

Pesach: Inspiring Us to Create Freedom for Others

Pesach, our celebration of freedom, brings new hope and a new beginning. And while there is much to celebrate—increasing numbers of synagogues and Jewish organizations are opening their doors and welcoming the Jewish Deaf community to a Friday night service, a Seder, or an Israel celebration—we still have a long way to go.

A majority of Jewish organizations and events are still not accessible to Jews who primarily communicate in ASL. Despite of the popularity of accredited courses in high schools and colleges in ASL and Deaf culture, it is still very difficult for Jews who communicate in ASL to gain access to much of the Jewish world. It seems that even the Torah understood our inclination to think of a Deaf person as less than equal; thus we are commanded in Leviticus not to insult the Deaf.

This lack of accessibility also impacts the families and children of the Jewish Deaf, who often can hear. Increasingly, these Jewish children are losing interest in the Jewish community because when their Deaf parents don't have access, they lose entry as well. Resources spent on outreach programs to these children could be better spent by welcoming Jews who communicate in ASL today instead of investing much larger sums when their hearing children have already become assimilated and disenfranchised adults. This is a serious issue in the Jewish Deaf community and a cause for concern.

As a Jew who is hearing, I have full entry into every aspect of Jewish communal life. When I was in my twenties, I was on the boards of several Jewish groups. In contrast, professional Deaf colleagues in their forties still cannot depend on access to meetings in major Jewish organizations. There are leaders in the Jewish Deaf community prepared to partner creatively with us to solve the numerous challenges confronting the Jewish world today. These Deaf individuals are prepared to contribute to the Jewish community and not simply be recipients of our goodwill. But we must meet them at least halfway. A positive sign is the ASL Interpreting Fund recently created by UJA-Federation of New York, which will reimburse Jewish organizations for part of the expenses of hiring ASL interpreters.

Barack Obama's inauguration was so well attended because we were no longer merely discussing the possibility of an African American having access to our highest office. We actualized that possibility. Can this example inspire us to provide greater access for our Jewish Deaf brothers and sisters so that they, too, can reach their highest potential in the wider Jewish community?

This Pesah, may we be inspired to create access for all of our future leaders. When we create opportunities for others to forge ahead we will have fulfilled our obligation to remember that God gave us our freedom and now we must create freedom for others.

Naomi Brunnlehrman, an alumna of The Graduate School of The Jewish Theological Seminary, has been an advocate for the rights of Jews who are Deaf for thirty years. She is co-founder of the [Jewish Deaf Resource Center](#) and a pioneer in the field of Hebrew to ASL Interpreting.