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BEYOND ACCESSIBILITY: CREATING WORSHIP THAT RESONATES WITH DEAF CONGREGANTS

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Investiture

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
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New York, New York

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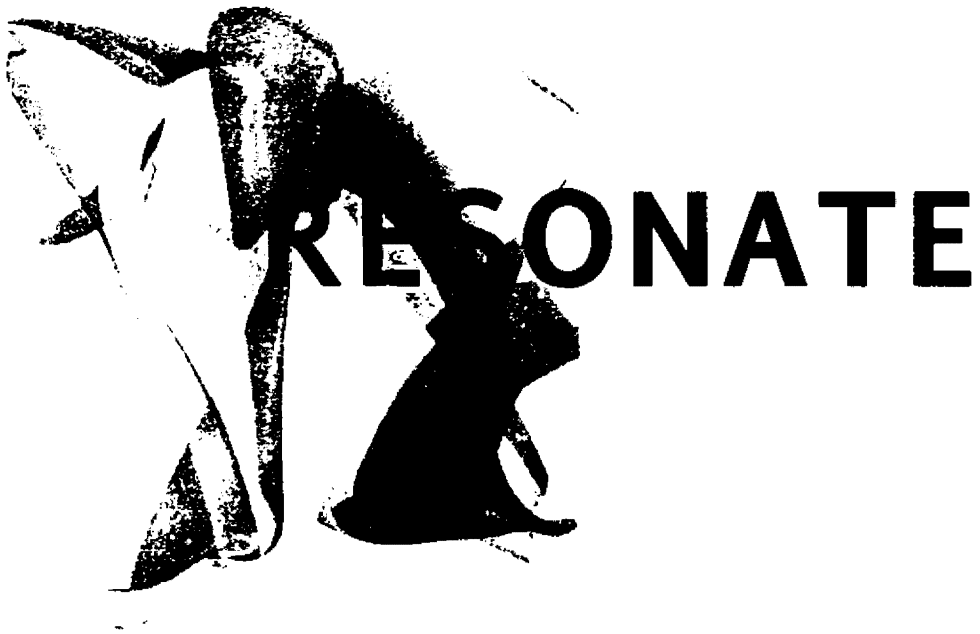
THESIS SUMMARY

Beyond Accessibility: Creating Worship That Resonates With Deaf Congregants is a thesis consisting of three chapters and an appendix. The ideas presented are intended to help cantors, rabbis, and other prayer leaders begin to create worship experiences that are meaningful for Deaf Jews. The thesis offers both a framework for thinking about welcoming Deaf people into the worship setting and practical suggestions for doing so.

Chapter One provides an orientation to Deaf communities and Deaf culture. Chapter Two draws lessons from Deaf theater analysis in order to establish a framework for creating worship that "resonates" with Deaf congregants. Chapter Three explores the functions music plays in worship and presents ways to achieve the same goals through non-aural means. Finally, the appendix serves as a guide for working with sign-language interpreters.

Beyond Accessibility draws from a variety of areas of study. The research draws most heavily from literature pertaining to Deaf culture in general, as well as Deaf theater and Deaf View/Image Art (De'VIA) in particular. Additional research about Deaf communities includes literature about Deaf congregations, both Jewish and Christian. Foundational to this work is literature about Jewish worship and synagogue renewal. Additionally, interviews were conducted.

It is my hope that the synthesis of these different avenues of study will prove a helpful resource for creating worship that is meaningful for Deaf Jews, and that clergy will feel compelled and encouraged to take up this important work.



resonate: to connect; to come towards another in connection

This image is a visual representation of the sign "resonate" based on a mapping of the movement of that sign (created by Dynamic Graphics Project, University of Toronto for the Deaf Culture Centre, Toronto, Ontario).

CONTENTS

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Many people have shared their knowledge and ideas with me. Thanks go again to Anita Small and to Joanne Cripps, co-directors of the Deaf Culture Centre in Toronto, and to the staff of the Centre for teaching me about Deaf culture. I am also appreciative of the congregants of the Hebrew Association of the Deaf in New York City, who have warmly welcomed me into their worship and discussions. Special thanks go to Rachael Bregman; it has been a joy to share ideas with each other.

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And, especially, to Jeff, for being with me on this journey.... You sustain me.

INTRODUCTION

"Cantors are trained to facilitate experiences of transcendence and to transmit our tradition in relevant and ever-changing ways."[1] This statement, written by the American Conference of Cantors (ACC) Executive Board, is included in Richard Cohn's article, "Visioning" in the Winter 2007 edition of the ACC newsletter *Koleinu*. It includes other inspirational statements, speaking of the cantor's role in creating connectedness – between individual congregants and God, to Jewish history and culture, and between people. In worship, cantors primarily use music to actualize this connectedness. But what of those in the congregation who cannot hear the music? How can the cantor, rabbi, and congregation work to make sure these people, too, are connected? What are the relevant and ever-changing ways of this work?

Sizable cities may have Deaf Jewish populations large enough to accommodate Deaf synagogues. But, from time to time, other Reform congregations in or out of urban centers may find their membership rosters include Deaf congregants or, at least, Deaf relatives of hearing congregants who appear at services from time to time. Alternatively, they may find that there are Deaf Jews in the community who have not affiliated because the typical congregation is unable to address their particular needs. Both these situations should prompt congregations to grapple with issues of engaging the Deaf.

Considering ways to create worship that resonates with Deaf people undeniably challenges conventional ways of thinking about and planning services. Jewish worship is

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[1]American Conference of Cantors Executive Board, quoted in Richard Cohn, "Visioning," *Koleinu*, Winter 2007.

a largely aural experience, particularly in Reform settings that emphasize communal prayer in unison rather than individual *davening* and exclude a silent *Amidah*. The focus is primarily on listening to sound and producing sound, whether spoken or sung. Special emphasis is placed on the role of music in shaping the worship experience.

Given these realities of the Reform worship setting, how can we make worship meaningful for those who cannot hear the music? How is participation possible for those who do not communicate aurally? How can we best transmit text to those for whom American Sign Language, not English, is their first or primary language? How can we transform our worship spaces so they better foster the prayer experiences of all congregants?

This thesis seeks to address those questions so we can envision worship designed to be engaging and meaningful for Deaf Jews.

A starting point is for cantors, rabbis, and other prayer leaders to gain a better understanding of the Deaf population. To begin with, we require sensitivity regarding nomenclature – why, for example, we refer to people as Deaf (capitalized) not deaf (with a lower case). We shall see later that the capitalized form is used as an affirmation of Deaf culture. How individuals view their deafness and respond to it can be a highly sensitive topic, emotionally and politically charged. In planning appropriate worship, clergy must understand these issues of Deaf identity and culture. Chapter One provides the orientation to Deaf communities necessary to begin this work.

Once worship leaders are aware of the diversity within the Deaf community and how their congregants fit into that spectrum, they can begin to think about appropriate and dignified ways of creating a worship environment that resonates with the Deaf. To

establish a framework for achieving this goal, Chapter Two turns toward Deaf theater analysis. Deaf theater companies must make choices including how to best adapt and translate existing plays (or create new ones), what language or languages in which to communicate those plays, which elements of Deaf culture to integrate into the performance, and how to best use theater space; these choices are made with an eye toward balancing the needs and desires both of Deaf and of hearing audience members. Much has been written on the parallels, in general, between worship as ritual, on one hand, and theater on the other.[2] In our case, we should consult specifically Deaf theater, drawing lessons from it that will help us think clearly about how to create a worship environment that will respond to the needs and desires of all our congregants, the Deaf included.

Once a framework is established for creating a worship environment that resonates with the Deaf, we must consider the role of music in worship. As stated above, music plays in integral role in shaping worship. Creating models of worship that are both aural and visual in nature takes careful consideration. Therefore, Chapter Three delves into the many functions music plays in worship and explores ways to achieve the same goals through non-aural means. Various worship ideas are presented as a starting point for clergy to begin crafting worship that is not just accessible, but also meaningful for Deaf congregants.

Finally, any worship setting with Deaf congregants will necessarily also include sign language interpreters. The appendix serves as a guide for clergy working with interpreters. By working closely together, clergy and interpreters can move beyond

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[2]See works of Richard Schechner in particular.

accessibility to create worship that resonates with Deaf congregants.

It is my hope that this research will prove helpful for worship leaders. We must work to create paths of connection for all our congregants. We must strive "to facilitate experiences of transcendence and to transmit our tradition in relevant and ever-changing ways," for everyone in our midst.

CHAPTER 1

ORIENTATION TO DEAF COMMUNITIES

Today, in an age of synagogue renewal, clergy are reminded of the multiple ways one may understand the rabbinic phrase, "*Da lifnei mi atah omed*," or "Know before whom you stand." The usual reading of this phrase is that the "whom" in question is God; however, another reading designates the "whom" as the people before whom clergy literally stand: their congregants. Meaningful worship is at least partially dependent upon having an understanding of the people in the congregation, both as a group and as individuals. Knowing the congregants leads to knowing – or at least having a sense regarding – how prayers, sermons, and music will touch them.

Understanding the diversity of the Deaf communities and culture is an important step in knowing the person before you. Being Deaf is one of many aspects in a person's life, and we would be remiss in only knowing a congregant in this capacity. Nonetheless, understanding the various aspects of a congregant's Deaf identity will help prayer leaders plan appropriately accessible, engaging, and meaningful worship.

Oliver Sacks reminds us that, "the term 'deaf' is vague, or rather, is so general that it impedes consideration of the vastly differing degrees of deafness, degrees that are of qualitative, and even of 'existential,' significance."[1] Therefore, it is helpful to consider a number of characteristics, each of which is a piece of a Deaf person's identity. First we will consider the degree of deafness; second, at what age deafness occurred;

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[1]Oliver Sacks, *Seeing Voices: A Journey Into the World of the Deaf* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 4.

third, which language one uses; and fourth, to what world, or culture, one belongs.[2]

Degree of Deafness

The ability to hear speech is the determining factor in whether one is classified as Deaf or hard of hearing. A person is considered *hard of hearing* if he or she is able to hear speech to some extent; generally this is made possible with use of hearing aids. The hearing loss may fall anywhere within a large spectrum ranging from moderate to severe. A *Deaf* person may have some residual hearing, such as the ability to hear very high or very low-pitched sounds, but cannot discern speech aurally.[3] Additionally, some Deaf people may be able to perceive sound through the use of a cochlear implant[4]. This surgically implanted device consists of external and internal coils behind the ear in addition to an electrode within the cochlea, or inner ear; the implant stimulates the auditory nerve, actually establishing sound so that it can be experienced. This is in contrast to hearing aids, which simply amplify sound.[5]

Age at which Deafness Occurred

A person is considered *congenitally Deaf* if he or she was born Deaf. One is

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[2]Lew Golan, *Reading Between the Lips* (Chicago: Bonus Books, Inc., 1995), 5.

[3]John W. Adams and Pamela S. Rohring, *Handbook to Service the Deaf and Hard of Hearing* (New York: Elsevier Academic Press, 2004), 13.

[4]This is a controversial procedure in the Deaf community, partly because it is presented as a way to "cure" deafness, suggesting that deafness is an ailment, an idea rejected in Deaf culture; additionally, many in the Deaf community object to this procedure being performed on young children who cannot consent to the surgery, especially because success cannot be guaranteed.

[5]Adams and Rohring, *Deaf and Hard of Hearing*, 91.

prelingually Deaf if a hearing loss occurred before the acquisition of spoken language. Congenitally and prelingually Deaf people are often grouped together because they share the attribute of not having learned a spoken language aurally.[6]

A *postlingually Deaf* person is one who experienced hearing loss after the acquisition of spoken language, generally after the age of two. The term *deafened* is synonymous with postlingually Deaf. A sub-set of deafened, or postlingually Deaf, people, are those with *late onset deafness*. This describes people for whom the onset of deafness occurred during adulthood; they are sometimes called *late-deafened adults*.[7]

Language Use

A binary view of communication methods used by the Deaf divides the population between those who use oral communication, with a spoken language, and those who communicate manually, with a signed language. The language with which one communicates is usually determinative of one's cultural identity.

Those who communicate orally do so in the language of the country and culture in which they live. Deaf people who use an oral approach to communication will utilize lip-reading for language input (speech-reading, synonymous with lip-reading, is the preferred term by some). Hard of hearing people may communicate in English (or another spoken language) with the assistance of hearing aids. We saw above how hearing aids serve to

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[6]Maurice H. Miller, "An Audiological View of Deafness," in *The Deaf Jew in the Modern World* (Hoboken: Ktav Pub. House for New York Society for the Deaf, 1986), 73.

[7]Bill Graham and Marymargaret Sharp-Pucci, "The Special Challenge of Late-Deafened Adults: Another Deaf Way," in *The Deaf Way: Perspectives from the International Conference on Deaf Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1994), 504.

amplify sound; more specifically, they help distinguish specific vowels and consonants from each other.[8] An additional distinguishing method is "cued speech." Cued speech uses specific gestures to show visually whether a given consonant is, for example, /b/, /p/, or /m/, all of which look alike on the lips.[9] Since it is not an aural method, it can be used by Deaf people in addition to the hard of hearing.

Those who communicate with a manual language are most likely to utilize a natural sign language, such as American Sign Language (ASL), British Sign Language (BSL), *Langue des Signes Française* (LSF, French Sign Language), or *Langues des Signes Québécois* (LSQ, Quebec Sign Language). These natural sign languages are recognized by linguists as distinct languages, each with its own grammar and vocabulary. Because ASL is the sign language most likely to be used by Deaf Jews in North America, we will now turn our focus to gaining a general knowledge of what it is and how it works.

American Sign Language was first recognized as a genuine language in the 1960s, when a teacher at Gallaudet College (now Gallaudet University), William Stokoe, published *Sign Language Structure* (1960) and *A Dictionary of American Sign Language* (1965). He was the first to analyze the structure of ASL, revealing it to be a full language and not simply a pantomimed version of English as many had believed previously. Stokoe's study showed that signs in ASL are structured by three factors: handshape,

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[8] Lew Golan, *Reading Between the Lips*, 327.

[9] Sharon Neuman Solow, *Sign Language Interpreting: A Basic Resource Book* (Silver Spring: The National Association of the Deaf, 1981), 11.

movement, and location.[10] Just as letters are combined to form syllables and then words in English, handshape, movement, and location are used in different combinations to make up the vocabulary of ASL.

As an example, we can look at the "5" handshape, a hand with the fingers spread as if to indicate the number five (in fact, this is the sign for FIVE). Now, let us pair the "5" handshape with a movement and location, tapping the thumb of that hand on a particular part of the body. If this handshape and movement is executed on the side of one's forehead, we have the sign for FATHER; if however, this same pairing of handshape and movement is executed on the chest, we have the sign for FINE.[11]

As a visual language, communication in ASL relies on spatial relations and facial expressions.[12] For example, the English sentence "Help me" requires the use of only one sign in ASL: HELP. By signing HELP and moving the sign inward toward one's own body, the message "Help me" is expressed. One would express the idea of helping another with the same handshape, but with movement in the direction toward the person who is intended as the recipient of the help. Facial expression helps serve the same purpose inflection of voice does in spoken language, such as indicating a question and, further, what type of question. "Wh-questions," such as who? what? and where? are indicated by lowering one's eyebrows and frowning, whereas raised eyebrows

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[10]Sacks, *Seeing Voices*, 77.

[11]Harlan Lane, Robert Hoffmeister, and Ben Bahan, *A Journey into the Deaf-World* (San Diego: DawnSignPress, 1996), 79.

[12]Ibid., 81, 91.

accompany "yes/no" questions.[13] Therefore, raising one's eyebrows while signing HELP directionally toward another person communicates the question, "Do you want help?"

The many aspects of American Sign Language are too numerous to be included in this study; this brief overview is simply intended as an introduction to allow the reader a glimpse into the unique grammar and structure of the language.

In addition to natural sign languages like ASL, there are also invented manual systems. Most of these Manually Coded English (MCE) systems were created by teachers of the Deaf as ways of communicating English by manual means. They are generally used in educational settings, but may occasionally be used as a primary means of communication for some deaf people, particularly some late-deafened adults.[14] Most MCEs borrow vocabulary from ASL but follow English syntax in structuring sentences. Additionally, they include invented signs for aspects of English grammar that do not exist in ASL. For example, Signed English, which was created in 1973 by Gallaudet University professor Harry Bornstein, uses invented signs for articles and verb conjugations. Signing Exact English was also invented by a Gallaudet professor, Gerilee Gustason, in 1969 and is the most commonly used MCE. Signing Exact English uses more invented forms than Signed English, sometimes changing signs that were originally ASL in order to communicate aural aspects of English manually (for example, by assigning the same sign for "*right* (direction), *right* (correct), and *right* (privilege)."[15]

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[13]Ibid., 92.

[14]Graham and Sharp-Pucci, "Late-Deafened Adults," 505.

[15]Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan, *Journey into the Deaf-World*, 269-270.

Questions of Culture

Most Deaf people will identify themselves as belonging to the Deaf-World, also called Deaf culture, or the hearing-world, also called hearing culture (sometimes spelled with a capital "H"). Affiliation with one culture or the other may come at different points in life. Some are born into the Deaf-World, but many are born into the hearing-world: a 1997 study showed that 90-95% of parents of Deaf and hard of hearing children are themselves hearing.[16]

The culture with which one identifies is generally determined by the language one uses to communicate. People who identify strongly with Deaf culture are those "for whom the sign languages, communities and cultures of the Deaf collective represents their primary experience and allegiance, many of whom perceive their experience as essentially akin to other language minorities."[17] Members of the Deaf community build their individual and group cultural identity around language. They counter the medical definition of deafness, which focuses on hearing loss and tends to couch deafness in terms of disability. Those who live as part of the Deaf-World, however, present a culturo-linguistic model, focusing on sign language as the centerpiece of Deaf identity; their framework for "being-in-the-world" focuses on their possession of a beautiful language and rich heritage rather than on a lack of ability to hear.[18] This focus on possession of a visual language is illustrated by an attempt made during the 1960s by John Darcy Smith, an advocate of the Deaf Art Movement, to coin the term "seeing" in

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[16]Adams and Rohring, *Deaf and Hard of Hearing*, 18.

[17]Paddy Ladd, *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters LTD, 2003), xvii.

[18]Ibid., 15-16.

the Deaf context. "His reasoning was that if humans who depend on sound are called 'hearing' people; others who rely on sight should likewise be labeled 'seeing' rather than 'hearing-impaired.'"[19] Using the word "seeing" to describe Deaf people never caught on, but "hearing-impaired" is still considered a derogatory term.

There are those – both hearing and Deaf – who hold that Deaf people should live primarily as part of hearing culture, and those who advocate for Deaf culture. At times there are tensions between these groups. This tension can be traced at least back to the 1880 International Congress of Educators of the Deaf, at which a vote was held to decide whether schools for the deaf should follow a strictly oral approach, putting the acquisition of spoken language skills above general education (teaching speech can take up dozens of hours in a week), or allow instruction to be conducted in sign language in order to devote time to the acquisition of general knowledge (thereby condoning the possibility of a non-speaking deaf population). Deaf teachers were excluded from the vote, and the oralist approach prevailed.

The result in the United States was both a suppression of sign language and a general deterioration of the quality of education for the Deaf; this deficit has only begun to be made up in the last few decades as American Sign Language became recognized as a legitimate language and made its way back into some classrooms.[20] Still, even today the debate between oralism and sign language remains. Because of the strong feelings this subject arouses, it is important for synagogue leaders to be aware of – and sensitive

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[19]Ann Silver, artistic description of "Deaf Identity Crayons: Then & Now," in *Elements of a Culture: Visions by Deaf Artists* (First National Touring Exhibit of Deaf Culture Art, 1999-2000), 22.

[20]Sacks, *Seeing Voices*, 25-29.

about – where Deaf and hard of hearing congregants identify themselves in relation to Deaf and hearing culture.

The vast majority of clergy people, themselves hearing, need little explanation of hearing culture. However, the relative unfamiliarity of the Deaf-World suggests that further knowledge of Deaf culture, especially the Deaf arts, is called for.

Deaf Arts

The arts of any society provide a porthole through which to gain knowledge and perspective into the lives and culture of its people. The Deaf arts are no exception. Through studio and performative arts we can find expressions of the Deaf experience:

> Deaf Art is art – oils, watercolors, acrylic, pen and ink, video, photography, sculpture – that is an expression of Deaf culture. Deaf Art communicates not the sensory experience of silence but rather the values of Deaf culture: the beauty of sign language and its painful oppression, the breakdown of family life when hearing parents cannot communicate in sign language, the joys of Deaf bonding, the abuses of audiology when the Deaf difference is treated as deviance, turning points in the artist's acculturation to Deaf culture, such as the discovery of language, and turning points in the history of Deaf peoples . . . .[21]

Deaf studio arts find their expression in De'VIA, or "Deaf View/Image Art." The name and concept of De'VIA was created in 1989 by a group of Deaf artists attending a workshop co-facilitated by Betty G. Miller and Paul Johnston (themselves Deaf artists).[22] Deaf Art had existed prior to this time, but the creation of De'VIA marks a shift toward a more defined art form. The artists wrote a manifesto explaining the goal of De'VIA to

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[21]Brenda Schertz and Harlan Lane, "Forward," in *Elements of a Culture: Visions by Deaf Artists* (First National Touring Exhibit of Deaf Culture Art, 1999-2000), 2.

[22] Brenda Schertz, "Elements of a Deaf Culture," in *Elements of a Culture: Visions by Deaf Artists* (First National Touring Exhibit of Deaf Culture Art, 1999-2000), 10.

communicate "innate cultural or physical Deaf experiences," such as metaphors and perspectives, relationships with the environment, spiritual and everyday life, through art. Furthermore,

> De'VIA can be identified by formal elements such as Deaf artists' possible tendency to use contrasting colors and values, intense colors, contrasting textures. It may also most often include a centralized focus, with exaggeration or emphasis on facial features, especially eyes, mouths, ears, and hands.[23]

Some common themes found in De'VIA include sign language in general, and handshapes in particular; visual representations of sound, whether as imagined by the artist or as experienced in the form of residual hearing; and references to musical instruments. The use of musical imagery often serves as metaphor: one Deaf artist, Alex Whilhite, explains, "A painting, for me, must have facial or visual sound, and it must vibrate," and Harry R. Williams, another Deaf artist, is quoted as saying, "Art is our music!"[24]

The art of American Sign Language is explored most fully in Deaf poetry. Deaf poetry may incorporate elements of visual rhythm and/or rhyme. Visual rhythm may reflect the inherent rhythm of ASL, or it may be created by establishing a beat and moving from sign to sign in relation to it. For example, Deaf Rap follows a specific rhythmic pattern similar to a "cha-cha" which one might notate musically as quarter note/quarter note/eighth note/eighth note/quarter note. Visual rhyme is achieved through

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[23]Ibid., 10.

[24]Alex Wilhite, quoted in S. Farrington, "Very Special Artist Receives a very special recognition," *The Sanford Herald*, 10 November 1999, quoted in *Elements of a Culture: Visions by Deaf Artists* (First National Touring Exhibit of Deaf Culture Art, 1999-2000), 34; Harry R. Williams, quoted in Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan, *Journey into the Deaf-World*, 141.

handshape; for example, the signs for FATHER and FINE, explored above, rhyme visually because both use the "5" handshape.[25]

Sign dance is a performative art form that combines sign language with dance. Sign dance is sometimes accompanied by music, with the dancer or dancers interpreting a song's lyrics as they dance. Often, the signing is exaggerated or stylized. Sign dance may also take a more abstract and less narrative form by fusing sign language, or elements of sign language, into choreography.[26]

Finally, Deaf theater has become an established art form in the United States in recent decades, celebrated by hearing and Deaf people alike. Most broadly defined, Deaf theater is theater performed in sign language. However, some people seek to distinguish between different theater forms with the use of two terms "deaf theater" and "sign-language theater." Actors Dorothy Miles and Louie J. Fant, Jr. define sign-language theater as:

> any production which begins with a text originally written for spoken theatre . . . or with selected items of literature . . . and arranges this work for simultaneous presentation in spoken language and in the sign language used by deaf persons in that country or locality.[27]

Sign-language theater does not deal specifically with deafness, whereas Deaf theater does. Deaf theater seeks:

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[25]Co-director Anita Small of the Deaf Culture Centre, interview by author, 26 July 2007.

[26]Kelli Deister, *Sign Dance*, in *Bella Online: The Voice of Women* (2007), available from http://www.bellaonline.com/articles/art42920.asp; Common Ground Sign Dance Theatre (2005), available from http://www.signdance.com/about.htm.

[27]Dorothy S. Miles and Louie J. Fant, Jr., *Sign-Language Theatre and Deaf Theatre: New Definitions and Directions* (Northridge: Center on Deafness California State University, 1976), 4-5.

> to entertain and enlighten both deaf and hearing audiences with realistic portrayals of the lives of deaf persons, or with real or imaginary representations drawn from the deaf person's unique perception of the world; to provide both deaf and hearing playwrights with models from which to develop further creations; and to bring to the deaf public a theatre with which they can truly identify.[28]

Miles and Fant acknowledge that the terms deaf theater and sign-language theater are often used interchangeably. Throughout this thesis, the use of the term "Deaf theater" intends the broadest definition, encompassing within it both Deaf theater and sign-language theater.

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[28]Ibid., 6.

CHAPTER 2

CREATING A WORSHIP ENVIRONMENT THAT "RESONATES"

> How can Deaf culture and sign language be incorporated into the theatrical event to meet the needs of Deaf spectators? And what about hearing spectators? How can the promise of performing arts in sign language theater be realized for people who are unfamiliar with Deaf culture? And, finally, can both audiences be satisfied with the same performance?[1]

These questions raised for the theater experience can likewise be asked for the worship setting. By substituting just a few words, we might ask: How can Deaf culture and sign language be incorporated into the worship service to meet the needs of Deaf congregants? And what about hearing congregants, and deaf congregants who are members of hearing culture? . . . And, finally, can both groups be satisfied with the same worship service?

Moving Beyond Accessibility: Making Worship Resonate

Creating worship that is meaningful for Deaf congregants is a daunting task. There is no simple formula for doing so. Upon mentioning the subject of my research to someone, I invariably got one of three responses: (a) "That sounds really challenging – I have no idea what you would do!" (b) "Just provide personal amplification devices!" or (c) "Just hire a sign language interpreter!" While each of these responses is well meaning, they are of limited help (if of help at all), especially if seen as both the starting and ending point. Providing personal amplification devices, as some congregations do, might aid moderately hard of hearing congregants in terms of hearing the service better;

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[1]Don Bangs, "What is a Deaf Performing Arts Experience?" in *The Deaf Way: Perspectives from the International Conference on Deaf Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1994), 751.

however, they will be of no help for the profoundly Deaf who rely on lipreading rather than aural input. Worse, they may insult and even distance congregants who identify strongly with Deaf culture, for hearing aids and similar devices are symbols of the pathological view of deafness – as a deficiency that needs to be cured. Hiring sign-language interpreters will again do nothing for those who communicate with English, although it is an important first step for worship with culturally Deaf congregants, as it will allow them to follow the service in their own language. This is just a first step, however, for hiring interpreters will help make worship more accessible, but not necessarily meaningful for Deaf congregants.

The word "accessible" is defined as "that can be approached or entered."[2] Accessibility allows a Deaf person to enter into the hearing environment, even to participate in it. It is a necessary first step, but it is not enough. We must create worship that also resonates with Deaf congregants.

In American Sign Language, the word "resonate" does not relate to sound, as in the primary English definition, but rather is about connecting. The sign involves two bent "5" handshapes facing each other; one moves toward the other until they intersect, with fingers interlocking. It connotes coming together, relevancy, and meaning. This is the worship environment we must work to create: one that relevant and full of meaning, where hearing and Deaf people come together to forge connections. An accessible congregation says, "Come in. You're welcome in our [hearing] sanctuary." A congregation that creates worship that resonates with Deaf congregants says, "Come in. This is our [hearing and Deaf] sanctuary."

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[2]Webster's New World Dictionary, 3d ed., (1988), 7.

If we are to create a worship environment that resonates with Deaf congregants, then, we must consider a number of factors, with the transmission of text being just one of them. Deaf theater can provide a helpful framework for thinking about such worship, for Deaf theater is not just theater made accessible for Deaf people through the use of an interpreter. Don Bangs illuminates the limitations of such a practice:

> Many theater companies have attempted to meet the needs of Deaf patrons by providing sign language interpreters, usually at one side of the proscenium, during special performances. But is this really a theater experience for Deaf audiences? Can Deaf spectators who try to follow the signs of an interpreter in one location while viewing a theatrical production somewhere else really receive a theatrical experience comparable to that of their hearing counterparts?[3]

Deaf theater seeks not only to convey the message of a script to Deaf people, but also to create a Deaf theater experience. We can learn from it in order to begin to shape worship experiences that resonate with Deaf people.

A Study of Deaf Theater

Bangs conducted a study of three Deaf theater companies with the goal of analyzing the relationship of Deaf audiences, as well as hearing audiences, to the performance. The first, and probably most well known of the companies, is the National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD), founded in 1966. Also included in his study are the Fairmont Theatre of the Deaf (FTD) in the greater metropolitan Cleveland area, founded in 1975, and the Department of Performing Arts at the National Technical Institute of the Deaf (NTID) drama club in Rochester, founded in 1968. Each of these companies played an important role in the establishment of Deaf theater, yet each was founded with somewhat differing goals and area of focus. NTD, which was founded by a hearing man, David

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[3]Bangs, "What is a Deaf Performing Arts Experience?" 751.

Hays, sought to expose both hearing and Deaf audiences to the art of sign language in differing forms, combining it with choreography and on-stage voice narration. FTD, with hearing and Deaf co-founders Charles St. Clair and Brian Kilpatrick, focused on presenting the issues Deaf people face in relationships with hearing people and the hearing world. Finally, the NTID drama club, formed by students at the urging of Deaf professor Robert Panara, performed traditional Deaf cultural works, or adapted hearing theater in uniquely Deaf ways.[4]

Bangs determined there were four factors that influenced the effectiveness of each theater in creating successful theater experiences for its intended audience. The four factors are:

> (1) themes used to develop original theater works, and the types or genres of hearing works adapted into sign language productions; (2) sign language styles displayed in performance; (3) elements of Deaf culture featured in various theater productions; and (4) use of the theater space and other production considerations.[5]

These can be adapted to guide considerations for Jewish worship that resonates with the Deaf.

Themes and Genres: A Consideration of Texts

Theater companies have many options in terms of themes and genres; they can choose a new script for each production. Worship differs, in that our "script" is, to a great extent, both fixed and repetitive. Yet there is room for some variation and innovation. A service will undoubtedly include parts of the "traditional" liturgy, but it may also include other texts. These can take the form of creative translations, prose

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[4]Ibid., 754-755.

[5]Ibid., 754.

readings, or poetry. Such readings might be included in the printed *siddur*, or they might be drawn from other sources and inserted by a prayer leader. Additionally, we may have spoken text, through which a rabbi or other prayer leader projects thoughts and insights into the worship service. Therefore, while Jewish worship does not allow for quite the same range of freedom of theme and genre as theater, such freedom is indeed there, at least to some degree.

Prayer leaders can direct attention to already-existing texts that may be especially meaningful for Deaf congregants, or can introduce such texts into the liturgy. Just as cantors particularly connect with texts such as "שירו ליהוה שיר חדש – Sing unto Adonai a new song," (Psalm 96) or translations such as "We thank You and sing Your praises . . . ."[6] because they mention song, the cantor's primary mode of prayer, Deaf congregants may find particularly relevant expression in other texts. Just as De'VIA works emphasize eyes (vital in communication for any Deaf person) and hands (of particular importance to the Deaf because of sign language), texts that feature the same things may prove especially meaningful for Deaf congregants. Consider the following texts:

1. והאר עינינו בתורתך, ודבק לבנו במצותך – Enlighten our eyes with Your Torah, and cleave our hearts to Your mitzvot. . . . (*Ahavah Rabah*)
2. בידו אפקיד רוחי, בעת אישן ואעירה. ועם רוחי גויתי, יי לי ולא אירא. – Into Your hands I entrust my spirit, when I sleep and when I wake, and with my spirit my body also; the Eternal is with me, I shall not fear. (*Adon Olam*)
3. אשא עיני אל-ההרים מאין יבא עזרי? עזרי מעם יהוה עשה שמים וארץ. . . . יהוה שמרך יהוה צלך על-יד ימינך. – I lift my eyes to the mountains; from where will my help

[6]Chaim Stern, *Gates of Prayer for Shabbat and Weekdays* (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1994), 61.

come? My help comes from Adonai, maker of heaven and earth. . . . Adonai is your guardian, Adonai is your protection at your right hand. (Psalm 121)

A particular text may also be introduced into the worship service because it responds to liturgical texts that might otherwise alienate Deaf people. For example, Psalm 150, included in the *P'sukei D'zimrah* section of the morning service, lists different ways one might praise God, focusing almost exclusively on the use of musical instruments. This text is almost always sung and is often a high point of the preliminary prayers. An alternative text provided in *Mishkan T'filah* can offer Deaf congregants a point of entry into this text; music is included in it as just one of many ways of praising God:

> PRAISE GOD in the depths of the universe;
> praise God in the human heart.
> Praise God for power and beauty,
> for all-feeling, fathomless love.
> Praise God with drums and trumpets,
> with string quartets and guitars.
> Praise God in market and workplace,
> with computer, with hammer and nails.
> Praise God in bedroom and kitchen;
> praise God with pots and pans.
> Praise God in the temple of the present;
> let every breath be God's praise.[7]

Another prayer that may alienate Deaf people is the *Sh'ma*, this "watchword of our faith" that demands: "Hear O Israel . . . ." Not only may the words be difficult, but the custom of closing one's eyes during it may be an impossible (and perhaps culturally insensitive) idea for Deaf people, for doing so would completely cut them off from the communal prayer experience. The song "Open Up Our Eyes" by Cantor Jeff Klepper, inspired by

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[7] *Mishkan T'filah: The Siddur for Reform Jewish Prayer, Draft Services for Weekdays* (Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2004), 141.

the text *V'haeir Eineinu* (see number 1 above), was written as a meditation before the *Sh'ma*.[8] Beginning with the words "Open up our eyes," and concluding with "we will know that You are One," the song can offer a framework for understanding the *Sh'ma* in a way that can meaningful for all congregants, Deaf or hearing. It might be sung, signed, and/or read:

> Open up our eyes, teach us how to live,
> fill our hearts with joy and all the love You have to give.
> Gather us in peace as You lead us to Your Name,
> and we will know that You are One.[9]

Sign Language Styles and Language Choices

When Deaf theater companies choose sign language styles, particularly for adaptations of hearing plays, they must consider ways in which to balance communication and art:

> To develop an effective translation, both the artistry of sign language and its communicative function must be considered. The former aspect carries more weight with hearing audiences, as they rely on the voiced narration while enjoying the visual imagery of artistic signs. By contrast, Deaf audiences are more concerned with the clarity of the sign language translation, because they cannot hear the voiced narration. These conflicting audience needs have challenged each theater to search for a sign language translation that works with both Deaf and hearing audiences.[10]

Synagogues, too, must consider this issue. We will see in greater detail later that artistic signing can prove a meaningful method in worship; but meaning is lost if the message becomes unintelligible. Many people will find messages difficult to comprehend if a text

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[8]Jeff Klepper, introduction to "Open Up Our Eyes," in *Ruach 5761/5763 Songbook* (New York: Transcontinental Music Publications, 2003), 24.

[9]Idem, *Open Up Our Eyes*.

[10]Bangs, "What is a Deaf Performing Arts Experience?" 758.

is communicated in an MCE such as Signed English rather than ASL. A hard of hearing woman explains this problem in relation to Sign Dance:

> Many times, I have witnessed people signing in exact English, which causes problems for those that have deafness because they have a hard time understanding what message the person is trying to convey through their interpretation of the song. As a hard of hearing individual, having been raised in the hearing community, it is hard enough for me to follow a sign dance that uses exact English. I stumble over trying to keep up with the words being signed, rather than getting clarity on the overall message of the sign dance itself.[11]

Additionally, the message can become unclear when signed by someone inexperienced in ASL, who may unintentionally – and indeed, with good intentions – make mistakes that render the communication incomprehensible.[12]

Jewish prayer has additional language considerations, because it is conducted in English, Hebrew, Aramaic, and even Yiddish or Ladino at times, depending upon the given congregation and particular prayer. When planning a worship environment that resonates with Deaf Jews, clergy (working with interpreters, and with the Deaf congregants themselves) must decide how to best transmit texts. English can readily be translated into ASL, but other languages cannot. Hebrew signs exist in the form of Israeli Sign Language, but North American interpreters and congregants are not likely to know this language.

A decision must be made, then, whether – or when – to transliterate, portraying the sounds of Hebrew in sign, or translate the texts. Translating non-English liturgy into

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[11]Kelli Deister, *Sign Dance*, in *Bella Online: The Voice of Women* (2007), http://www.bellaonline.com/articles/art42920.asp.

[12]Dorothy S. Miles and Louie J. Fant, Jr., *Sign-Language Theatre and Deaf Theatre: New Definitions and Directions* (Northridge: Center on Deafness California State University, 1976), 15.

American Sign Language will require two levels of translating: first, from the original language, such as Hebrew, into English; second, from the English translation into ASL. Rabbi Elyse Goldstein explains how this worked when she served a Deaf congregation: "If I use Hebrew I also simultaneously sign the English meaning, so my congregants can lipread the Hebrew while seeing the meaning in sign."[13] However, Goldstein also describes a method by which a one can transliterate Hebrew texts:

> The deaf person can learn Hebrew via fingerspelling . . . . Reading Hebrew as they would read English, forming letters into fingerspelled words, such as *bah rooch*; providing that the person recognizes *bet-reysh-shoorook-chaf* as the word *baruch*, without having to orally say *baruch*.[14]

Deaf Cultural Elements

Theater considerations regarding Deaf cultural elements generally have to do with maintaining a believable performance that accurately reflects Deaf life. For example, a Deaf character would use a TTY rather than a phone, and actors must maintain eye contact when communicating (a necessity for visual communication).[15] Jewish liturgy might not portray Deaf culture, but there are many ways to incorporate elements of Deaf culture into the worship setting.

We can learn from the example of Deaf churches by bringing visual cues to our services. Hearing people may be used to aural cues, such as a voiced announcement or

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[13]Elyse Goldstein, "Ceremonials, Rites, and Worship," in *The Deaf Jew in the Modern World* (Hoboken: Ktav Pub. House for New York Society for the Deaf, 1986), 57; this is an example of Simultaneous Communication (Sim Com), which is critiqued for causing distortions of meaning.

[14]Ibid., 59.

[15]Bangs, "What is a Deaf Performing Arts Experience?" 759.

an instrumental prelude, to indicate a service is beginning. Deaf people, however, rely on visual cues, such as flashing lights, to indicate that an event is about to begin. Using flashing lights, instead of or in addition to the announcement or prelude, is one way to bring Deaf culture into the worship setting.[16]

Deaf cultural elements can also be brought into the synagogue through Deaf arts. A congregation might choose to hang artwork created by a Jewish De'VIA artist. Or, the concepts of De'VIA might be applied to text choices by bringing attention to texts that mention eyes or hands, as described above. Other Deaf arts, such as sign language poetry and Sign Dance, can also be used as part of the "performance" of worship, thereby incorporating elements of Deaf culture into the synagogue.

Use of Space

Theater space and other production considerations generally revolve around issues of visibility and directly apply to considerations of sanctuary space. Whether one reads lips or uses ASL, language for Deaf – and many hard of hearing – people is necessarily visual. Therefore, there must be clear lines of vision between people who are communicating. Furthermore, lipreading is generally only possible up to distances of 20-30 feet, so proximity is also important.[17] Congregations will want to consider: Are there clear lines of vision between prayer leaders, congregants, and interpreters? Are podiums, microphones, Shabbat candles, and the like, blocking views? Is seating arranged in such

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[16]Nadia Bolz-Weber, "Seeing the Word: What I Learned About Worship from a Deaf Congregation," *Reformed Worship Magazine*, March 2005, 43.

[17] Jerome D. Schein and Lester J. Waldman, "Introduction," in *The Deaf Jew in the Modern World* (Hoboken: Ktav Pub. House for New York Society for the Deaf, 1986), 8.

a way as to provide lines of vision between congregants as well?

Lighting is another important consideration for the worship space. Dim lighting makes any visual communication difficult. Backlighting is also problematic, as it puts the speaker or signer into silhouette. Additionally, a strong light shining directly from above a speaker can throw distracting shadows on the face.[18]

Articulating Goals for a Worship Environment That Resonates

By using Deaf theater analysis as a framework for creating Jewish worship that resonates with Deaf congregants, we can begin working to actualize the following goals:

1. Through intentional choices of text, we can craft liturgy that speaks to a spectrum of worshipers, whether Deaf or hearing.
2. Through well educated clergy and well prepared interpreters, we can reach across the barriers of language difference and conquer communication challenges.
3. Through education of congregants and clergy, and out-of-the-box creative thinking, we can make the synagogue a place reflective of many cultures - Jewish, American or Canadian, Deaf, and hearing.
4. Through an understanding of the needs of Deaf and hard of hearing congregants, we can utilize our physical worship space in a way that helps, not hinders, prayer.

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[18]Lew Golan, *Reading Between the Lips* (Chicago: Bonus Books, Inc., 1995), 329-330.

CHAPTER 3

CREATING MEANING

In *The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community*, Dr. Ron Wolfson writes, "When I am asked the question 'Is there any one thing that is essential to the creation of a spiritually moving prayer service?' I reply, 'There are *three* things: music, music, music.'" He continues:

> Music gives us the cues to follow the service, triggers our responses to the prayers, provides the beat of the choreography, and underscores the drama of the worship. To my mind, it is the most important component of the worship experience.[1]

As a future cantor, I cannot wholly disagree with Wolfson. Through my training, I have come to see music as the glue that binds worship together, a key determinant in transforming the written word into a prayer experience. Yet I am also aware that if we only consider the aural in order to craft meaningful worship, we shut out the Deaf population. With a framework in place for creating worship that will resonate with Deaf congregants, the next step is to examine the roles music plays in worship and begin thinking of ways to fulfill those same goals, but through visual means.

Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman and Cantor Benjie-Ellen Schiller have both written about the roles music plays in worship. In *The Art of Public Prayer: Not for Clergy Only*, Hoffman outlines five functions music plays in worship: it "1. enhances the message of the words; 2. evokes associations of the flow of time in the sacred calendar; 4. bonds together the worshiping community; 4. stirs our emotions; and 5. helps us know

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[1]Ron Wolfson, *The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community* (Woodstock, Vt.: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2006), 96-97.

the presence of God."[2] Schiller, in "The Many Faces of Jewish Sacred Music," expounds upon ways in which music evokes four distinct moods in worship: it inspires awe with moments of *majesty*, draws us inward with moments of *meditation*, connects us to those around us through moments of *meeting*, and moves things along to create and maintain *momentum*; in addition, music connects us to the past through moments of *memory*.[3] Because of the overlap between Hoffman's "bonds together the worshiping community" and Schiller's idea of "music of meeting," I will consider these two as one. Therefore, we have nine avenues through which to explore ways of crafting meaningful worship, overlaying the visual on top of the aural.

Enhancing the Message of Words

Music enhances prayer texts in a number of ways. Composers of liturgical music "try to outfit the text in question with an appropriately expressive sound."[4] For some composers, this involves word painting, expressing the meaning of *individual words* through melody (one example is the use of a trill on the word "shofar"). Other composers may aim to illuminate the *general message* of a text through music. In both cases, the music and the text partner in a synergetic relationship, bringing deeper meaning than either the text or the music could forge without the other.

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[2]Lawrence A. Hoffman, *The Art of Public Prayer: Not for Clergy Only*, 2d ed. (Woodstock, Vt.: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 1999), 199 [numbers added].

[3]Benjie-Ellen Schiller, "The Many Faces of Jewish Sacred Music," in *Engaging the Congregational Voice*, by Merri Lovinger Arian (Synagogue 2000/Synagogue 3000, 2000), 19-21; available from http://www.synagogue3000.org/documents/PrayerCurriculumUnitSix.pdf.

[4]Hoffman, *Art of Public Prayer*, 185.

To begin to address the issue of enhancing a text's message not only aurally, but visually as well, let us turn to the words of a De'VIA artist, Paul Johnston. Like many Deaf artists, his work addresses the question of what music means to a Deaf person; additionally, he includes a classic element of De'VIA art, an emphasis on hands. He writes:

> I am infatuated with the shape and gestures of the hand. Some of my work serves as an analogy: the pleasure that music brings to hearing people is equivalent to the pleasure which beautifully expressed hand signs and gestures bring to Deaf people.[5]

For Deaf congregants, then, the message of prayer texts might be enhanced through particularly beautiful, expressive, and artistic signing. Just as music can bring a text to live aurally, sign language can interface with liturgical texts to bring them to life visually – such as this example from Bread of Life Lutheran Church for the Deaf:

> In hearing Lutheran churches the gospel reading is announced by the singing of the Alleluia, after which the pastor says, "The Gospel of our Lord is written in the [chapter and verse] of the [book]," to which the congregation responds, "Glory to you, O Lord."
>
> At Bread of Life, the Bible faces the congregation, opened to the gospel reading. As Pastor Dorothy stands aside the altar she places her hands in one fist over another on the open page of the Bible, then, as her hands come out from the Bible toward the congregation, her fingers flutter, opening up the Word of God to the congregation. The action is striking. The gospel is hardly able to be contained as it jumps out to meet the congregation.[6]

The pastor at Bread of Life could have simply translated the English introduction to the gospel reading directly into everyday conversational ASL, but instead drew from the language's inherent expressiveness to create a particularly expressive, and perhaps deeper

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[5]Paul Johnston, artistic description of "Poetic Hand I" and "Poetic Hand II," in *Elements of a Culture: Visions by Deaf Artists* (First National Touring Exhibit of Deaf Culture Art, 1999-2000), 16.

[6]Nadia Bolz-Weber, "Seeing the Word: What I Learned About Worship from a Deaf Congregation, *Reformed Worship Magazine*, March 2005, 43.

and more meaningful, introduction.

Sign language can express more than just the meaning of a text; poetic sign language devices can be used to mirror the poetic in liturgy. Consider, for example, the translation of texts such as *Ashamnu* or *Ashrei*, that are structured as acrostics. ASL "ABC stories" are based on a similar concept as acrostics. The fingerspelled English alphabet forms the structure of ABC stories; however, the words themselves are not fingerspelled. An ABC story moves through the alphabet, from A to Z, with a given letter functioning as the handshape for a given sign.[7] For example, for the letter B, one could sign GOD, because that sign utilizes the B handshape. By bringing in this and other elements of Deaf poetry into worship, we can provide a richer experience of text.

Evoking Associations of the Flow of Time in Our Sacred Calendar

In the Ashkenazi musical tradition, which most Reform synagogues follow, at least to some degree, the passage of time throughout the calendar year is reflected in liturgical musical settings. Certain modes are associated with specific times, and different musical motifs are specified for each holiday. These modes and motifs help ground congregations in the Jewish calendar, helping make Rosh Hashanah evening feel like Rosh Hashanah and not *N'ilah* or Shabbat morning or Sukkot.

If we look for a visual parallel already in practice in the synagogue, common convention surrounding the High Holy Days provides a good model. At that time of year, one only needs to step into the sanctuary to know we are in the *aseret y'mei*

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[7]Co-director Anita Small of the Deaf Culture Centre, interview by author, 26 July 2007; John W. Adams and Pamela S. Rohring, *Handbook to Service the Deaf and Hard of Hearing* (New York: Elsevier Academic Press, 2004), 85-87.

t'shuvah ("ten days of repentance"). The Torah scrolls are dressed in white, the clergy wear white robes, and the *bimah* flowers are often white as well. We even pray from a different book (though its cover is not white). Just as certain musical motifs ground hearing congregants in the specific time of year in which we find ourselves, visual patterns developed to associate with particular times of the year can do the same for Deaf congregants. These will certainly also prove effective for hearing congregants, as the vast majority of them are "seeing" as well.

Synagogues might try to build upon the example of the High Holy Days' white theme by connecting each of the other holidays with a color. Congregations can have a different set of Torah covers for each holiday, and in congregations where the clergy wear robes, these too can be changed to reflect a particular holiday's color scheme. Additionally, color schemes can be reflected in the paper on which the order of service is printed, in the *bimah* flowers, and other sanctuary visuals, depending upon the congregation.

Another visual approach is the prominent display of time-appropriate symbols. Most times throughout the Jewish year are connected with some physical object: two candlesticks on Shabbat; braided candle, spice box, and *kiddush* cup for Havdalah; *shofar* on the High Holy Days; *lulav* and *etrog* on Sukkot; *chanukiah* on Chanukkah, *M'gilat Esther* on Purim. Jewish music provides a different tune for *Mi Chamochah* for the various Jewish festivals, and musically learned congregants know to listen for the motif that fits the time of year; so too, congregations can establish a physical space in the sanctuary - a table on the *bimah*, for example - on which to display the object associated with any particular time; congregants can learn to look there to be grounded visually in

the Jewish calendar.

One additional method of creating a visual cue to indicate time is to create a different tapestry for each holiday and Shabbat. Each tapestry can be displayed at the appropriate time in the calendar, at the entrance to the sanctuary or inside it in order to establish visual patterns associated with particular times of the year. Displaying banners and tapestries is common in churches; Catholic supply companies regularly advertise such time-related banners – for Christmas and Advent, for example – as well as for life cycle events such as baptisms and weddings.[8] Mass produced banners and tapestries are not readily available for synagogues. But designing or creating tapestries together as a congregation can serve the double purpose of creating meaningful artworks and helping to bond the community together.

Bonding the Community, Through Moments of Meeting

Schiller describes moments of meeting as those times

> in which we become aware of the larger community and literally meet other souls through prayer. When all voices join to create a resounding chorus of prayer, when every voice contributes its sound to the whole, a new expression of prayer is born. Even among strangers, we sense both a personal and a spiritual connection with those with whom we pray.[9]

The obvious parallel to congregational *singing* is congregational *signing*. This presents definite challenges, as most hearing congregants are not familiar with American Sign Language, and it is hardly feasible to expect all congregants to learn it. However, congregations can work toward the goal of bringing ASL, at least to some extent, into the

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[8]Slabbinck Online Store (1997-2007); available from http://www.slabbinck.com/catalog/search.phtml?navid=37&artnr=766&artshowmethod=showall.

[9]Schiller, "Many Faces of Jewish Sacred Music," 20.

congregational repertoire, building over time.

Synagogues with a majority of hearing congregants might consider starting by following the example of the Hebrew Association of the Deaf in New York City and their student rabbi, Rachael Bregman. At one Shabbat service, the student rabbi read a poem based on Psalm 150 while an interpreter translated the poem into ASL. Whenever the word *hal'luyah* (or a derivative thereof) came in the text, the entire community joined in signing the word.[10] Hearing congregants can be taught signs for words that repeat often throughout a service, such as *hal'luyah*, *amen*, and *shalom* so that whenever these words occur in the liturgy the whole congregation can join together in sign. Fortunately, liturgy is naturally redundant. A limited set of words recur regularly, allowing a lot to be accomplished with just a very few signs.

Another possibility for facilitating moments of communal worship in ASL lies in forming sign-language choirs. This would facilitate moments of connection between members of the choir – whether Deaf or hearing – just as members of a singing choir bond through the shared act of making music. Sign-language choirs work to learn ASL translations of prayers and practice signing them in unison. Often, these choirs sign during musical settings of prayers, providing visual rhythm to match the music. Connecting sign language and music in this way is especially useful because it provides a path of connection between Deaf and hearing congregants.

The use of percussive instruments in worship can also connect Deaf and hearing people during musical moments. A drum's vibrations allow a Deaf person to literally feel the pulse of the music, providing context to any swaying, clapping, or dancing in the

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[10]Shabbat service at the Hebrew Association of the Deaf, New York City, 15 December 2007.

congregation and thereby engaging Deaf congregants as part of those actions. Additionally, a bass instrument's vibrations are felt, providing another avenue of connection with the worship.

As was mentioned in Chapter Two, ensuring clear lines of vision between congregants and the *bimah* is vital, as it permits Deaf congregants to take in all communication. It also allows for eye contact between congregants and clergy, in general. Catching another person's gaze is a moment of meeting in any situation - all the more so with Deaf congregants, as eye contact is an important aspect of visual communication.[11] Eye contact may seem small to clergy, but it is critical when creating moments of meeting with Deaf congregants.

Moments of meeting can also be forged, among Deaf and hearing congregants, through the sharing of personal stories. Some Reform congregations, as part of the Union for Reform Judaism's Just Congregations program, directed by Rabbi Jonah Pesner, are beginning to look toward the faith-based community organizing (FBCO) model as a means for rallying community around issues of social justice. The faith-based community organizing model is based on the idea that when people engage in conversation, learning what matters to each other, deep relationships are established. The community that is forged through this process will be inspired to join together, working to make change in the community around issues of mutual concern.

> FBCO groups get people talking to each other and building relationships . . . . These new relationships cause a powerful transformation at several levels. As isolation crumbles, a new community emerges made up of diverse people who have shared their stories with each other. These new relationships often bring life to congregations where people have prayed together for years without ever really getting to know each other. And this is only the beginning: when people are in

[11]Adams and Rohring, *Deaf and Hard of Hearing*, 65.

> relationship and have identified common values and interests, they are able to take joint actions to make civic change.[12]

Faith-based community organizing typically uses what is called "one-to-one" meetings to construct relationships, on which concerted work together later can be built. These conversations often occur in home environments, but they can also happen in synagogue within the worship service (albeit in a truncated version due to time constraints). Clergy can build this time into the service, perhaps following the Torah reading, providing a question to guide conversations. Questions might include: What are your hopes and dreams? What are your values? What are the things you cannot live without? What significant life experiences brought you to where you are today?[13] They might flow directly from the *parshah* – "What personal *t'rumah* do you want to donate to the world?" or "*Vayikra* means 'calling.' How are you called in your life to act in the world?" By sharing their deepest thoughts about themselves congregants connect with one another, creating meeting in ways that should only grow with time. Conversation about what drives each of us also functions particularly well in breaking down stereotypes and allowing hearing people and Deaf people to feel comfortable initiating dialogue with one another.

Stirring Our Emotions

Sometimes music touches us, in a way that is only possible through the arts.

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[12]The Jewish FundS for Justice, *Faith-Based Community Organizing: A Unique Social Justice Approach to Revitalizing Synagogue Life* (New York: The Jewish FundS for Justice, n.d.), 6.

[13]Jews For Racial and Economic Justice, *One-to-One Fact Sheet*, distributed at a Jews for Racial and Economic Justice training, New York, 19 February 2006.

Therefore, when considering the limitations of music with regard to Deaf congregants, we must look toward bringing in non-aural arts as well: dance, in particular. As a performative and abstract art form, dance has the power to stir emotions in a way not unlike music. Participating in a dance draws one into the mood of the piece, just as singing or playing an instrument can. Even as an observer, one may be affected emotionally – by a certain turn of a dancer's head or some other movement – just as a certain melodic phrase or rhythm may touch one's emotions, whether or not one is actually singing.

Dance in worship might be performed by all present or presented just by a few congregants. It can be choreographed ahead of time or created during the service. It could take the form of Sign Dance (described in Chapter One) or may draw from other western or folk dance forms.

Modern dance techniques can be especially useful for dance in worship. Choreographer Liz Lerman in particular has worked to bring dance and prayer together by utilizing modern dance techniques she developed for use in her own dance company, and then used experimentally with Temple Micah in Washington, D.C. and in national gatherings for Synagogue 2000 [now 3000]. The technique Lerman calls "spontaneous gesture" can be a helpful tool in creating dances with hearing and deaf congregants who communicate orally. Spontaneous gesture begins by asking a question; in the worship setting, perhaps related to a particular prayer. Next, a designated observer carefully watches and collects the gesticulations that accompany the answer.

> When people talk, they almost always gesture with their hands. If observed carefully, this expressive movement can be coaxed into a choreographic form. . . . the impulse to gesture often comes into play with strong emotion or urgency to communicate. So in addition to being of inherent interest, the gestures can also be

> a signal for the aspect of the story or description that is most significant for the speaker.[14]

Gestures collected from several people are then strung together to create the dance.

For Deaf people using sign language, spontaneous gesture can be adapted and combined with the technique "theme and variation." The process would begin in the same way: with a question. As congregants answer, the designated observer might note whether there was one sign that particularly stood out, perhaps because it was repeated, because there was strong feeling expressed in it, or for some other reason. Participants can then work with that sign – the theme – and abstract it in some way, perhaps by changing the handshape or movement, and in that way create variations. The variations collected from several people can be strung together, in the same way as above, to create the dance. Entire congregations could work this way, thus demonstrating the richness of sign language for hearing people as well.

Helping Us Know the Presence of God

> Musicians the world over testify to the innate spiritual power of music. We should not be surprised, therefore, to find that music used in worship invokes a certain sense of the presence of God. . . .God is known in more than one way. Different kinds of music establish different modes of openness to the many sides of God.[15]

Clergy can help congregants know God differently by drawing from a diversity of musical models within any given service. This connection to the Divine may also be realized through forging relationships with other congregants, being in dialogue with the

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[14]Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, "Spontaneous Gesture," available from http://www.danceexchange.org/toolbox/tool.asp?Line=4.

[15]Hoffman, *Art of Public Prayer*, 192.

deep implications of a text, engaging in an emotionally stirring dance, or abandoning oneself to the uniqueness of Jewish sacred time.

Inspiring Awe with Moments of Majesty

The mood of majesty "evokes within us a sense of awe and grandeur."[16] The majesty inherent in some of our liturgical texts is usually reflected in music or some other expression of "awe and grandeur." Sign language has its own panoply of register, so a text can be signed in a way that expresses its mood. To achieve a feeling of majesty, an interpreter can sign in a more formal, grand manner. Signs can be exaggerated and executed larger than usual to create a heightened sense of grandeur. Additionally, the body language (and even the face) of the clergy can do much to transmit a feeling of majesty.

Drawing Inward with Moments of Meditation

Moments of meditation draw us inward; they are contemplative. They may be called for by the obvious meaning of certain texts (*Elohai N'shamah*, for example) or in response to the function a text plays in worship (*Oseh Shalom*, bringing us out of the silent prayer, for example). Like creating the mood of majesty, above, the signing style employed can foster a feeling of inwardness and meditation, but here the signing would be smaller and gentler. And, just as the body language of the clergy can transmit a feeling of majesty, so too can it convey a meditative mood.

In looking toward creating moments of meditation, we can consider meditation

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[16]Schiller, "Many Faces of Jewish Sacred Music," 19.

itself. Many congregations already bring meditation into worship, but the usual manner, closing one's eyes, completely closes off a Deaf person from the experience. Giving the option of keeping one's eyes open sends the message that meditation is open to all congregants, not just the hearing.

Many congregations that do not explicitly include meditation in worship might include the singing of *niggunim* as part of their service. *Niggun* functions in a similar way to meditation: the melodic phrases are generally short and all of the same length, thereby serving the same function of regulating breath that many meditations do. Prayer leaders might consider providing a breathing meditation option simultaneous to the singing of a *niggun*, using the same breathing pattern for both. Hand motions could be used to indicate when to breathe in and when out.

Connecting to the Past Through Moments of Memory

Moments of memory connect us to past experiences, whether personal or communal. With regard to the former, each congregant comes with a different past, so it is difficult to point to any single particular prayer practice as prompting similar memories.

Congregations can reflect upon their worship to see if any existing prayer practices might be evocative of collective memory. For example, including a processional and recessional in services might create moments of memory for congregants who grew up in Classical Reform congregations. Alternatively, congregations can consider creating traditions within the community; when repeated over time, these can grow to become moments of memory. Such practices might take the form

of providing a time in the service when congregants can share recent joys, or might involve inviting all children up to the *bimah* to help lead *motzi* (as was the custom in my home synagogue as I was growing up).

Moving Things Along, Maintaining Momentum

> Some music functions as the "connective tissue" of the liturgy, carrying the worship from one section to the next . . . . "connectors," such as the Chatzi Kaddish, fulfill an important task – they create momentum, so that one prayer flows smoothly into the next.[17]

Music often keeps or builds momentum by creating a moment of transition within worship. At these times, clergy should ask themselves, "Are we creating a smooth visual transition in addition to the musical transition?" Singing *Al Sh'losha D'varim* may distract hearing congregants from the mild chaos that might accompany a Torah service (Who's supposed to open the ark? Where does the Torah cover go after the scroll is undressed?) but a Deaf congregant will have no such distraction. Therefore, it is helpful to plan the choreography of moments of transition.

The idea of "moving along" should impact the way we think about the words signed, not just spoken and sung. An interpreter will often be a few seconds behind the aural message. Therefore, it is necessary to plan for brief pauses in between prayers so that the interpreter may finish each section with integrity.[18]

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[17]Ibid., 20.

[18] Adams and Rohring, *Deaf and Hard of Hearing*, 163

CONCLUSION

This paper provides a starting point to help congregations and clergy think about how to better serve – or begin to serve – Deaf congregants. By learning about Deaf communities and identity, establishing a framework for creating a worship environment that "resonates," and creating a visual layer of meaning in prayer, clergy can begin the important work of welcoming Deaf Jews as valued members of our communities.

While there is not currently much literature exploring this subject in the Jewish context, there is literally a "world" to learn about the Deaf community and Deaf culture. There is also much majority-hearing congregations can learn from Deaf synagogues and churches. Further delving into this subject would involve more interaction with Deaf congregations and congregants than has been possible for this study.

Just as there is no one musical program that can be meaningful for all congregants and congregations, so it is not possible to provide a single path that will automatically touch all Deaf congregants. This paper provides a starting place, however, both practically, in terms of what to do, and cognitively, in terms of how to think. Clergy should at least be aware that Deaf congregants exist, that Deaf culture is deep and rich, and the both the Deaf and the hearing can benefit from interaction between them

APPENDIX

GUIDE TO WORKING WITH AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS

Sign-language interpreters can be partners in executing meaningful worship with Deaf congregants. Thorough preparation is necessary in order to maximize potential for a meaningful experience. This appendix provides general information on working with interpreters as well as specific considerations for the Jewish worship setting.

Role of the Sign Language Interpreter

The primary, and most obvious, role of a sign-language interpreter is to interpret, or translate, the spoken word into sign language. For most Reform congregations, the specific language will be ASL. Interpreting is distinguished from transliterating, in that transliterating is from English to an English-related manual communication system, such as Signed English.[1]

Interpretation goes beyond translating from one language to another. An interpreter also communicates environmental cues so that Deaf people will be party to all the sound-sensory information necessary to be equal participants.[2] For example, a Deaf congregant would not know why nothing is happening on the *bimah* unless the interpreter explains that the organ is playing a prelude. Or, a Deaf person might wonder why, say, in the middle of the Torah service, everyone in the congregation suddenly turns his or her

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[1]John W. Adams and Pamela S. Rohring, *Handbook to Service the Deaf and Hard of Hearing* (New York: Elsevier Academic Press, 2004), 67.

[2]Sharon Neuman Solow, *Sign Language Interpreting: A Basic Resource Book* (Silver Spring: The National Association of the Deaf, 1981), x.

head; the interpreter could share what happened: someone's cell phone just rang. (Worship leaders should remember that Deaf congregants who rely on reading lips will miss these same environmental cues, but will not have an interpreter to communicate them.)

Considering Space

As was mentioned previously (Chapter Two), establishing clear lines of vision is an essential consideration of worship space. Clergy can work with interpreters to determine the best place for the interpreter to stand or sit to maximize visibility. Choreography of the service should be taken into consideration so that movement around the *bimah* or the sanctuary will not interfere with lines of vision between congregants and the interpreter, and so that the interpreter will not be in the way of necessary movement. Ideally, the interpreter should be situated in front of a neutral wall or backdrop, and not directly in front of a light source.[3]

If Deaf congregants decide that seating the interpreter on the *bimah* will be most effective for clear communication, doing so can send a powerful message about the equality of Deaf people in the congregation. This can also help bridge cultures and serve to educate hearing congregants about sign language. Even hearing congregants, who do not understand ASL will find the beauty of the language moving and an enhancement to their worship.

Situating the interpreter on the *bimah* will additionally minimize the challenge of divided attention, which occurs when visual and auditory cues come from different

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[3]Ibid., 28-29.

places.[4] Seating the interpreter off the *bimah* might make it difficult for Deaf congregants to take in the interpreter's communication as well as the prayer leaders' visual cues. But seating the interpreter in closer proximity to the clergy allows everything to be in the direct line of vision.

Straight-backed chairs should be provided for the interpreter, should he or she wish to sit at any point during the service. In addition, a music stand or table on which the interpreter can place his or her *siddur*, and any other books and papers, is necessary.

Considering Language and Religion

Generally, a sign-language interpreter will not have the skills necessary to translate from a language other than English. This presents a challenge for Jewish worship, as much of the liturgy is read or sung in Hebrew (sometimes Aramaic, or on occasion Yiddish or Ladino). If no English translation is provided, an interpreter will indicate that the text being read or sung is in Hebrew, and will resume interpreting when the language switches back to English.[5] Thus, if the entire service is to be open to Deaf congregants, interpreters must be supplied with translations of all non-English texts.

Before the service, prayer leaders and interpreters should be in contact to make sure the interpreter is familiar with religious vocabulary appropriate for the Jewish setting. ASL may have different signs, depending on religion or sect, for words that are universal in English, such as Bible.[6] Indeed, one student rabbi shared a story of an

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[4]Adams and Rohring, *Deaf and Hard of Hearing*, 66.

[5]Neuman Solow, *Sign Language Interpreting*, 58.

[6]Ibid., 57.

unfortunate religious ASL vocabulary mix-up. Halfway through the sermon, the sign language interpreter with whom the student rabbi was working realized she had been using the wrong sign for Bible; she had been using the Christian sign, which is made up of the signs JESUS + BOOK. Not knowing ASL herself, the student rabbi had not been aware of the mistake; luckily, the interpreter caught herself and cleared things up.[7]

Clergy and interpreters might also want to discuss ahead of time how to best communicate Hebrew words and phrases, such as "Shabbat" or "bat mitzvah" which are usually not translated even when the rest of the sentence is in English. These words provide a special challenge; Rabbi Daniel Grossman points out that when speaking in English,

> Yom Kippur does not become 'Day of Fasting,' *yamulka* does not become 'skullcap,' and *bar mitzvah* does not become 'youth of responsibility.' When we go from Hebrew to English to sign we lose sight of the word because each translation is an interpretation as well as a language change.[8]

Grossman suggests that Deaf Jews create new signs for "Jewish-Hebrew" words (as he calls them) such as these, but until this happens – and until knowledge of this vocabulary becomes widespread – decisions must be made regarding how to best convey these words. It would be prudent to include Deaf congregants in this discussion so they can decide what will be most effective and meaningful for them.

Providing Texts

Sign-language interpreters are highly skilled and are generally able to translate

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[7]The student rabbi wished to remain anonymous.

[8]Daniel Grossman, "Jewish Signs and Vocabulary," in *The Deaf Jew in the Modern World* (Hoboken: Ktav Pub. House for New York Society for the Deaf, 1986), 62-63.

from English into ASL without the aid of written texts. However, there are certain instances when it may be helpful to provide texts. Most importantly, the interpreter should be provided with a *siddur*, preferably ahead of time so he or she may have sufficient time to prepare the liturgical language. Additionally, providing a copy of the sermon and announcements can be of help, as they may include Hebrew vocabulary. Finally, the interpreter should be given a copy of any names that will be called out, such as for a *mi shebeirach l'cholim* or for *kaddish*.[9] Being able to see the names will allow the interpreter to fingerspell them correctly; additionally, clergy should make an effort not to read through the names too quickly in order to give the interpreter enough time for the fingerspelling.

Signing to Music

Signing to music is a special skill, as a Standard Practice Paper put out by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf explains:

> Specific musical arrangements, lyrics and the meaning behind poetic language require analysis and rehearsal. This level of preparation by the interpreter is necessary in order to render a piece of music or poetic expression that is accurate, artistic, culturally modified and as visually inspiring and insightful as the audio portion. In this specialized setting, preparation by the interpreter requires commitment to ensure quality interpreting, such as matching the music flow, using the correct sign modality, providing an accurate rendition of the frozen text, displaying the appropriate emotions and actions, etc.[10]

In the Jewish setting, the additional challenge of signing to music sung in Hebrew means that extra preparation is needed, both on the part of the cantor and the interpreter.

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[9]*Interpreting in Religious Settings* (Alexandria, Va.: Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, 2000), 2, available from http://www.rid.org/Userfiles/File/pdfs/Standard_Practice_Papers/Drafts_June_2006/Religious_SPP.pdf.

[10]Ibid.

Meeting ahead of time, or providing a recording of the music that will be sung, will be helpful. For texts that will be sung in Hebrew, the interpreter will need not only an English translation, but also a guide for how the English translation matches up with the musical setting. If there is a chorus or any other repeated phrase, that information should be indicated. An interlinear transliteration/translation, though requiring a good deal of time to prepare, would be a helpful tool for the interpreter.

By working together with interpreters in these ways, clergy can help craft worship that is wholly accessible – and meaningful – for Deaf congregants.

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