

Jews are not only the People of the *Book*. Most of us think of ourselves also as the People of the Conversation, the Words, the Argumentative Voices. We Jews are known as a nation of talkers. This means that Jews who are deaf are often marginalized, not expected to participate fully in the noisiness of Jewish discourse.

This special section of *Lilith* explores being deaf and Jewish and female. Meet women leaders in the Deaf community, women filmmakers and the subjects of films about deafness. Women who are calling out the Jewish community on the need for more inclusion; a hearing mother raising deaf children; deaf women telling their own stories.

SUSAN WEIDMAN SCHNEIDER



Deaf Daughters

by JENNIFER ROSNER

EVERY EXPECTANT MOTHER TOTES AROUND HER OWN grab-bag of fears about what might go wrong with her newborn. Prospective parents of Ashkenazi descent have the added “Ashkenazi Jewish Genetic Panel” of prenatal screening tests to contend with, and its specter of potential genetic anomalies.

Though I had other worries as I entered the labor and delivery room, *deafness* was not one of the things I feared for my newborn. Congenital hearing loss was nowhere revealed on the genetic tests we’d had—Jewish or otherwise—and I never imagined that my baby might not hear.

When our daughter failed the newborn hearing screening test, and we warily entered the world of audiologists, otologists, and otolaryngologists (not to mention cardiologists, ophthalmologists, and the others we needed to consult as we sought to rule out the many syndromes involving deafness), I for the first time studied my family tree. To my surprise, I discovered that there were deaf relatives in my family—including two deaf sisters living in an Austrian shtetl in the 1800s—more than five generations before I gave birth to my daughter.

Geneticists looking at my family tree doubted that there could be a pattern traceable from my deaf great-great-aunts to my baby, especially since (with the exception of the aunts’ children) there was no deafness in any of the many, many children in between. But it turned out that the geneticists’ predictions were wrong. And with the arrival of our second child, there are once again two deaf sisters in my family tree.

A CONNEXIN 26 DISORDER IS THE PRECISE GENETIC cause of our daughters’ deafness. (It is now tested for, in the Ashkenazi Jewish Panel for Hearing Loss and Usher Syndrome.)

Through a series of blood tests, we learned that my hearing husband and I each recessively carry a flawed copy of the GJB2/Connexin 26 gene, and we have passed these on to our girls.

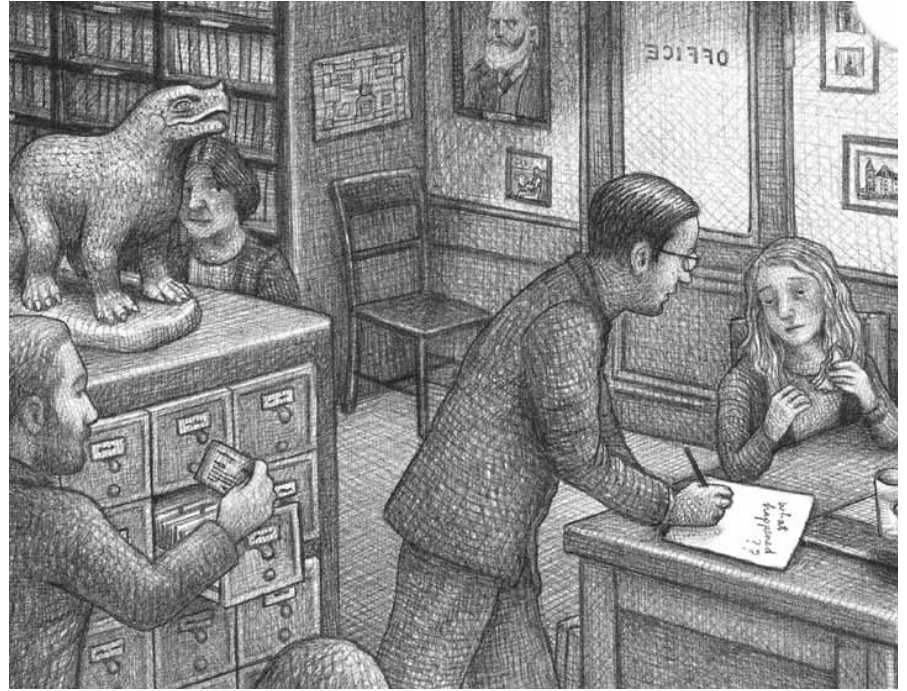
This genetic information has allowed us to rule out the many syndromes involving hearing loss: we no longer need to test our girls’ kidneys for Alport’s, their hearts for Long QT, or their eyes for Usher’s. Connexin 26 is the cause of *non-syndromic* hearing loss.

At the same time, this information has confirmed what my family tree hinted at: that deafness may well continue down the family lines, affecting our children’s children and beyond.

WHEN MY DAUGHTERS WERE VERY SMALL, I GRIEVED for what they couldn’t hear. I could not stop wishing, with every rustle of leaves, every footfall, every whisper from other mothers to their children, that my girls could hear; so they wouldn’t have to startle when I came into a room, so their overly-diligent eyes could relax for a few seconds, so I could share with them the many sounds I cherished. As a hearing mother, sharing experiences with my children and communicating—the very pathways to bonding and intimacy—felt profoundly challenged.

Though my daughters’ congenital deafness came as a shock at first, I was no stranger to the experience of not hearing, and not being heard. My mother had a significant hearing loss throughout her life. Hers was not thought to be genetic, but rather the result of mastoid infections and botched surgeries during infancy. Whatever the cause, my mother’s deafness and a variety of other emotional factors resulted in her retreat. She kept to herself and was only intermittently attentive. Far more often, she tuned me out.

So, while I was consumed as a new mother with my daughters’ hearing challenges, I was also consumed with my *own*. I



hadn't had a model for hearing or being heard in my relationship with my mother, and I gravely questioned my own capacity for hearing my children.

I felt surrounded by deafness. As the daughter of a mother who had difficulty hearing me, both literally and figuratively, I wanted more than anything to find a way, as a mother of deaf daughters, to be close and connected. But *how*? At times my girls' deafness didn't feel like a big gulf, especially when our interaction was largely physical and non-verbal; but at other times—when a lullaby snuck out of me and my grief for all that they couldn't hear spilled out all over again, it felt impassable. I had trained for many years as a singer and longed to share with them the music I loved. I longed to share *everything*, to attain intimacy with my children. Given the disconnectedness of my childhood, I prayed that I *could*.

When I learned of my deaf great-great-aunts, I began scouring historical records and calling relatives in search of information. I urgently wanted to know what life was like for them, how *their* mother managed, and how they fared. Were they integrated into the family, or were they kept apart, shut out? Did others learn to communicate with them? How? In Sign or in some other way?

It was difficult to uncover how they lived day-to-day, so long ago. But I did learn one detail: when they became mothers, they would tie strings from their wrists to their babies at night, so that they could feel a tug when the babies cried and would wake to care for them.

Learning of *this* heritage—my ancestors' innovation of a string, forging a way to hear and to connect to their children—provided me with a model for the intimacy I was seeking. And it taught me that what I pass on to my girls includes much more than the particulars of a genetic code, or even my own particular childhood

The illustrations in this section come from *Wonderstruck*, a new novel in words and pictures by Brian Selznick, the creator of the award-winning book *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, which inspired the acclaimed movie "Hugo." In *Wonderstruck*, the two main characters are deaf.

Selznick says: "While I was working on *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, I saw a documentary called 'Through Deaf Eyes,' about the history of Deaf culture in America. I was especially fascinated by the section about cinema and the new technology of sound, which was introduced to the movies in 1927. Prior to this, both deaf and hearing populations could enjoy the cinema together. Sound movies, for the first time, excluded the deaf. The documentary also featured an interview with a young deaf man who was raised by hearing parents, as many deaf people are. It wasn't until he went to college and met other deaf people that he felt he had really found his community. That fascinated me, and I became intrigued by the idea of looking for one's culture outside of one's biological family."

experiences. What I pass on includes how I choose to frame what's happening—for myself and for them—and how I manage to stay creative and connected through it all. Strings, wrist-to-wrist, in whatever way makes sense at a given time.

IF OUR DAUGHTERS SOMEDAY HAVE DEAF CHILDREN of their own, who knows what parts of their heritage they will borrow from, or what sorts of decisions they'll make? We decided to give our girls access to sound through hearing technology. Since they have different degrees of hearing loss, we chose high-powered hearing aids for one and cochlear implants for her sister. As a result, they are part of a new, emerging hybrid: the hearing deaf. They go to school in the mainstream, suited up with wireless FM systems that allow them to hear their teachers' voices

through the classroom din. They speak to their friends without a hint of accent. A moment I never expected: my older daughter was just chosen as “lead vocalist” in her school’s music program. Another singer in the family!



When we first pondered the communication options we had—using hearing technology and spoken language, or using Sign to communicate—my concern for their ability to *connect* with us and with those around them took a central place in my thinking. And like all parents, I wanted our daughters to have the greatest possible opportunities—to follow their dreams, to find friendship and love, to pursue meaningful work.

Our choices concerning the girls’ communication pathways were not as private as you might think—our circumstance ignited sparks in a political firestorm between those who think it’s best for deaf kids to be aided to hear and to speak, and those who think it’s

So long as their eyes can be open to supplement their ears, they can thrive.

best for them to live Deaf with a capital D, using Sign Language. *Everyone* had an opinion: teachers, audiologists, other parents, Deaf adults, friends and strangers alike. As hearing parents of deaf children, we stood, inevitably, at the center of the highly fractured Hearing/Deaf divide. I found as much vehemence in the Jewish Deaf community as anywhere else, and over the years and on a variety of occasions have experienced feeling ostracized for my choice to use an Oral approach, rather than Sign.

It’s not that I didn’t want our family to learn Sign (in fact, I began learning it immediately after our first daughter was born, and gained some substantial competency in it)—it’s that I didn’t want to be confined to bumbling around in a distant second language as I interacted with my young children. I wanted to communicate fluently and intimately, sharing my heritage and culture via my native language—like other parents do. These were the pathways I knew to connection and closeness.

From the moment the children got access, they *soaked up* sound—speech, music, bird-song, rainfall. They soon began to speak, and in time they were imitating accents, matching pitches, and singing show tunes. Playing whis-per games! Using the telephone! They were *marvels* to hear. We celebrated every utterance—even my older daughter’s exclamation of the word “shit,” with her perfect enunciation of that final (high frequency!) “t.”

The ability they now have to communicate with the 99.98% of the population that uses spoken language

gives them a myriad of options. This ability does not change the fact of their deafness; at any and all times, they can remove the devices that give them access to sound, and they can slip into silence. It is their choice, and I envy them for it. They have not experienced feeling excluded or ostracized by hearing peers. They continue to develop both speaking and Signing skills, and I can only hope that they will also find acceptance in Deaf communities—Jewish and otherwise—for all that they are and all that they share.

OUR DAUGHTERS ARE CURRENTLY ENROLLED IN A Jewish day school. They are happy to be part of a robust, tolerant Jewish community, sharing in this identification as they navigate experiences in which they are often the only children who are deaf and also gluten-free. (They have celiac, another condition prevalent among Ashkenazi Jews!) Their teachers make every effort to assure their access. A rare glitch came early on, during the first days of school, when there was an instruction for the students to cover their eyes during the Sh’m’a; thus preventing my daughters from being able to read the words of the prayer

and follow along! So long as their eyes can be open to supplement their ears, they can thrive.

It doesn’t always come easy—there are breakdowns of technology, of communication, of friendships, of spirit. The days can be tiring; the children must be on the lookout for visual cues and context to fill in the inevitable auditory gaps. At night, they remove their technology and enter what appears to be a peaceful silence. We use sign language then, or we simply rest. At bedtime, I sign for them to go to sleep, hoping they can relax their still scanning eyes. As my signing hand falls and I walk out of their bedroom, I make out an imaginary string, trailing loosely behind me—a sign that I hope connotes our connection. ■

Jennifer Rosner is author of the memoir If A Tree Falls: A Family’s Quest to Hear and Be Heard. She has a Ph.D. in philosophy and is writing a novel about a grandmother and the child she hid during WWII.

In the 2011 documentary film “Deaf Jam,” now making the rounds of film festivals, Deaf Jewish teen Aneta Brodski signs her way into spoken poetry slams. Aneta, whose young brother and American-Russian-Israeli parents are also deaf, uses her whole body to make A.S.L. as expressive as spoken poetry. The film, produced by Judy Lief, shows the rhythmic poetry collaboration between Aneta and Palestinian-American teen poet Tahani, who is hearing. PBS’s Independent Lens, where “Deaf Jam” aired in November, calls the creative partnership of the two young women “a new form of slam poetry that crosses boundaries, cultures, and languages.” deafjam.org



Access to Many Worlds

Changing the Environment for Deaf Jews

by CHANA WIDAWSKI

WHEN BERNICE FARR SHARES HER FAMILY'S STORY, her kvelling could rival the jubilation at any book club, mah jongg game or senior center full of bubbies and savtas. Farr lights up with pride as she conveys her family's rich identity. A third-generation Deaf Jewish woman, she expresses in American Sign Language (A.S.L.), through a video relay service, that she is a Deaf grandmother *and* a Deaf granddaughter. Over 80 years ago, her father founded the Brooklyn Hebrew Society for the Deaf, where she still enjoys High Holiday services and other gatherings with her community of friends.

Tzila Seewald-Russell, 25, an observant Orthodox Jew (see sidebar) smiles as she speaks her story, recalling the first meetings her parents had at her Brooklyn yeshiva, where they responded to concerned questions about her ability to follow along in class. At age 3, the first in her family to not hear, Tzila became the 13th-ever recipient of a cochlear implant, a surgically placed electronic device that provides a sense of sound to a person profoundly deaf or severely hard of hearing. When Tzila said "bless you" to the director of kindergarten and pre 1-A who sneezed, the director became convinced she could accept her. She has spoken English throughout her mainstream education and is now pursuing a Master's degree in social work.

Attorney Alexis Kashar, 45, whose legal practice is focused on civil rights and special education, is now president of the Jewish Deaf Resource Center (J.D.R.C.). She has become one of the public faces for deaf advocacy in the Jewish community, facilitating a panel discussion at the 2012 Reelabilities Film Festival and delivering the *dvar* Torah at a major Jewish funders conference. She is part of a three-generation deaf family, and her deaf parents made it a priority for her to be bilingual in A.S.L. and English. She said her "heart goes out" to people who "fall through the cracks" because they are usually limited to a communication made as opposed to being given full access to language.

These three women highlight in their own lives the vast spectrum of deafness and some common dynamics experienced by deaf Jews, too often marginalized both by religious practice and by the inaccessibility of Jewish community functions. And for women, of course gender plays a role as well.

"We're not all the same!"

When speaking to hearing people, Tzila Seewald-Russell identifies herself as "hard of hearing," recognizing that people make many assumptions about the word "deaf," including thinking that she cannot hear anything at all. In other settings, she says, "I would consider myself deaf (with a lower-case d). Even though I'm mainstreamed—which I'm grateful for because it's allowed me to truly learn about community and to be involved in my synagogue, and I see tremendous value in being present there—I still can't totally fol-

low everything in shul or other large gatherings. I don't feel like I'm a part of Deaf culture, though, because I didn't grow up in it. I didn't learn A.S.L. I often wish I did but I just don't share the language."

Seewald-Russell often feels split between deaf and hearing worlds, and told Lilith how lucky she feels that her parents decided on the implant, immersing her in Jewish schools and camps that wouldn't otherwise have been (fully) accessible for her. She often tries to explain herself to hearing people when she first meets them, so they don't feel uncomfortable. And when people ask her questions, she loves it. "It indicates to me that they are not only interested and interesting, but that they are also interested in getting to know me. It often seems like hearing people don't know anything at all about deafness. Even in social work school, we talk about race, LGBT, but not enough about disabilities." Seewald-Russell and her hearing husband are thrilled about the growing number of film and mainstream television shows featuring deafness and often cite examples from ABC's "Switched at Birth" series to illustrate some of their experiences.

Bernice Farr, on the other hand, is deeply embedded in Deaf culture within the Jewish community and well beyond. She said that no language can express how proud she is that her son and grandchildren attended Gallaudet, the leading university for deaf and hard-of-hearing students. Asked her opinion about cochlear implants for her children or grandchildren, Bernice emphatically

Sign language interpreters? "If synagogues have budgets for flowers they can do this, too."

declared, "They were born Deaf and should stay deaf. We're just Deaf—that's all—the rest of us is the same. I'm happy being Deaf. There's nothing wrong with me." She shared that "implants are cruel because they spoil the experience of being deaf and force people into the mainstream."

Eden Ansell, an audiologist in Toronto, is troubled by the reluctance of many to avail themselves of whatever supports might be available, whether technological or social. For those who do, she said in an interview, "Nothing compares to the reaction on mom's face when suddenly her child can hear more clearly—or when someone who has become depressed and detached because of gradual hearing loss suddenly feels connected again."

Exclusion. And Inclusion

Alexis Kashar grew up with bagels and lox as one of her primary expressions of Judaism. She and her whole family, even her hearing sister, felt excluded from synagogue and Jewish community events. As her own children, who are not deaf, were growing up, she began exploring synagogue communities, first in California and then in Westchester County, New York. Some, overwhelmed by the cost and effort of hiring interpreters, asked her to "part-

ner”—in other words, said Kashar, to share the expense. “It is like telling someone in a wheelchair to bring your own ramp.”

Kashar didn't have interpreters until she reached high school, at which point she recognized what a difference they make. “I was able to get subsidized interpreters everywhere—from law school to law practice. Everywhere, except for synagogues—my own religion! I could become an attorney, a mother or anything else I wanted to be—but not a Jew. How could my 14-year-old daughter have higher status in the community than I did?” Since the U.S. Americans with Disabilities Act doesn't cover religious institutions, synagogues do not have to make accommodations. (while Jewish community centers and federations must).

Kashar felt it was important to attend her daughter's bat mitzvah retreat, together with her classmates' parents, and felt fortunate she could afford to split the interpreting costs. Naomi Brunnlehrman, co-founder and executive director of the Jewish Deaf Resource Center—and a rare trilingual interpreter in English, Hebrew and A.S.L.—enabled Kashar to take part in this important family experience. When her daughter was given the Torah portion she would read at her bat mitzvah, it happened to include the verse from *Leviticus 19:14*, translated as “You shall not curse a deaf person. You shall not place a stumbling block before a blind person.” This was all new to Alexis Kashar, and she became increasingly energized about practicing Judaism.

In December, as president of the J.D.R.C., she addressed, in sign language, 175 major philanthropists and professionals at Advance: The Ruderman Jewish Special Needs Funding Conference, sharing the podium with Academy Award winner Marlee Matlin, who is also deaf and Jewish. Kashar told of feeling like a beggar for services within her own community. She emphasized the importance of providing communication access, which includes having a hearing amplification system, captioning and/or interpreters, so that Jewish

programs are accessible, and she announced that funders have the power to tell organizations to make this a priority. “If synagogues have budgets for flowers, they can do this, too. They won't just be getting me—they'll be getting my whole family.”

The effects of both exclusion and inclusion are very real. Kashar was approached many times by signers representing Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormon Church. She learned firsthand that other faiths were well ahead of Judaism in reaching out to the deaf. The phenomenon of proselytizing and converting deaf Jews is common, and there is now educational programming to prepare Jewish individuals on how to respond when approached. Moreover, some who are deaf and Jewish may feel a greater connection to Deaf culture than to the Jewish community, and may be willing to switch religions for life partners or simply in order to be in a community where they are more explicitly welcomed.

A Religious Take on Deafness

Whether because they have inherited an Askenazi gene for deafness or are deaf for some other reason, there have always been deaf Jews. We know this at least in part from the fact that Jewish law has in some cases appeared to discriminate against the deaf. The assumption, when ancient law was being codified, seemed to be that people who could not hear also could not understand, and could not be full participants in Jewish ritual. Some Jewish texts are now being reread and reinterpreted so that deaf Jews are included in ritual obligations from which they'd formerly been excluded. Take the signal Jewish prayer, the Sh'ma, translated as an injunction to “hear.” Does it not apply to a deaf person? Is the prayer really about hearing? Or is it saying, “Listen. Pay Attention. Be Aware.”

And then there is the religious obligation to hear the shofar being blown. With a hand on the horn, is it not enough for one to *feel* its vibrations?



And the obligation to hear the megillah being read aloud at Purim. What if it is interpreted in A.S.L., and deaf congregants experience the vibrations of the noise and raucousness in the synagogue?

In 2011 Rabbi Pamela Barmash of the Conservative movement's Rabbinical Assembly authored a response to the question of whether or not a deaf person can serve as a witness to a mar-

Whose problem is it? The individuals who aren't getting access? Or the community?

riage or conversion. She concluded that "sign language is a means of communication equal in sophistication to oral language. This means that sign language can convey all the information required in halachic matters such as a marriage or conversion ceremony. The deaf therefore can serve as witnesses."

The Jewish Community Opens Some Doors

One synagogue is a model for how to welcome deaf Jews. Bram Weiser coordinates an interpreter program at Manhattan's Town and Village Synagogue, where a special fund created in honor of his 40th birthday has enabled fully interpreted Shabbat morning services once a month in addition to other programming. Weiser, who is not deaf, noted that Deaf community attendance goes far beyond deaf individuals—often including student interpreters. "The ripple effect of this is amazing. One of the greatest challenges to synagogues providing interpretation is that there is such a small pool of interpreters who are also versed in Hebrew and Judaism." While Weiser can now add himself to this short list, he sees the interpreted services at Town and Village as an opportunity to encourage the development of Judaically minded interpreters.

The congregation's Purim celebration includes interpretation of the full megillah reading, skits, remarks and anything else that takes place, with the full support of Rabbi Laurence Siebert. Programs are also held for Yom Hashoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day and other occasions. Although there are deaf congregations, such as Hebrew Seminary of the Deaf in Skokie, Illinois, Town and Village is one of just a small number of mainstream synagogues offering this inclusivity.

Including deaf Jews is now on the agenda of the continent's largest Jewish federation. Anita Altman, deputy managing director of government relations and external affairs at UJA-Federation of New York, is a longtime advocate on disability and access issues. Recently she spurred the creation of a deaf interpreter fund, modeled after a similar effort in Washington, D.C., which provides challenge grants for organizations to hire interpreters, a door-opener for synagogues and Jewish organizations to begin making deaf and hard-of-hearing Jews feel welcome and valued. At a March event on "Women,

Clothing and Religion" at the Jewish Theological Seminary, the fund made possible the presence of two sign language interpreters for the day-long program.

Chantal Lowe, also of UJA-Federation of New York, convened key organizations in the deaf community in a Deaf and Hard of Hearing Workgroup. At that initial meeting in September, Bernice Farr and others signed with fervor, indicating that interpreted prayer services weren't the only accommodation needed for deaf Jews, pointing out that nothing can compare to actually having religious services in their own language, led by their rabbi, who can sign. The discussions focused not only on funding but also on the imperative for advocacy, particularly on employment and legal issues

One excellent outcome: UJA-Federation of New York announced in February that all programs it sponsors will provide sign language interpretation upon request. Nonetheless, interpretation isn't all that's needed. As Tzila Seewald-Russell pointed out, sign language interpretation does not sufficiently serve the needs of people like her, with cochlear implants, who do not sign. Following up on the Workgroup, Lowe said that the main questions we should be asking are "Whose problem is it? The individuals who aren't getting access? Or the community's? Where does the responsibility lie?"

What about Deaf Women?

While some are exploring how to meet the special needs of deaf Jews, there are also special concerns for deaf women. Research shows that of the four million women who are abused each year by their partners, 500,000 are deaf, deaf-blind or hard of hearing. These crimes are among the most under-reported in America.

A deaf woman may suffer abuse specifically because of her deafness. Her abuser, who may also be her interpreter, may isolate her by restricting access to other deaf people for friendship and support or by monitoring her communication devices. She may suffer verbal abuse in the form of constant criticism of her language skills or by intimidating use of body language and A.S.L. A hearing abuser may block the use of sign language in the house, prevent her from communicating with her children, or take away a TTY device, hearing aid or hearing dog—or may simply turn off the lights, preventing communication by writing, signing or lip-reading. Physical violence can include binding her hands, gagging her or putting tape over her mouth if demands are not met. Abuse may also be in the form of turning away to speak to someone about her so she can't read lips or forcing her to agree to what is being said even if she doesn't understand it.

The small size and close-knit nature of deaf communities often makes it harder to keep plans secret and move away or hide from abusive partners. Similar to immigrant groups with limited English proficiency, deaf individuals encounter linguistic barriers that may seem insurmountable. Emergency 911 operators may hang up on a deaf caller. And other services from domestic violence agencies, police and courts might not feel fully accessible unless there is a deaf advocate in place, or staff who sign or are familiar with deaf culture. Shelters need other accommodations, like buzzers that light up and TTY phones. Deaf Jewish women may have the additional need for a shelter with a kosher kitchen and staff who understands their other religious concerns.



Daisy Martinez, a deaf advocate for those experiencing domestic violence and other crimes, emphasizes the importance not only of advocacy, but of qualified interpreters. She has countless stories to share of those who rely on their batterer or other family members for interpretation, a dynamic highly problematic in instances of abuse.

“Deafness makes us more vulnerable,” commented Tzila Seewald-Russell. “Someone has to have your back.”

Hearing. And Listening.

Anita Altman spoke for many when she said, “Hopefully people recognize that the community is now making a good faith effort not only to make accommodations for deaf Jews, but also that they are wanted at the table.”

Taking the time to hear the experiences of our neighbors, colleagues and co-religionists who are deaf or hard of hearing can provide us with much needed lessons about our own hearing. Are we fully hearing the voices of all who surround us and comprise our communities? Are our communities accessible to all? If not, do we have any idea what we’re missing?

Time and again both professionals and the deaf Jews they serve point out that the Jewish community has been missing out

The late, iconic Jewish folk-singer Debbie Friedman had A.S.L. interpreters onstage at her sold-out concerts and community appearances from the 1990s onward. Here, we see her with Ej Cohen.



on the valuable contributions that could come from “talented, smart people who are just like us, except for their hearing.” ■

Chana Widawski, a social worker, is a bicycle commuter and story collector who works with survivors of abuse and violence, leads educational travel programs around the globe, and works as a writer and consultant.

PHOTOS: NATHAN SERVI

Speaking Up

TZILA SEEWALD-RUSSELL, 25, answers *Lilith's* emailed questions about being deaf, a student, and a newlywed.

I grew up attending an all-girls yeshiva—Shulamith, in Brooklyn—and I didn’t have any experience in speaking to boys, except for my four brothers and my best friend’s brothers. A boy I grew up with told me boys in his camp bunk thought I was very weird. I was very hurt, and I thought that it was for two reasons. I was a tomboy and didn’t care about makeup and fashion and I am deaf/hard of hearing. I didn’t date until I was 20 years old. I remember one of my classmates knew a boy from my camp and IM’ed him asking if he knew me. He replied, “Oh the deaf girl.” I was so hurt! Not because I am deaf, but all he saw me as was as the deaf girl—not a human being or a girl—and my friend gave me that “pity” look! I hate the pity look. Look, I don’t mind

People told me it would be impossible to date a hearing person. Obviously I didn’t listen to what they said.

if you describe me as the deaf girl, but try to add something else that describes me to show that I am Tzila Seewald! If my *friends* describe me as “a deaf girl” I am fine with that, because that person accepts me as a human being. But a stranger—no way!

I wasn’t always proud being deaf. My parents tell this story to show what kind of a person I was when I was younger (and I regret that). When I was fourth grade, some deaf organization asked me if I wanted to learn sign language. I replied with chutzpah. “No way! That is for deaf people!” I was trying so hard

to get rid of the label “deaf” on my forehead. I wanted to be accepted by hearing people!

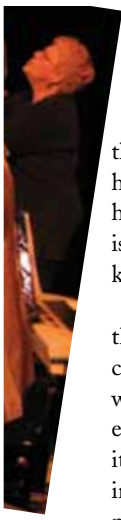
I gave mixed messages growing up. On one hand, I worked very hard not get labeled deaf but on the other hand, I was damn proud of my cochlear implant and my deafness. It was a confusing identity. One advantage of being the only girl who is deaf or hard of hearing in my school was that everyone knew my name. I was unique. I felt very popular. And I knew my principal and teachers stood behind me.

When I entered college, I was confused and felt very deaf!! Nobody knew me. I didn’t feel I fit into the norm... until a few months later my male cousin introduced me to his friends. I

will always be in his debt. These friends included me with open arms without looking down on me! But I noticed a difference between my college social group and high school. I was tired of trying to

be like a hearing person. I wanted to know more about Deaf culture. I took sign language classes during college! That was awesome! All those Deaf people. They were SO COOL and so nice. The students in A.S.L. class were hearing people!!! They were drinking in every word (or sign)! That was a huge power shift!

As I was growing up, at my family table my father always translated for me so that I could be included in the conversation, and I loved it. My father likes the concept of feminism. He believed that I should go to college and into a master’s program. He taught me



that men are not allowed to take advantage of me. He taught me how to be independent. He told me that I always have to ask my husband to do things in the house so I don't feel all the pressure is on me to be a superwoman. Because of my father, I am always known as a feminist even if my brothers made fun of me for it.

My mother is a homemaker. When I was a little girl, I always thought my mother didn't share my concept of feminism. I changed my mind about my mother's "feminist" perspective when I was 17 and found out about my Usher's Syndrome. My eye doctor told me the tragic news. I asked my parents to explain it to me again. My father told me the truth, that I might be blind in the future. I was crying hysterically. When we got home, my mother told me, "You can do anything, despite this bad news. Don't let this pull you down! Do what your heart tells you to do. Go out there and become something that you want to be!" That powerful message will stay with me forever.

That leads to my dating life. People told me it would be impossible to date a hearing person, or that it would be very hard to get married because I am deaf. Obviously I didn't listen to what they said, because I have a hearing, normal amazing husband who supports everything I do (even letting me keep my last name for my professional career and letting me hyphenate my last name and his last name in our marriage license).

Finding a Language

CAROLINE BLOCK, a Ph.D. candidate, was introduced to *Lilith* at a recent Jewish event. We invited her to tell a little about her life as a deaf woman in the academy.

At work I think it is fairly clear that I am Jewish. A curly-haired 20-something social scientist from the Semitic suburbs of New York working on a conspicuously Jewish dissertation topic, I know I am the Jew in the room—and so do those around me. I pepper my syllabi with showings of "Yentl" and readings by both of the Boyarins. I am familiar with many competing discourses of "Jewishness," and am often comfortable enough to play with them. I favor those fantastic beaten silver rings from Hadaya in the Old City (you know you've seen them), but if you look closely, mine are engraved with Talmudic axioms more analytical than pious. But sometimes—perhaps not often enough—I express more with my hands than these words etched into silver. This is when I sign, expressing a Deaf identity which I have found far more difficult than Jewishness to translate intelligibly at my place of work.

Of course, one very practical reason not to sign is that the majority of my friends and colleagues are hearing and wouldn't understand. A product of public and private schools, I encountered *being* deaf early, but Deaf *culture* relatively late, and haven't yet reached the same point of comfort that I have in bringing Jewishness into my departmental life. This is not an issue of "passing" at work. People know I don't hear them. They see my hearing aids, show various reactions to the intensity of my gaze when we are speaking. And yet the fact that I am Deaf is somehow literally unsayable in this context. In my second year of grad school I sat through a reading group on the concept of "listening." I mentally combed through the latest uses of Derrida

My matchmaker told my husband-to-be about my deafness. He was very curious what I would be like. He thought I might be ugly, speak very unclearly and have social awkwardness. We went out, and he was so shocked that I was nothing like the stereotype of deaf people. According to him, he thought I was beautiful, and very good at socialization. The first date we went on, he fell in love with me. (For me, on the other hand, it was on our third date). We got engaged within a month!

Before I met my husband, I remember reading about a blind woman who delivered a baby. A social worker came to her at the hospital and asked if she was planning to give her baby away, since a blind mother can't take care of a baby! The mother yelled at the social worker to get out of her room and told her she was keeping her baby! I applauded the mother, but I was sad about this social worker's attitude.

When I was a teenager, I told my friend I never babysat for children besides my nephews. She said, "Yeah right! Even though you don't hear as well as hearing people, you will be more responsible than a regular babysitter. I know you won't watch TV, and you will read a book right next to the door where the baby is sleeping, unlike other babysitters." That's what I did with my nephews! Therefore I knew I would do as well as the rest of mothers, just in a little different way. ■

and language theory I had seen in Deaf Studies collection while sitting with my copy of Jean-Luc Nancy, finding that the latter had nothing very specific to say on the topic. The post-doc who had called the group into existence declared his theoretical interest in hearing aids. I waited....I guess his interest really was only theoretical.

I feel I am left with (and fail to pick up) the burden of making a relevant and positive vocabulary available and assimilable into the everyday language of the academy. While the word may look the same on paper, I worry that the proud identity "Deaf" I see in the Deaf community will translate poorly into the label "deaf" of University administrations, or even on the lips of well-meaning professors and colleagues. In the slippages that take place as the semantic field shifts from one "Deaf" to another, I see the word accrue meanings I don't appreciate and discursive associations I don't want for myself.

And so, in my professional life I haven't spoken extensively about being Deaf. To me it has seemed like a contract: If I don't talk about it, if I take on the burden of communication, I allow people to know that I am Deaf without their having to think too hard about it, or feel too uncomfortable with it. But of course this is circular. People are uncomfortable imagining that I am Deaf because they don't have a vocabulary for it. And I should take some responsibility for not having provided one for them in the way that I have for the many overlapping Jewish spheres I inhabit. Because perhaps here, too, there is room for play. ■