Making Judaism Inclusive: An Exploration of Hearing Disabilities and the Jewish Community.

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Introduction:

Judaism has always placed great value on aurality. Jewish traditions, laws, rituals, and customs have been transmitted from generation to generation using oral methods. Music and chant, sermonizing, and *hevruta* study are commonly used forms of expression in synagogues, Jewish day and Hebrew schools, and other Jewish institutions. Jews communicate words of Torah through chant, engage youth at camps through song sessions, engage congregants through transcendent musical experiences in *tefilot*, and recite prayers that repeatedly ask for Jews to hear and be heard. In Jewish practice, hearing helps to connect people to God, history, worship, culture, text, music, and prayer.

What about those in the Jewish community who are unable to hear? What does Jewish law teach us about how to treat those who have hearing disabilities? How does someone who is hearing disabled relate to and connect with a sound-centered form of Jewish practice? How might Jewish clergy reach out to and engage those with hearing disabilities? What resources are available that may help to build more hearing disability friendly Jewish communities and institutions? These are all essential questions to ask when trying to create an inclusive Jewish community.

Hearing disabilities are an important issue in the Jewish world. Jewish clergy and community leaders must work hard to find new, non-conventional ways to help hearing disabled Jews connect to Judaism. In order to begin doing this, they need some basic knowledge of the spectrum of hearing impairments. A person who is born deaf, or someone with a Congenital Hearing Loss, is someone whose hearing disability is most likely caused by a genetic influence, though non-genetic factors also cause approximately 25% of congenital hearing loss, such as gestational infections or diseases, premature

birth, birth injuries, or other birth and gestational complications.[1] Congenital hearing loss may also be known as prelingual deafness because it is deafness before the development or acquisition of speech. "Prelingually deaf persons have great difficulty in developing speech, if they learn to speak at all, and their grasp of language is severely impaired. They grow up dependent on vision for communication, usually preferring to communicate manually rather than orally."[2]

Acquired Hearing Loss, on the other hand, occurs after birth as a result of illness or injury. Acquired hearing loss may happen at any point during a person's life and may be caused by any outside influence, such as frequent ear infections, meningitis, noise exposure, measles, flu, and medications. Other degrees of hearing disabilities may be defined in the following terms:

> We use the term *deaf* to describe persons who do not have sufficient residual hearing to enable them to communicate entirely by auditory means, even with the most powerful hearing aids available...The term *hard of hearing* is used for those who, despite a significant hearing impairment, communicate primarily through the auditory route, with or without hearing aids[3]

According to the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, a person may have Conductive Hearing Loss, Sensorineural Hearing Loss, or Mixed Hearing Loss.

> Conductive hearing loss occurs when sound is not conducted efficiently through the outer ear canal to the eardrum and the tiny bones (ossicles) of the middle ear. Conductive hearing loss usually involves a reduction in sound level or the ability to hear faint sounds. This type of hearing loss can often be corrected medically or surgically.[4]

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[1] http://www.asha.org/public/hearing/Congenital-Hearing-Loss/
[2] Schein and Waldman, 2
[3] Ibid, 72
[4] http://www.asha.org/public/hearing/Conductive-Hearing-Loss/

This type of hearing disability is not present at the onset of birth or before language skills are developed, but rather is often caused by outside factors, such as frequent ear infections, allergies, eardrum damage, or a malformation of a part of the ear canal. On the other hand, "Sensorineural hearing loss (SNHL) occurs when there is damage to the inner ear (cochlea), or to the nerve pathways from the inner ear to the brain. Most of the time, SNHL cannot be medically or surgically corrected. This is the most common type of permanent hearing loss."[5] Sensorineural hearing loss may be present at birth and may be genetic. However, it may also occur later in life and may be caused by aging, over-exposure to loud noises, or malformation of the inner ear. Mixed Hearing Loss is a combination of Conductive Hearing Loss and Sensorineural Hearing Loss. Awareness of the different causes of hearing disabilities and different degrees of hearing disabilities will only help Jewish leaders who want to reach out to deaf community members.

Stereotypes and misconceptions about hearing disabled people stem from a long history of misunderstanding.

> Perhaps indeed this passionate misperception, or prejudice, went back to biblical days: the subhuman status of mutes was part of the Mosaic code, and it was reinforced by the biblical exaltation of the voice and ear as the one and true way in which man and God could speak ('In the beginning was the Word').[6]

Aristotle claimed that the "deaf are born incapable to reason."[7] It was Socrates, however, who reminded the world that there are many other ways to communicate should we be without the ability to speak. The 16th century philosopher Geronimo Cardano taught his own deaf son to communicate using symbols. Throughout the next few centuries, more

[5] http://www.asha.org/public/hearing/Conductive-Hearing-Loss/
[6] Sacks, 13
[7] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deaf_history

advances were made in understanding hearing disabilities as well as in creating forms of communication and sign language. Abbe de l'Epee founded the first free school for the deaf in 1755 in Paris.

> De l'Epee's system of "methodical" signs – a combination of their own Sign with signed French grammar – enabled deaf students to write down what was said to them through a signing interpreter, a method so successful that, for the first time, it enabled ordinary deaf pupils to read and write French, and thus acquire an education. His school, founded in 1755, was the first to achieve public support. He trained a multitude of teachers for the deaf, who, by the time of his death in 1789, had established twenty-one schools for the deaf in France and Europe.[8]

The establishment of De l'Epee's school set the wheels in motion for the creation of a formal French sign language system. Meanwhile, in America, the first hearing disabled school, the American School for the Deaf, was established in 1817. The Columbia Institution for the Deaf and Blind, later named Gallaudet University (named for Thomas Gallaudet, a pioneer in hearing disability education), was the first institution of higher education for the hearing disabled and was founded in 1880. That same year saw the establishment of the National Association of the Deaf in the United States.

In Europe, in the late 1770s, there was a push to eliminate sign language from hearing disability education. Advocates of Oralism felt that the hearing disabled should learn to speak and should be taught through written and spoken language only. In 1880, the World Congress of the Educators of the Deaf gathered in Milan and passed a resolution that promoted Oralism and eliminated sign language and hearing disabled teachers from all hearing disability schools. "Oralism and the suppression of Sign have resulted in a dramatic deterioration in the education achievement of deaf children and in

[8] Sacks, 15

the literacy of the deaf generally."[9] Despite this setback, the hearing disabled community pushed forward. American Sign Language became a recognized language in 1960. The 1960s also saw the invention of the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD), while the 1980s gave rise to the "Deaf President Now" Protest at Gallaudet University, where students successfully protested to revolutionize the administrative structure at the university. While it has not been an easy road for the hearing disabled to be accepted members of the larger community it has also not been an easy road for the hearing disabled to establish schools, institutions, and forms of communication. Nevertheless, the hearing disabled have an important place in history and the development of disability awareness.

Pirkei Avot 4:20 teaches us not to judge someone for his or her physical characteristics. "Look not at the vessel, but at what it contains. There are new vessels that are filled with old wine, and old vessels that do not even contain new wine."[10] This *Mishnaic* text speaks profoundly to moral and ethical teachings. Ancient Jewish scholars were wise; they understood the importance of not judging someone unfairly and also giving a person respect for what lies beneath the surface. However, they did not fully understand hearing disabilities. At the time of the *Mishna's* redaction in 200 CE, there was not a medical understanding of the many degrees of hearing disabilities. Similarly, Tannatic rabbis did not know enough to separate hearing disabilities from cognitive abilities. Because they did not know what we know today, ancient Jewish scholars wrote Jewish law that separated the hearing disabled from the rest of the community. They thought they were protecting the hearing disabled, but in reality the laws were keeping

[9] Ibid, 25
[10] http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/682518/jewish/English-Text.htm

the hearing disabled isolated from participating in many community activities. As time moved forward people became more aware of the cognitive abilities of the hearing disabled. Rabbis and scholars agreed that Jewish law should be reexamined and hearing disabled Jews should be granted more rights and responsibilities. Despite this, however, hearing disabled Jews have remained on the outside of many Jewish communities. Therefore, chapter one will present an overview of the treatment of hearing disabilities throughout Jewish history, with a particular focus on our text tradition.

Chapter Two will examine the history of isolation that has plagued the hearing disabled for generations. It will also discuss the role of communication in Jewish culture and how normative Jewish modes of communication have affected the inclusion or exclusion of hearing disabled Jews. Chapter Two will also include the personal stories of hearing disabled Jews, some community leaders and some lay people who found great challenges when trying to integrate into the Jewish community.

The final chapter of the thesis will delve into the many resources available to the Jewish community to help it become more inclusive for those with hearing disabilities. Many communities have begun to use alternative methods for helping those with hearing disabilities to feel welcome, included, and connected to Judaism. From sign language to the use of visual media tools to exploring Judaism through the other senses, clergy people and community leaders may be able to create an inclusive community that no longer keeps the hearing disabled on the outside, and provides the hearing disabled with an opportunity to connect to Judaism through other, non-aural means.

Jewish tradition and history should be passed down and celebrated by all Jews. Jewish leaders should continue to work hard to make Judaism relevant to all Jews, and

must strive to make Judaism inclusive of those hearing disabled Jews who currently remain on the periphery of the Jewish community.

Chapter 1: Hearing Disabilities in Jewish History and Texts

As synagogue leaders we are called upon to challenge our conventional methods of thinking and practice in order to reach those in the hearing disabled community. Our hearing disabled congregants who want access to synagogue life simply ask us to think beyond the norm and to re-envision Jewish practice so that it may be inclusive of all people, not just those who benefit from an aural based practice. To understand what has kept hearing disabled Jews on the periphery of the community, we must first examine Jewish history. We must look carefully at the laws and practices that were set generations ago as well as at the modern day practices that have kept the hearing disabled community on the outside.

Central to Jewish law and Jewish personhood is knowing the difference between right and wrong. Jewish texts teach us to always do the right thing, whether it is to welcome the stranger into our midst, uphold the rights of the widow and the orphan, or take care of the land and environment. Jewish texts and law discuss the correct treatment of all people, including those with disabilities. Over time, Jewish law regarding people with disabilities developed. As Jews gained a better understanding of disabilities, they wrote more laws, responsa, and texts regarding disabilities. This chapter will explore some of the laws and texts that have shaped Jewish understandings of hearing disabilities and the treatment of hearing disabled Jews. By understanding how Jewish law has shaped our treatment of hearing disabled Jews, we can begin to effectively make changes to create more inclusive communities. These inclusive communities may utilize new forms of practice that are not only based on sound and music, but are also based on other forms of communication, such as Sign language and visual effects. This will hopefully

help connect members of the hearing disabled community to the broader Jewish community.

The Bible first mentions the deaf person, called the *heresh*, in the book of Leviticus. Although the Torah does not define the term *heresh,* the Talmud distinguishes between the hearing disabled, the speech disabled, and those who are both hearing and speech disabled. One who is both hearing and speech disabled is called a *heresh*. One who is just hearing disabled may also be referred to as a *heresh,* and a person who is speech disabled but has his or her hearing is known as an *ilem*.[11] It is a core Jewish value to protect and take care of one another for we are all God's creations. The Torah establishes ways to relate to the hearing disabled. Leviticus 19:14 says, "You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind. You shall fear your God; I am the Eternal."[12] This commandment is found in the holiness code, sandwiched between laws that dictate how we treat one another with specific reference to fraud and mistreatment of the poor. Can it be understood that this placement represents an understanding on the part of our ancestors to deal kindly with the disabled for they were like the poor? Is it a reminder to not take advantage of or deal deceitfully with those with disabilities? Our ancestors wanted to protect those who were considered less able and less fortunate, including the *heresh*. However, our ancestors did not have the knowledge and understanding of disabilities that we have today. We know today that being hearing disabled does not equate to being less fortunate or less capable, but early Jewish law did not represent this. Jewish law and generations of Jewish practice have been influenced by the ancient perception of the *heresh*.

[11] Marx, 115
[12] Plaut, 799

Jewish law gives credence to the treatment of those with disabilities because at its very core, Judaism stands for the just treatment of all. Jews have never turned their backs on those with disabilities. This perception stands in sharp contract with several ancient cultures, such as the Greeks and Romans, who revered perfection and "exposed" or abandoned children born with birth defects. The Greeks and Romans found it strange that Egyptians, Germans, and Jews did not share in this practice with their disabled children.[13] The cultures that revered perfection believed that every organ had a task that served the intellect, but Jews believed that God was in control of creating the body. If God creates the body, then God also creates disabilities and therefore we should always treat all people correctly. We read in Exodus 4:10-11 that Moses was a man slow of speech. "But Moses said to the Eternal, 'Please, O my Lord, I have never been good with words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.' And the Eternal said to him, 'Who gives humans speech? Who makes them dumb or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Eternal?'"[14] This is an excellent example of how the Torah uses disabilities within the narrative to emphasize the fact that the creation of each person's body is in God's hands. Moreover, Jews did not hide the fact that disabilities existed in the world; the Torah makes that clear enough with its many references to disabilities. Judith Abrams points out that disabilities sometimes serve a different purpose in the Bible. Sometimes they are used as literary devices throughout the Torah, such as in Genesis 27:1 or Genesis 29:17, where we read

[13] Abrams, 31
[14] Plaut, 354

that both Isaac and Leah had weak eyes, or in the story of Samson, whose blindness plays a key role in the narrative.[15]

Additionally, the text of Exodus 24:7 says: ***"Kol asher-deber Adonai, na'aseh v'nishma,"*** "All that God has spoken we will faithfully do."[16] The final word of this text, "*v'nishma*" is often translated as obey and even sometimes as understand. This is the third idea in succession about taking action and following God's commandments (Ex. 19:8, Ex. 24:3, and Ex. 24:7), but this final reference to action is the only one of the three that includes the second half of the phrase: *na'aseh v'nishma*. Why the addition of the word "*v'nishma*," and why this word, and not the word "*l'tza-yet*," literally to obey? Is there a specific action or level of understanding that takes place with hearing, as opposed to obeying, or a link between hearing and understanding? Midrash Mekhilta d'Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai 24:7 teaches us the following:

> And they [the Children of Israel] said, "all that God has said we will do and we will hear,'" since they had initially prioritized doing. Moses said to them, 'Is doing possible without understanding? Understanding brings one to doing.' They then said, 'We will do and we will understand,' [meaning] 'We will do what we understand.' This teaches that the people said 'na'aseh v'nishma' before receiving the Torah.[17]

Does this word choice exclude those with hearing disabilities from taking action? Does it mean that those with hearing disabilities are unable to understand or obey? Jewish law might say that yes, a person who is a *heresh*, one who cannot hear, is one who cannot understand and therefore cannot do. Deuteronomy 31:12 uses similar language, stating:

> 'Assemble the people, the men, and the women, and the children and the stranger…in order that they hear and in order that they learn and fear the

[15] Abrams, 53, 56
[16] Plaut, 523
[17] http://www.myjewishlearning.com/holidays/Jewish_Holidays/Shavuot/Themes_and_Theology/Celebrating_Submission/Accepting_the_Torah.shtml

> Lord your God and take care to do all the words of this Torah.' The roots of hearing and learning are linked in this verse, and it is expounded to explain that only hearing persons can learn and teach, and therefore, those who cannot learn as Israel gathers together need not appear.[18]

Other Biblical writings also make reference to hearing disabilities. In Psalm 38: 14-15 we read: "But I am like a deaf man, unhearing, like a dumb man who cannot speak up; I am like one who does not hear, who has no retort on his lips."[19] The prophets used hearing and speech disabilities as metaphors for moral actions, such as in Isaiah 42:18-25. Additionally, "Deaf, mute and mentally ill and disabled persons seem to be stigmatized in Wisdom literature. Since a major focus of the worlds of Wisdom literature (e.g., Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job) is the pursuit of justice and wisdom, it is not surprising that those disabilities which interfere with the pursuit of wisdom and justice are deemed more disabling than others."[20] Although Jews have never turned their backs on those with disabilities, the ancient understanding, or lack of understanding, of disabilities has been a problem for generations, categorizing and marginalizing the deaf. Jewish law has dictated that people with hearing disabilities stand on the outside of the community for their own protection. For the *heresh*, Jewish law not only generalized what it meant to be hearing disabled, but also placed the hearing disabled Jew in a category that isolated him or her from the community.

The Bible also specified who was or was not eligible to be a priest as a result of disabilities. Although Judaism places emphasis on treating those with disabilities with respect and upholding their rights, when it came to the priestly caste, the Torah, specifically Leviticus 21:16-25, teaches that physical imperfections are not permitted.

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[18] Abrams, 152
[19] JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh, 1457
[20] Abrams, 37

The Torah provides a specific list of defects that disqualify a person from the priestly caste. The list includes blindness, broken limbs, and scars, to name a few. The text also states, "No man among the offspring of Aaron the priest who has a defect shall be qualified to offer the Eternal's offering by fire; having a defect, he shall not be qualified to offer the food of his God (Lev. 21:21)."[21] Within the priestly cast, "There seems to be no hierarchy of disabilities: one is either perfect or one is not."[22] However, "Though absolute perfection may be required only of priests, each person's body, regardless of its state of perfection or imperfection, is to be honored and protected."[23]

Jewish law states that there are three categories of people who are not required to participate fully in Jewish ritual life: the *heresh*, the minor, and the mentally disabled. These three groups of people were categorized together because they shared one very important commonality: an inability to communicate articulately and expressively. It was assumed, therefore, that because they could not communicate fully, they were incapable of fulfilling commandments because they were otherwise incapable of understanding. "One who cannot hear or speak, it is presumed, has been denied the ability to communicate properly."[24] We know that there are several levels of hearing disabilities; the sages also understood that there were varying classifications of hearing disabilities and muteness that may qualify a person to fulfill certain *mitzvot* and obligations. Mishna Terumot 1:2 states, "A *heresh* who speaks but cannot hear should not separate *terumah* but if he did so, his *terumah* is valid. The *heresh* of whom the

[21] Plaut, 820
[22] Abrams, 18
[23] Ibid, 51
[24] Schein and Waldman, 13

Sages spoke in all cases is one who can neither hear nor speak."[25] "There seem to be two meanings which can be attributed to the term *heresh* in this mishnah. It refers both to one who cannot hear but can speak, e.g. one who has lost the ability to hear, and to one who can neither speak nor hear. The general rule is then stated that when the Mishnah speaks of a *heresh*, it refers to the latter, not the former."[26] The Talmud Yerushalmi differentiates between the deaf and the deaf-mute: "Deaf persons are considered to be able validly to recite the Shema, read the Megillah and separate *terumah*, all of which require some form of recitation. Again we see the tendency to include the deaf (not mute) *heresh* in the 'fully-abled' category. His actions are not discredited."[27] If a person can speak, but not hear, or hear but not speak, this person is obligated to fulfill the commandments.[28] "Since communication with them is possible, the deaf and the mute are considered responsible individuals."[29] The term *heresh* may at times be used to describe someone who is just deaf, to distinguish between one who is simply mute, or the *ilem*. In both cases, both the *heresh* and the *ilem* are considered capable of understanding.[30] "When the degree of impairment prevents a person from hearing and understanding speech, that person is *deaf*."[31] Over time, as the sages came to further understand the varying degrees of hearing disabilities and levels of understanding capable amongst the hearing disabled, they also came to see that the *heresh* may fall into different categories with regard to *mitzvot* obligations.

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[25] Abrams, 107
[26] Abrams, 107-108
[27] Ibid, 152
[28] Marx, 114
[29] Ibid, 116
[30] Ibid, 115
[31] Schein and Waldman, 1-2

The *heresh* is categorized with the mentally disabled and the minor in exemptions relating to the Temple and Temple festivities because they are exempt from all obligations stated in the Torah, including rejoicing. Those who are only hearing disabled, however, may be seen rejoicing and are therefore not exempt. The Mishna categorizes the deaf-mute as one who is disqualified from Temple service even though it is not a visible disability.[32] The Talmud does not have the same questions about the mental abilities of the hearing disabled that it does of those who are both deaf and mute. One who is a *heresh*, a true deaf-mute, is not deemed capable of "giving from his heart."[33] The *heresh* was not considered capable of fulfilling precepts with full and true intent.

Rabbinic sages were very concerned with the idea of being able to properly give from the heart. They were concerned with the idea of *da'at*, knowledge, and a true understanding of knowledge. According to the Mishna, *da'at* is represented by moral and cognitive abilities, purposeful action, action with consent, opinion, temperament, and the ability to speak and answer questions.[34] Those with hearing disabilities may not be able to prove understanding or take action according to the rabbinic definition of *da'at*, which includes cognitive abilities, the ability to differentiate between right and wrong, the ability to express positive emotional abilities (such as empathy), spiritual achievements, fear of God, and taking action with full intent. "This linkage of *da'at* with hearing and speech has a great impact on the status of deaf persons, for they are thereby deemed unable to acquire *da'at* with all that that word implies: discernment, moral

[32] Abrams, 17
[33] Marx, 116
[34] Abrams, 88-94

judgment, cognitive knowledge and the Torah of God."[35] This quote speaks to the complexities that the rabbinic sages faced when trying to understand and make decisions for the hearing disabled community.

One of the greatest challenges for the deaf community in both ancient and modern times has been communication. The *heresh* seems to be in a liminal position that the minor and the mentally disabled are not; when the *heresh* is able to prove communication skills or understanding he or she is able to participate in precepts. Our ancestors did not take for granted the power of communication, nor did they take for granted that communication may occur in different forms. There are many examples throughout the Mishna that either obligate or exempt the hearing disabled person from precepts because of communication. Some of these include: M. Terumah, where the *heresh* is not considered to have enough *da'at* to fulfill the *mitzvah*, and M. Hullin, which regards to the exclusion of the *heresh* from the ritual slaughtering of animals. M. Arakhin, speaks to being active or passive participants in making vows and being able to understand transactions, while M. Rosh Hashanah speaks to obligations for the commandments and being able to effectively perform them or communicate. Overall, the Mishna recognizes non-verbal communication. For example, M. Gittin 5:7 discusses the communication in business transactions, stating: "A *heresh* may transact business by signs and be communicated with by signs. Ben Bateira says, 'He may transact business and be communicated with by lip movements.'"[36] Other texts, such as the Tosefta, further support the definitions of disabilities and categorizations of precept obligations and exemptions found in the Mishna. According to M. Gittin, with specific reference to

[35] Ibid, 40
[36] Abrams, 108

marriage and divorce, the hearing disabled person may communicate by gestures. The Talmud Bavli allows for the *heresh* to be categorized as a full participant in certain precepts, the marriage laws for example, because the exact nature of the deaf person's cognition was too difficult to measure and define. The sages believed the *heresh* could marry and divorce and use gestures for the necessary legal procedures because, unlike a person with a mental disability, "The deaf-mute's ability to sustain a serious relationship is not called into question, despite the fact that he is not subject to precept-observance."[37] Other texts recognize that there can be meaningful communication with gestures in business transactions: "A deaf-mute gestures and is gestured to (*romez venirmaz*). Ben Beteira says: He communicates and is communicated to by movements of the mouth (*kofetz venikpatz*) with regard to movable property."[38] If the deaf-mute can prove that he is capable of full understanding, then communication through gestures may be acceptable.

Over time, it became clear that a person with a hearing disability was not necessarily mentally disabled or incapable of communicating. In fact, it was thought that a hearing disabled person could show signs of improved hearing, which could change one's status within the community. "However, as we shall see, one may move from this discredited category into a valid one, if it can be proved that an individual has *da'at*, i.e., has been impressed with the seal of his culture's *gnosis.*[39] Rabbinic authorities were becoming aware of the developments in communication and language skills within the deaf community and new *halakhic* debates emerged. "The contemporary *halakhic*

[37] Marx, 118
[38] Ibid, 118
[39] Abrams, 87

authorities must now reevaluate the position of Jewish law on the deaf mute…The situation poses a challenge for the tradition, which must integrate contemporary knowledge and sensibilities without undermining its integrity."[40] The debate about acceptable forms of communication continued among the rabbinic authorities for generations. In the 19th century, the rabbinic community was split. In response to the question of the status of the deaf-mute, R. Azriel Hildesheimer of Hildesheim saw the following possible legal options:

1. Deaf-mutes have attained a new status, and are like those in full possession of their faculties; hence, they are fully qualified, and obligated, to observe the precepts;
2. The status of deaf-mutes remains the same, that is, the same as that of the mentally disabled; they remain exempt and disqualified from precept-observance;
3. The status of deaf-mutes is controversial and undecided, and therefore, to be adjudged stringently.[41]

In the end, after researching both Jewish law and the new developments in the deaf community, R. Hildesheimer concluded that individual assessment is necessary to judge the intellectual capacity of the deaf-mute, much like any other person, disabled or not, and looks favorably upon the status of the deaf-mute in the Jewish community.

The pressing nature of the issue led R. Judah Leibush of Lvov, a 19th century rabbinic authority, to write *Melechet Heresh*, the *Work of the Deaf*. This work was a compilation of articles and responsa by rabbis concerning the complex issues regarding status and communication within the hearing disabled community. Several of the contributing rabbis felt that if a person with a hearing disability can learn to communicate using other, non-verbal skills, then that is enough to have legal limitations removed.

[40] Marx, 119
[41] Marx, 120

Other rabbis argued that without any verbal communication, legal limitations were necessary. The rabbis were undecided. To stammer a little showed speaking ability and removed someone from the category of deaf-mute. If someone could produce a verbal sound, he was no longer considered limited. Sign language also proved an ability to understand; communication through hand gestures was enough evidence of understanding. "The others said that the fact that he can communicate with his hands, that he can communicate in any way, makes him as qualified and as unrestricted legally, as undisabled as all the rest of us."[42] However, some rabbis felt that if someone could not produce any sound, the label and legal restrictions remained. Sign language was simply not enough for the rabbinic authorities on that side of the debate. Communication comes in all forms and some of our ancestors were willing to see and understand this, but only when it came to specific legal areas.

Jewish law has developed over time, much like our understanding of what it means to be hearing disabled. Our texts recognize the importance of upholding the rights and taking care of those with disabilities. Jewish texts also recognize that our bodies are created by God, no matter the disability, and should always be treated with respect. The early sages may not have understood hearing disabilities, but the later sages tried to understand the varying degrees of hearing disabilities in order to include those with hearing disabilities in certain precepts. Though a lack of technology and medical knowledge prevented rabbinic authorities from being able to judge the individual rather than the disability, our knowledge today provides us with the opportunity to fully welcome the hearing disabled person into the Jewish community.

[42] Schein and Waldman, 15

Chapter 2: Personalizing Hearing Disabilities

People with hearing disabilities have been a marginalized and isolated group within the Jewish community throughout history. The inability to communicate may have denied Jews with hearing disabilities from participating in community programs, Hebrew schools, and worship. Throughout the past few decades, Jews with hearing disabilities have tried to advocate for more resources within communities. Unfortunately, they have found many challenges as communities are not readily equipped with spaces that are acoustically designed for people with hearing aides, do not have sign interpreters within the community, and do not have additional funding for resources such as interpreters or visual aids. Meyer Lief, a former teacher of religious education for the hearing disabled, discusses how religious education for hearing disabled children is a problem because, "There are not enough Jewish deaf children in any one school to make a religious class."[43] If there are not enough students for a class, a synagogue may not be able to make resources available for those few students in the community. Additionally, at one time, Jewish law dictated that a person with a hearing disability could not fully participate in Jewish rituals. However, "these strictures were not meant to be cruel but were seen as the means of protecting such individuals from exploitation by others, while recognizing that they could not contribute fully to the religious life of the community."[44] Though not malicious, these restrictions set the course for Jews with hearing disabilities to be segregated from the rest of the Jewish community.

Alexander Fleischman, the first president of the World Organization of the Jewish Deaf, points out, "The deaf of America are the most overlooked and forgotten group of

[43] Schein and Waldman, 54
[44] Ibid, 1

handicapped people by our Jewish community."[45] In order to integrate hearing disabled Jews into the larger Jewish community, we need to first understand the hearing disabled community and the struggles the community has had throughout the past and into the present with regard to its status within the greater Jewish community. As Fleischman explains, "deafness is an invisible handicap,"[46] but once a hearing disabled person is identified, communication comes to an immediate halt, thus further isolating the person with the hearing disability and placing the person on the outside of the community. Moreover, people with hearing disabilities are often misjudged and stereotyped as being inferior to and less capable than their hearing peers, placing them further and further on the periphery of the community.

Historically, people who were hearing disabled could not easily communicate and were assumed to be "dumb." The inability to communicate created tensions between the hearing and non-hearing world and it has taken many generations for the hearing disabled community to fully integrate into the hearing world. Prior to the eighteenth century, the world had little to no understanding of or desires to know about the varying degrees of deafness. Similar to the *halakhic* Jewish world, the broader hearing community viewed the deaf community as inferior in many ways.

> It was for this reason that the congenitally deaf, or "deaf and dumb," were considered "dumb" (stupid) for thousands of years and were regarded by unenlightened law as "incompetent"—to inherit property, to marry, to receive education, to have adequately challenging work—and were denied fundamental human rights. This situation did not begin to be remedied until the middle of the eighteenth century, when (perhaps as a part of a more general enlightenment, perhaps as a specific act of empathy and genius) the perception and situation of the deaf were radically altered.[47]

[45] Schein and Waldman, 39
[46] Ibid, 39
[47] Sacks, 8

During the eighteenth century however, it became evident that a hearing disabled person's intelligence should not be questioned; people are people and hearing disabled or not we all feel, have emotions, have abilities, etc. It was the outside world that had been suppressing the cognitive abilities of the hearing disabled person. People with hearing disabilities were being excluded from education and work that required real challenge because the notion of educating a person with a hearing disability was inconceivable. What was the reason for this? Abbe Roch-Ambroise Sicard, supervisor of the National Institution for Deaf-Mutes in Paris in 1800 noted, "the deaf person has 'no symbols for fixing and combining ideas…that there is a total communication gap between him and other people.''[48] An inability to communicate was equated with a lack of intelligence. And at that time in history (and even earlier, as sign language began to develop in the 1700s as a response to a religious desire to try to save the souls of deaf Catholics), when people still relied on the Bible as their main source for law, communication was only understood through speech, not through other avenues, such as symbols that would later develop into sign language.

Thomas Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc founded the first US school for the hearing disabled 1817. The school was located in Hartford and was called the American Asylum for the Deaf. The opening of the school and the institutionalization of the new language was met with enthusiasm; deaf literacy, language and culture soon spread throughout the United States and the rest of the world. In fact, "In 1864 Congress passed a law authorizing the Columbia Institution for the Deaf and Blind in Washington to become a national deaf-mute college, the first institution of higher learning specifically for the

[48] Sacks, 13

deaf."[49] This was a huge stride for the hearing disabled culture and the sign language movement. However, as with all trends in education and culture, there was resistance. The late 1800s gave rise to Victorian standards and an "oppressiveness" that was intolerant of minorities and those with disabilities. The language and culture of the hearing disabled community was stifled. For centuries, prior to the institutionalization of sign language, education focused on teaching people with hearing disabilities to speak. The trends of the second half of the nineteenth century saw a return to this philosophy, Oralism, as a way to conform to "ideal" standards, and threatened the success of hearing disabled education in the United States. During this time, many in the deaf community came to debate whether or not speech and sign language should be taught simultaneously. Thomas Gallaudet's son, Edward, visited schools for the hearing disabled in Europe, comparing the techniques used and found that while they used both speech and sign language, "the sign language schools did as well as the oral schools as far as articulated speech was concerned, but obtained superior results in general education. He felt that articulation skills, though highly desirable, could not be the basis of primary instruction—that this had to be achieved, and achieved early, by Sign."[50] The debate continued, and the conformists eventually won. In many schools for the hearing disabled, teachers themselves were not hearing disabled, thus furthering the setbacks for sign language and the hearing disabled community and culture.

For too long the hearing disabled community was deprived of a way to live their natural culture. "The suppression of Sign in the 1880s had a deleterious effect on the deaf for seventy-five years, not only on their education and academic achievements but

[49] Sacks, 21
[50] Ibid, 23

on their image of themselves and on their entire community and culture."[51] However, the great strides that were made in the second half of the twentieth century, when the hearing disabled community was no longer willing to be stifled, helped to revive their culture not only within the hearing disabled community but within the broader society as well. "Now, for the first time, there was an 'identity' for the deaf, not merely a personal one, but a social, cultural one. They were no longer just individuals, with an individual's plights or triumphs; they were a *people*, with their own culture, like the Jews or the Welsh."[52]

Despite the advances that have been made technologically, scientifically, religiously, educationally, and socially, some hearing disabled Jews have had difficulty integrating into the community. As recently as 1982, at the Second Congress of the World Organization of the Jewish Deaf, Israel's chief Rabbi, Shlomo Goren, "declared in his keynote address that, in his observation of and research on deaf Jews, he was confident that they qualify for all rights and privileges as members of the Jewish community and called for the removal of all barriers."[53] Jews, both hearing disabled and hearing, continue to work to break down the barriers that have been placed upon them for many generations.

Communication is the act of imparting information through speech, writing, or signs.[54] Meaningful communication comes when there is purpose, significance, and value in the interaction. Meaningful communication may occur when we break down the barriers that prevent us from communicating with one another. Just because we do not

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[51] Sacks, 111
[52] Ibid, 109
[53] Ibid, 38
[54] www.dictionary.com

understand a culture or group of people does not mean that we are limited in communicating with those same people. Someone who is not hearing disabled may place a barrier between him or herself and someone who cannot hear because he or she may be uncomfortable with any attempt of communicating with signs, interpreters, or technology. Likewise, stepping outside of a comfort zone of communication for someone who is hearing disabled may place a barrier between him or herself and a hearing person. John Blacking, an ethnomusicologist, investigates the significance of various forms of meaningful communication and understanding cultural forms of communication. Blacking's book, *How Musical is Man* explores the relationship between humans and music, between humans and sound. Blacking, who did an extensive study of the musical culture of the people of Venda of the Northern Transvaal of South Africa, writes about the role that music and sound have within a culture and the role that a culture has within music and sound. This is a most interesting consideration when examining the culture of most synagogues in North America. Blacking asserts that, "We need to know what sounds and what kind of behavior different societies have chosen to call 'musical;'"[55] However, in the instance of this particular study, the study of the Jewish hearing disabled community, one might argue that we need to know what different societies have chosen to identify as communication behaviors in order to create their cultures. Blacking comments that compared with other musical cultures, the Venda may seem primitive and may not pass other cultural, musical standards. However their musical and sound culture has helped to keep their society alive in many ways. It is not so dissimilar within the hearing disabled community. Despite not being able to hear, this group of people has

[55] Blacking, 5

created an entire culture and society for themselves with a full communication system based on a different concept of language. Oliver Sacks details this concept in his work, *Seeing Voices*, commenting on the culture created in the Gallaudet School for the Deaf: "The unique pattern of transmission of deaf culture relates equally to the deaf's language (Sign) and to their schools. These schools acted as foci for the deaf community, passing down deaf history and culture from one generation to the next."[56] Language and communication are directly linked to one another in any culture.

As Jews we focus on the passing of our culture from one generation to the next, but for generations we have done it this through an oral, sound based tradition. As Blacking, an ethnomusicologist, states, "The sound may be the object, but man is the subject; and the key to understanding music is in the relationships existing between subject and object, the activating principle of organization."[57] If we replace the word "music" with "communication," we may be able to better understand the hearing disabled community and move towards a more inclusive and integrated Jewish community. The culture within the majority of synagogues revolves around an oral communication system. For example, a typical worship culture may include singing, instruments, readings, and a sermon, all of which require auditory communication in order for congregants to be engaged. If a person who does not hear wants to be a part of this synagogue, he or she might have difficulty participating in this particular worship experience.

While Blacking's study took him to the Transvaal Venda people of South Africa to learn how this particular social group relied upon its musical culture for its social

[56] Sacks, 108-109
[57] Blacking, 26

continuity, he also went on to discover how its social groups related to one another as a result of its musical and communication culture. Blacking was concerned with sociological questions: "[and] situations in different societies can be compared without any reference to the surface forms of music because we are concerned only with its function in social life."[58] In other words, we may come to better know how people in the different cultures function, the hearing disabled community for example, when we examine how their social and cultural life is affected by their language and communication. In Blacking's study this was through music. In the hearing disabled world it may be through sign language or other communication tools. The question then becomes this: What role does language play in the hearing disabled world when a person who cannot hear wants to integrate into the Jewish community? In his study, Blacking comments on what seems to be, superficially, the simplicity of the Venda musical technique to the outside world. However, he argues that musical technique is irrelevant if it fulfills a greater purpose of providing a social experience. Blacking strengthens his arguments by stating the following, "A man's mystical or psychedelic experiences may not be seen or felt by his neighbors, but they cannot be dismissed as irrelevant by his life in society."[59] A person who cannot hear may not be able to fully experience synagogue life the way a hearing person may, but the person who is hearing disabled may not be dismissed by the community either. It is simply a form of human relational experience. In synagogue life, we relate to one another through relational experiences of sound based communication.

[58] Blacking, 32
[59] Ibid, 33

Blacking would agree that a culture should not be judged superficially. Just as the Venda tribe's musical culture may appear primitive and simple to other cultures, the hearing disabled, those without oral language skills, may seem simple on the surface with their grunts and hand signs. However, beyond what might appear incomprehensible to the hearing person lays a richly developed language and culture. If the hearing disabled person has difficulty relating to the hearing person through sounds and oral communication, then it may be time for congregations and other institutions to begin offering sign language courses. Not only will this open the lines of communication, but it will also educate congregants and create a more inclusive community. Rather than shut out potential synagogue members who are hearing disabled, we must do all we can to narrow the communication gap that exists between Jews who are hearing and Jews who are hearing disabled.

If communication is directly associated with how we relate to one another within a culture, then there is no question as to why the oral model that synagogues have been using for generations has added to the marginalization of the hearing disabled within the larger Jewish community. "And to be defective in language, for a human being, is one of the most desperate of calamities, for it is only through language that we enter fully into our human estate and culture, communicate freely with our fellows, acquire and share information."[60] Creating Jewish identity for an entire group of people who have been isolated is not easy. We first have to understand the Jewish hearing disabled community and their experience in the Jewish community. The personal stories of the struggles and successes of the members of the Jewish community with hearing disabilities is one of the

[60] Sacks, 8

greatest resources available to us as clergy. Frederick Schreiber, who was once the executive director of the National Association of the Deaf, explains what he believes a hearing disabled Jewish leader expects from a Jewish clergy. He sees the fundamental problems in both religious matters and secular matters, such as religious education. "The deaf child needs the same opportunity to learn the hows and whys of his faith as does any other child."[61] Moreover, he recognizes the challenge that arises when a hearing disabled person may approach a clergy person – the clergy person, more often than not, has a limited background in this particular disability. While future clergy do receive some education in disability awareness, it is not solely focused on hearing disabilities, and what little training they may receive is not enough to provide sufficient support for what hearing disabled congregants need. Unfortunately, "the deaf person can quickly recognize that his advisor is not familiar with the complexities of his disability and turn away, rejecting not only the advice but the advisor and perhaps even the Temple itself."[62] Schreiber also points to funding issues (for both the hearing disabled congregant and the synagogue) as well as communication problems for reasons why integration of the hearing disabled Jew may continue to be so difficult. However, it is Schreiber's personal story that is most touching. Knowing that Judaism is a religion that relies on future generations, he has great concern for the future of the children of hearing disabled Jews. He asks, "All evidence has shown that the deaf Jew has been sadly neglected by his religion. How, then, can he be a functioning member of his own congregation and also insure that his hearing children will be brought up in the faith of his fathers?"[63]

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[61] Schein and Waldman, 30
[62] Ibid, 32
[63] Ibid, 34

Schreiber explains that he wanted to enroll his children in Sunday School, but was told he needed to be a member at the synagogue. Although he believed he would not gain anything from being a member, he joined and enrolled his children in the Hebrew school program. He spoke with the teachers about his family's situation; he explained that he had not had a Jewish education because of his hearing disability, and felt he "did not have the training necessary to fulfill the role of a typical Jewish father." Despite his concerns and conversations with the teachers, his children came home with questions and assignments with which Schreiber could not help. Eventually embarrassment set in and the family left the synagogue. Schreiber tried again with another synagogue, but the rabbi was more "interested in me than in my children." In the end, Schreiber decided to hire private tutors for his children's religious education, depriving them of the community benefits that come with being a part of a synagogue. Some of Schreiber's children have married outside the faith and he admits that for all his efforts, it hurts. "Whether he attends a Temple or not, whether he is deaf or not, a Jewish boy who grows up in a Jewish household, is still a Jew…If the deaf Jew is not important to the Temple, certainly his children and his children's children should be and their future is worth considering."[64] For Schreiber, it was never about him or his hearing disability, but always, and it will always remain so for the Jewish people, about the future generations.

Community and culture are primary reasons why people join a synagogue. But the culture within many synagogues is not always as rich and diverse as it could be; the hearing disabled community is isolated from the mainstream synagogue culture. As a result, they are denied access to the community, education, programming, and everything

[64] Schein and Waldman, 34-35

else that a synagogue has to offer to its members. Alexis Kashar recalls the difficulties and challenges she faced trying to integrate into the Jewish community as a person with severe hearing disabilities. In an article entitled "Allowing the Deaf to be Jews,"[65] Kashar details her experience as a young, hearing disabled child and as an adult, wanting to live a Jewish life, rather than simply being an outsider to the Jewish world because of her disability. Kashar was born deaf, as were both her parents and her paternal grandparents. In fact, her sister is the only hearing member of her family. Communication and resources were not a problem within Kashar's family unit, but it did become a problem within the Jewish community. As Frederich Schreiber explains so eloquently about communication and the hearing disabled community:

> Deaf people live in a world that differs vastly from any other because the common medium that binds most people together is communication. Our world is an auditory one, and the inability to learn by auditory methods imposes a heavy burden on the individual which, so far, has proven barely tolerable. Helen Keller once noted that if she had to do it all over again she would devote her time to working with the deaf because 'blindness cuts you off from things, while deafness cuts you off from people.'"[66]

Kashar's family did not have access to the Jewish community because communication was not a possibility, thus denying both Kashar and her hearing sister contact to the Jewish community. Kashar recalls that although her sister "was not deaf, she too had no access to the greater [Jewish] community because it was inaccessible to our family."[67]

As a civil rights lawyer who is married with three children who are all hearing, Kashar had first settled in Los Angeles. Because Los Angeles is a large city with a large Jewish population, it was easy to assume that Jews with disabilities might be able to find

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[65] Kolot, 18
[66] Schein and Waldman, 31
[67] Kolot, 18

a communal home, a place with resources and welcoming arms for integration. Kashar wanted to give her children a Jewish education and, as she says, the "gift of moral stability." However, she knew that there would be challenges to providing her family with this gift. "For this to happen, I had to join a synagogue, go to services, and become a practicing Jew to share the experience with my children and be a role model for them."[68] Kashar found herself in an interesting predicament. She was told that despite being a full dues paying member of a synagogue, she would have to cover extra costs for her disability. She felt, yet again, cut off from the Jewish world. She was denied the opportunity to share an experience with her children, and worst of all, she was made to feel like a "beggar," negotiating for an interpreter at services. "I was begging to be given the opportunity to be a Jew. I would have to pay more than everyone else to participate in my own heritage. Paying for my own interpreter is the equivalent of making people who use wheelchairs provide their own ramps."[69]

Kashar and her family moved to Westchester County, NY, shortly before her oldest child was to become a Bat Mitzvah. By this time, Kashar knew enough was enough, but even she admits she that was exhausted from fighting an uphill battle. She wanted access to and to be an active member of the Jewish community, and to truly experience a rich and meaningful Jewish life, but felt drained from years of being turned away and segregated from her heritage. Kashar became involved with the Jewish Deaf Resource Center as her daughter prepared for the synagogue's family B'nei Mitzvah Shabbat retreat. Kashar had planned to not attend the retreat with her daughter because she was burnt out from her fight for access, but the JDRC's founder, Naomi

[68] Kolot, 18
[69] Ibid, 18

Brunnlehrman, strongly encouraged Kashar to attend the retreat, even offering to go as Kashar's interpreter. This was the turning point for Kashar. Not only was the retreat meaningful for Kashar and her daughter, but it also opened the eyes of people at the retreat and opened the door for Kashar and her family within the Jewish community. Kashar's community is now fully open to integration and is taking the necessary steps to welcome the hearing disabled community into their synagogue.

The experience at the retreat set the wheels in motion for Kashar and her family to be included within the Jewish community. In her community on Rosh Hashanah, there were ASL interpreters, and even hearing community members moved closer to the interpreters just to see the liturgy in a new and beautiful form. Kashar, as well as the many others fighting for a more just world for those with hearing disabilities, understands that integration comes at a cost. However, as she so beautifully states, "Interpreters are not a luxury. They are a necessity. The community pays for many mandatory expenses and takes care of many different groups. Not to pay for interpreters is to say that the souls of deaf Jews are unworthy."[70] No Jew should be turned away from a community because of a hearing disability or the means to provide resources for a hearing disability, and no Jew should have to fight the battle that Kashar had to fight. Kashar's battle is just one of the many that exist for the hearing disabled Jewish community, and it is the personal stories, such as Kashar's that will help the Jewish community to become more inclusive, open, and fully integrated for those with hearing disabilities.

In our past, Jews traveled far and wide to transmit the word of God, to pray, to make sacrifices, and to be a community. Our ancestors went to great lengths to create a

[70] Kolot, 19

Jewish community that was knowledgeable, but more importantly, was a community. They did this the best way they could, using the tools they had: Torah, *halakha,* and communication through the spoken word. We want the same things our ancestors wanted and strive to create the same things they created: a Jewish community that is knowledgeable, that will teach the future generations, and that will truly be a great Jewish community. Until we are united in making changes in our communities for the hearing disabled so that they no longer remain on the periphery of the Jewish community, the broader Jewish community will remain incomplete. It is my hope, however, that as the Jewish community will become more aware of the struggles of the hearing disabled community, and more efforts will be made for integration and education. Bob Johnson, a "pioneer Sign linguist," expressed it perfectly:

> It's really remarkable, because in all my experience I've seen deaf people be passive and accept the kind of treatment that hearing people give them. I've seen them willing, or seem to be willing, to be "clients," when in fact they should be controlling things…now all at once there's been a transformation in the consciousness of what it means to be a deaf person in the world, to take responsibility for things. The illusion that deaf people are powerless—all at once, now, that illusion has gone, and that means the whole nature of things can change for them now. I'm very optimistic and extremely enthusiastic about what I'm going to see over the next few years.[71]

[71] Sacks, 126

Chapter 3: Creating Inclusive Communities

Jewish communities continually try to find new and innovative ways to bring in new members. Community leaders reach out to potential members by offering interesting programs, reduced fees, and new experiences. However, community leaders may not be reaching out to potential members in the hearing disabled community. Community leaders may feel unable to welcome members with hearing disabilities if there are not proper resources available within the community. Additionally, community leaders may feel unable to provide for members with hearing disabilities if they are not properly educated in how to include and communicate with persons with hearing disabilities. We live in an age of technological and medical advances that will help Jewish communities extend their open doors to potential members with hearing disabilities. In order for this to take place, clergy and community leaders must be willing to think beyond the norm. "Getting information through the eyes is not the same thing as getting it through the ears, and that is the crux of the communication issue and of the central problem of all deaf people everywhere."[72] Rather than trying to bridge the gap between the hearing disabled and the hearing, we must try to form new bridges in order to make Judaism accessible to everyone.

Given the technological advances we have made with regard to hearing aides, sign language, visual and lighting sources, and other resources, why is it that people with hearing disabilities still face challenges when entering a Jewish community? There have been few studies conducted to determine the causes for the lack of participation of hearing disabled Jews within the Jewish community. In the mid 1960's, Dr. Jerome D.

[72] Benderly, 164

Schein, former president of the New York Society for the Deaf and professor of deafness rehabilitation at New York University, conducted a study to determine the religious preference of the hearing disabled population of Metropolitan Washington D.C. Of the 1,132 persons interviewed, only 51 were Jewish. His study also found that many hearing disabled people intermarry because they stay insular, rather than reaching out to the hearing community for partnership. However, Schein's study did find that within the hearing disabled community, Jewish hearing disabled wives had the highest proportion of Jewish husbands, though their male counterparts had the lowest proportion of Jewish wives. Today, according to Hillel – The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, there are only 100 Jewish students on Gallaudet University's campus. Of these 100 Jewish students, 75 are undergraduate students and 25 are graduate. Gallaudet has a total of 1000 undergraduate students and 400 graduate students, which means that 7.5% of the university's undergraduate population and 6.26% of its graduate population is Jewish. Despite the percentage of Jewish students on campus, there are no Jewish courses offered, no possibility to major or minor in Jewish studies, no opportunity to study in Israel, and no religious services available to the Jewish students. Kosher food, however, is available on campus for Jewish students. On campus, there are no opportunities for the Gallaudet students to practice or study Judaism.

There may be many explanations for these statistical results, for the poor representation of the hearing disabled in Jewish communities, including the Hillel at Gallaudet University. For instance, without proper education, members of Jewish communities may not understand what needs to be done in order to include those with hearing disabilities. Clergy must be trained to work with all people, not just those who

are hearing. Also, Jews with hearing disabilities may not be comfortable leaving their own communities to join new, hearing communities. It is difficult enough to relate to someone in your own community, but even more difficult to relate to someone who is different, who speaks a different language, and who experiences the world differently. Furthermore, Jews with hearing disabilities may not want to be a part of hearing communities, but may desire the tools to create their own Jewish communities. It may be the responsibility of clergy to train those in the hearing disabled community to be leaders, to run committees, book clubs, programs, and even worship. It is essential that Jewish communities begin to engage those with hearing disabilities, and it is imperative that those with hearing disabilities feel welcome and at home when they enter a new community.

People relate to one another through communication. Meaningful communication may only happen when people use the same language. Without a common language, people need to find alternative ways to communicate. A person who is hearing disabled may need to utilize an interpreter to effectively communicate with people who are hearing. "An interpreted education means that every interaction includes three people, not two."[73] Having an interpreter hinders relationships between people because direct intimacy can never be achieved. Having an interpreter changes the interaction between people; nuance is lost, pieces of the conversation may be omitted, added, or substituted, and vocal inflection, eye contact, and body language may be altered. Furthermore, the necessity for an interpreter or other alternative forms of communication, such as writing rather than speaking, creates social barriers for people with hearing disabilities.

[73] Cerney, 47

A Look at Educational Possibilities:

How can Jewish communities create closer, more intimate relationships between hearing and non-hearing members? If sign language classes and workshops are offered, people with and without hearing disabilities will be able to communicate and interact directly, without the help of a mediator. Janet Cerney, author of *Deaf Education in America: Voices of Children from Inclusion Settings*, suggests that this may be possible beginning with our classrooms. "One alternative is the model of co-teaching deaf and hearing students together."[74] To support her claim, Cerney says, "Yet, the only way for deaf students to gain full access to the communication in the classrooms would be if the teachers and classmates were to become fluent in American Sign Language and use it in all communicative acts. Separate from this, significant communication barriers can greatly hinder the education of deaf students."[75] If students in Hebrew schools, hearing disabled or not, are able to communicate with one another, those students will become adults who feel they have a place in the Jewish community.

Hebrew schools and Jewish Day Schools are the gateway to creating inclusive communities. Students are receptive to education about people with differences and disabilities. Students in small Hebrew school classrooms build relationships based on their common background. However, a student with a hearing disability stands on the outside of the community because he or she may not be able to create a bond with his or her hearing peers.

> Deaf students who attend public schools experience a very different world from their hearing counterparts. It's as though they walk and live behind a soundproof wall that serves as a complete barrier to the messages floating

[74] Cerney, 8
[75] Ibid, 27

> around them. Where the hearing peer is lavished with language and discourse, the deaf student is often deprived of the words and the content, as well as the relationships that these voices represent. The phenomena are only slightly altered by the involvement of an interpreter, who attempts to funnel all of the voices into a single channel of access.[76]

Students with hearing disabilities do not have the same access to education and peer bonding as hearing students. They are at the mercy of an interpreter to explain lessons and teachings, to share jokes, gossip, and play time with their peers. There is no substitute for a relationship with real, good friends. However, a child with a hearing disability spends the majority of his or her time interacting with an interpreter, an adult. There is much evidence to support the theory that students excel when given the opportunity to learn and interact with peers with whom they may fully communicate. "Piaget suggests that the social exchanges between children are more likely to lead to cognitive development, compared to the exchanges between children and adults. This observation was premised on the belief that among age peers there is mutual control over the interaction."[77] It is vital, therefore, that children with hearing disabilities be given the opportunity to experience life and build relationships with their hearing counterparts alongside the relationships they build within the hearing disabled community.

Students with hearing disabilities who learn in inclusive settings often face challenges because they are unable to articulate their thoughts and feelings, participate, and understand the teacher and lessons. "Many attribute the lack in academic achievement to a system that does not provide quality, communication-based educational programs for deaf and hard of hearing children."[78] One of the challenges that hearing

[76] Cerney, 3
[77] Ibid, 5
[78] Ibid, 29

disabled students face is overcoming the room set up and learning space. Many classrooms, and worship spaces, are not set up to maximize multiple sightlines. Typically, these spaces are set up in rows. However, setting up space in a round formation allows for everyone, including those with hearing disabilities, to be able to see and communicate with everything and everyone around them, rather than missing communication that happens behind them or to either side of them. Cerney cites additional reasons for challenges for hearing disabled students in inclusive classrooms:

> What are the barriers that deaf students experience in participating in the classroom? The first barrier is *lag time* between the spoken message and the interpreted message, which prevents the deaf student from equal participation. The lag time often leaves the student unable to respond or in danger of responding inappropriately, embarrassing themselves and others. The second barrier is the *rapid rate of discussion* or presentation that occurs when many speakers are involved in a lively discussion. As speakers jump in and out of a discussion very quickly, the message that comes through the interpreter is one long, undifferentiated string of words, without the visual breaking of looking from speaker to speaker. The third barrier to participation is *space*. Deaf students need to sit in areas of the classroom that maximize the range of their visual field; they must be able to see the instructor, the blackboard, and the interpreter all at once…The final barrier to participation is *language*. Though the obvious result of not sharing a language is confusion, the barrier of language also prevents deaf students from participating in class relationship building.[79]

Hearing disabled students are at a disadvantage because we teach to the majority. We offer lessons and teach in a manner that does not welcome students with hearing disabilities, but rather pushes them to the outside of the classroom and outside of the circle of friendships formed within the classroom. Although being Jewish connects all the students within the Hebrew School and Jewish Day School settings, it is not necessarily enough of a connection to build strong relationships to one another or to Jewish practice.

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[79] Cerney 29-30

Imagining Our Jewish Communities: Welcoming the Hearing Disabled and Their Families:

What can Jewish clergy do to welcome and include families who have children or family members with hearing disabilities? We must move beyond our reliance on practicing Judaism through aural means. "Our species has been using sound to transmit detailed information since before we were human; physical anthropologists believe that the demands of speech may well have set the direction for human evolution."[80] Our bodies are built to absorb and transmit information using more than our ears, yet we rely on our ears as our main source of transmission. "We are also built to see. The human eye is meant to do certain specific things very well, but different things from what the ear excels at."[81] If this is true, why not utilize our other senses in worship and Jewish practice? "Without hearing you would need to use sight to find out what sound tells other people. And since the most important use that human beings make of sound is to convey information symbolically through language, you would have to find a visual substitute for the human voice."[82] Judaism promotes multi-sensory experiences, even if we do not always practice in multi-sensory ways. Jewish practice recognizes the complete and diverse experiences that may occur with multi-sensory rituals.

> A multi-sensory approach with music and movement as in Orff-Shulwerk[83] encourages and supports the playful interaction and establishment of relations between music, movement, language and materials. The main aim here is always active communication, whether it concerns an individual, a couple, a small or a large group. The access via more than one sense (especially the senses of touch and vibrations) allows

[80] Benderly, 165
[81] Ibid, 165
[82] Ibid 166
[83] A developmental approach to music education that combines music, drama, speech, and movement.

> for the most diverse variations of experience and expression and can thus support the development of dialogue and individual expression.[84]

Jews experience *Havadalah* through sight, smell, taste, and hearing. Since it is natural in Jewish practice to use many senses, not just the sense of hearing, Jewish communities should be able to find many ways to become inclusive of the hearing disabled. While some inclusion procedures require funding, many do not. It is simple to create a closed captioning effect by using a projection device. With a computer and a projector, an entire worship service may become a visual experience, rather than just an aural experience. People with hearing disabilities communicate with their hands. Projection also allows their hands to be free, rather than holding a book, and their eyes to be raised up, providing more of an opportunity to participate. Visual materials such as power point projection and detailed handouts at committee meetings, parent-teacher conferences, worship, and social gatherings will also help to include people with hearing disabilities in the Jewish community.

Although not all forms of inclusion require funding, some do and it remains a question for many congregations of where the money will be found to pay for these resources. Sign language interpreters need to be paid, new sound and amplification systems need to be purchased, and new electronics for visual resources cost money. Many Jewish communities have discretionary funds and caring and education committees that have funds. Money from these funds may be used to finance extra resources for hearing disabled congregants. Also, there are national organizations, such as the National Association of the Deaf and the American Association for the Deaf-Blind, that provide resources, funding, and advocacy for the hearing disabled. Any Jewish community may

[84] Salmon, 103

reach out to these organizations to receive financial support as well as educational resources for teaching, working with, and including the hearing disabled.

Jewish communities in smaller cities may consider sharing resources in order to become inclusive of hearing disabled Jews in the community. "Dialogue and emotional exchange with others are decisive criteria for human development."[85] Hearing disabled Jews need other hearing disabled Jews. But they also need Jewish ritual and practice. If there are multiple synagogues within a city, and each has a handful of hearing disabled congregants, the synagogues may consider offering joint programming, joint Hebrew School classes, or joint services that rotate from synagogue to synagogue once a month and focus on inclusion and utilize resources specifically for the hearing disabled. Similarly, no community needs to reinvent the wheel when creating a more inclusive community. Community leaders should reach out to other community leaders, in and outside of the Jewish world, to learn about the most successful ways to include the hearing disabled. Community leaders should build alliances and relationships with other organizations and communities and then advertise these alliances and their inclusive programs in order to grow, raise awareness, and draw in hearing disabled community members. This will also help the outside community to become a more public entity, making the public aware of the changes and inclusive nature of the synagogue.

Furthermore, as the population of many Jewish communities grows older, many synagogues must begin addressing the needs of those who experience the types of hearing loss that accompanies aging. First, Jewish communities must raise awareness about hearing disabilities by offering educational workshops, sign language lessons, and

[85] Salmon, 103

visiting hearing disabled communities and synagogues. Next, synagogue leaders must consider the needs and assistance needed in order for hearing disabled congregants, particularly those who are losing or have lost their hearing as a result of aging, to continue to be congregational participants. The change in their hearing ability may make them feel alienated, so providing resources will help this population to retain their feeling of welcome and within the community. Our communities and populations are changing, and we must change with them in order to provide a rich Jewish background for all Jews in the community.

Many people become synagogue members because they want to connect to Judaism on some level. They may hope to connect with other synagogue members, connect through participation on a committee, or connect through prayer. However, our synagogues are still lacking in membership of people with hearing disabilities. For any hearing disabled person, joining a Jewish community that is not specifically for the hearing disabled may be daunting. Not only will that person struggle to find means to communicate with members of the community, but also if that person was not raised with a Jewish education, his or her lack of knowledge may become exposed. Walking into a Jewish environment for the first time may trigger negative feelings of low competence and vulnerability. In order to create a sense of ownership and competence for Jews with hearing disabilities, clergy and lay leaders should go into hearing disabled communities and train leaders to run programming, lead worship, and offer classes. Leaders in the hearing community should also be in contact with the deaf community to help them grow Jewishly, and create knowledgeable communities.

Jewish communities around the world need to do more to be inclusive of those with hearing disabilities. If synagogue leaders are willing to think outside the box, be more creative with programming, education, and worship, then people with hearing disabilities may be attracted to the community. Jewish leaders must do everything in their power to welcome and include potential members with hearing disabilities, including training both the hearing community and the hearing disabled community, bringing new resources to the community, and making their classrooms, teachers, and students more prepared for including people with hearing disabilities.

Conclusion:

In today's technologically and medically advanced society, we should do all we can to make our communities inclusive. People with hearing disabilities have been left on the periphery of the Jewish community for too long. Inclusion of all people is vital to the creation of a rich, diverse, and full Jewish community. Clergy, lay leaders, and community members, hearing and hearing disabled, need to work together to build a welcoming environment where all can interact comfortably with one another. Much of Jewish practice, text, history, and education is brought to life through oral methods. Congregants feel connected to Judaism and one another through the oral transmission of information. An oral only method, however, does not reach every member within the Jewish community. Jews with hearing disabilities are often denied the opportunity to participate in Jewish communal life because they do not benefit from our tradition of oral practice. Jews with hearing disabilities are not able to fully absorb information nor are they able to fully communicate with other hearing members in the Jewish community. Therefore, it is imperative that our communities change. It is time that Jewish communities become entirely inclusive and expand their borders to the hearing disabled community.

For generations, Jewish scholars believed that people with hearing disabilities did not have full mental capabilities. Prior to invention of sign language, hearing aides, and other aides and communication devices for the hearing disabled, people with hearing disabilities were unable to communicate and express themselves articulately. The lack of communication between the hearing disabled and the hearing led to the misconception that people with hearing disabilities were not intelligent. As a result, rabbis wrote laws

that restricted Jews with hearing disabilities from full participation in ritual obligations. These laws, meant to protect those with hearing disabilities, put them at a disadvantage and pushed them to the outside of the community. Over time, it became evident that people with hearing disabilities were just as competent as those who hear, but needed to use other forms of communication to express themselves. Thus, the rabbis decided if the hearing disabled person was able to use hand signs or make minimal sounds to communicate then he or she should be granted rights within the community. Jewish law has evolved and developed parallel to the evolution of our understanding and perception of hearing disabilities.

In addition to adapting Jewish law to correspond with a modern understanding of hearing disabilities, clergy and lay leaders may begin to make Jewish communities more inclusive by understanding the struggles of Jews with hearing disabilities. How we communicate with one another will directly affect how we relate to one another. When we are able to communicate with all people, including those who communicate using other, non-oral, methods such as sign language, we will become more inclusive and more understanding of one another. Communication is necessary for people to relate to one another. However, oral forms of communication do not exclusively define communication. An inability to communicate orally often presents the greatest challenge for hearing disabled Jews who struggle to find a place within the Jewish community. Additionally, hearing disabled Jews feel alienated from the community because synagogues often lack resources and funding to provide opportunities for participation. However, knowledge and understanding of what it is to be hearing disabled will help to

bridge the communication gap. When we understand the needs of those on the periphery of the community, we can begin to create inclusive Jewish communities.

In order to create inclusive communities, clergy and lay leaders must explore the range of resources available. Our synagogues and Hebrew Schools will become places for all Jews, including those with hearing disabilities, when we explore and utilize resources. Using multi-sensory programming, funding and resources from organizations for the hearing disabled, sign language interpreters, educational opportunities, and thoughtful synagogue and classroom design and layout, our communities can become fuller, richer, diverse, and inclusive of those with hearing disabilities. Synagogue leaders from multiple communities may also join together to offer joint programming for those with hearing disabilities. By opening the doors to other Jewish communities, synagogue leaders will raise awareness about hearing disabilities within those communities and welcome more hearing disabled Jews into the greater Jewish community. There are many ways for communities to involve and engage Jews with hearing disabilities in the Jewish community and many opportunities for communities to become inclusive.

Judaism has always been a religion of inclusion. However, those with hearing disabilities have found themselves excluded from the larger Jewish community. Jewish law and historical ritual practice, communication obstacles, and funding complications have been barriers for hearing disabled Jews who struggle to find a home within the Jewish community. More and more, however, synagogues are gathering resources and working diligently to become more inclusive of those with hearing disabilities. It is within each of us to do our part to create a Jewish home for all Jews.

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