform Movement regarding individuals with disabilities is the Central Conference of American Rabbis Resolution on Systemic Inclusion for Disabled People, which was published on February 9th, 2021. While not a responsum, the resolution presents the current stance in the Reform Movement on supporting people with disabilities. This resolution was released as a response to the COVID-19 Pandemic and the shift in awareness of accommodating people with disabilities that occurred societally following the start of the Pandemic. It outlines eight points for inclusion that the Central Conference of American Rabbis is calling on its members, Reform rabbis, to follow in their congregations.

Resources for blind and visually impaired Jews have existed for a long time. JBI, formerly the Jewish Braille Institute, was founded in 1931 by the son of a rabbi who was blinded in World War I. JBI published the first Braille Torah in 1950. Computer Sciences for the Blind was established in 1996, providing free Jewish resources to Orthodox blind individuals. Despite access to these free resources for the blind and visually impaired, many synagogues do not have access to Braille or even large print prayer books let alone Torah or Chumash leaving blind congregants unable to fully participate in services and congregational life. Additionally, adult education or religious schools rarely have resources for blind congregants. One cost-efficient way that we can move to be more inclusive of our blind congregants is by purchasing a handful of tablets and a Braille display or two. This would allow a blind individual, no matter their

reading style (Braille, large print, or audio) to be able to fully participate in services and adult education or religious school.

In February 2024, The Washington Jewish Week published an article about B'nai Israel Congregation in Rockville, MD, the first congregation in North America to install sensors for the blind and visually impaired. The sensors are made by the Israeli company, RightHear, and are designed to be scanned with a smartphone and provide audible information regarding the surrounding area to help people orient themselves.[48] This use of technology to help congregants feel included is a huge step on the right path toward inclusion within our communities.

In the coming years, it would be beneficial to see more widespread use of technology in the synagogue. In addition, the Reform Movement could benefit from writing a responsum regarding reading the Torah from Braille as well as publishing the responsum present here in Chapter 6 or a version of it in regards to the allowance of guide dogs in services. More synagogues should also take advantage of the technology of RightHear. The more synagogues are aware of and utilize resources available to them such as JBI and CSB, the better off the Jewish community will be.

[48]Braden Hamelin, "B'nai Israel Becomes First Synagogue in North America to Add New Technology for Individuals With Visual Impairments," Washington Jewish Week, February 28, 2024, http://www.washingtonjewishweek.com/bnai-israel-becomes-first-synagogue-in-north-america-to-add-new-technology-for-individuals-with-visual-impairments/?utm_content=bufferad81a&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer&fbclid=IwAR2o4cvcKNHXmXuIaZ98u6n-mGYt9sFcNL8qP6AcC-xw02oCLKUuWnbwyBc.

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