

For deaf Jews, community, synagogues only slowly opening up

By SUE FISHKOFF
JTA news service

WHITE PLAINS, NY — Alexis Kashar was listening intently to the speaker at a recent Jewish Federation event in this New York City suburb. A closer look revealed that her eyes were trained not on the podium but on Naomi Brunnlehrman, who was seated in front of the speaker translating the lecture into American Sign Language.

Kashar, 43, a longtime civil rights lawyer, has been deaf since birth. Five years ago she and Brunnlehrman, co-founder of the Jewish Deaf Resource Center, asked the UJA-Federation of New York to subsidize ASL interpreters, so Kashar and other deaf Jews in the New York area could take part in Jewish communal events.

In 2009, the Federation began granting \$5,000 a year to the

center.

"I was ready to quit the Jewish community when I met Naomi," said Kashar, who lip reads and speaks but works with an interpreter. Kashar is involved with the Jewish Federation, she says, in an effort to increase services for the Jewish deaf and hard of hearing.

Kashar has three hearing children and was concerned about their Jewish future.

"I realized if I don't have access, my children won't either," she said. "Why would I take them to synagogue when I have to sit there and have no idea what's going on?"

An estimated 50,000 deaf Jews live in the United States, according to advocacy groups for the Jewish deaf. Insiders say most are not involved in Jewish life, mainly because it's just too difficult. There are a handful of synagogues for

the deaf and half a dozen deaf rabbis, and several national and local social and cultural organizations serve the Jewish deaf.

In the past decade, however, mainstream Jewish institutions and synagogues have begun providing ASL interpreters and/or assistive listening devices, allowing deaf and hard-of-hearing Jews to take part in mainstream Jewish life instead of being segregated. The numbers of such pioneering institutions, however, remain quite small, experts say.

"You can count them on one hand," said Jeffrey Lichtman, director of Yachad, the National Jewish Council for Disabilities, which operates under the auspices of the Orthodox Union.

Traditionally, the Jewish deaf were not treated as full members of the community. Their testi-

mony was not accepted in religious courts, and they were exempt from commandments that involve listening, which means they were not called to the Torah or even taught Hebrew. That is changing, but very slowly.

"We don't expect all synagogues to have all their services interpreted, but maybe once a month or for the holidays," Lichtman told JTA. "It's no different from making accommodations for the physically challenged or the blind. If you don't, you are effectively saying these people are not welcome."

Funding for inclusion is increasing mainly because the Jewish deaf community, like the American deaf community in general, is in transition. There is a growing divide between those who are more comfortable in deaf-only settings -- usually older people who grew up signing and comprise the bulk of membership in deaf congregations -- and younger deaf Jews who are more at ease in hearing society.

The change is largely due to technology, especially the prevalence of cochlear implants that permit limited hearing, according to Lichtman.

"Ten years ago the deaf community had a strong component that did not want inclusion. They wanted their own separate community," he said. "Today, people who were not interested in inclusion in the past are now much more interested, especially for their children."

Avi Jacob, 21, wears hearing aids and does not sign.

"We wanted to get him to speak, so he could be included in the typical Jewish world," said his mother, Batya Jacob, program director at Our Way, Yachad's department for the Jewish deaf.

Avi Jacob attended Jewish day school and is now a senior at Yeshiva University, where a notetaker takes notes for him in secular



ASL interpreter Naomi Brunnlehrman, left, and Alexis Kashar are co-founders of the Jewish Deaf Resource Center. They hope to take their organization national.

classes. In his Jewish courses, Batya says, public funding is not available, so he borrows friends' notes.

"He does not consider himself disabled," she said.

Congregation Bene Shalom in Skokie, IL, is among a handful of synagogues founded to serve deaf Jews and their families. Rabbi Douglas Goldhamer says that services, meetings and his counseling sessions are voiced and signed.

When the cantor sings in Hebrew, a choir "translates" the prayers into ASL. Clergy don't face the ark during prayers when it is customary to do so because deaf congregants would be unable to see what they are saying.

At some liberal synagogues, lights flash on and off to signal certain parts of the service.

In Columbus, OH, the local Jewish Federation gives \$3,000 a year for deaf services, with interpreted High Holidays services rotating to different synagogues each year. At Temple Israel in Columbus, which has eight or nine deaf regulars, a deaf member in his 80s celebrated his bar mitzvah seven years ago. The ceremony was interpreted into ASL.

"He told me that when he was growing up, there wasn't a place for him in the Jewish world," said the synagogue's executive director, Elaine Tenenbaum.



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PARTNERSHIP

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The hospice rabbi is a full-time Menorah Manor employee. "We share in the cost of this position and we work together," Orloff said.

If a patient is affiliated with a congregation and wants their rabbi to render spiritual care, that is who is called on. But if that rabbi is not available or if the patient is not affiliated, but wants Jewish spiritual care, then Rabbi Herz will step in. "We share her. If there is a great need for a patient at Menorah Manor, then that is where she needs to be. Conversely, she may be working with a patient in their home spending time there. She goes where she is needed," Orloff said.

"The community pulpit rabbis have been very supportive," Seiden said.

Rabbi Herz received her ordination from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in 2005. Prior to joining the Toby Weinman program, she was the rabbi at Temple Israel in Canton, OH, and prior to that was assistant rabbi at Temple DeHirsch Sinai, in Seattle and Bellevue, WA. She earned her bachelor's degree in psychology, and went on to receive her certification in dance, drama and music therapy. She has extensive experience working with senior populations, having volunteered frequently to lead Shabbat and holiday services in nursing centers. She has also taught classes for seniors and made hospital and hospice visits.

In addition to providing a rabbi, other services offered include nursing care, social services assistance, home health aides, volunteers,

physicians, equipment specialists, child and family support counselors, therapists and others trained in meeting specific needs. There is always a need for more volunteers, who receive training to they can offer practical and emotional support and companionship, Orloff said.

The services do not end with the patient's death. Bereavement services for family members, including children and grandchildren, are available "for as long as the family wants it," she said. Even long after death, if a family occasion such as a graduation or wedding prompts new feelings of loss, counseling is available, she noted. If family members of one who received hospice care in Pinellas County live in some other county and request counseling, it could be given via Skype or phone, or they could be directed to their local hospice, she noted.

While Medicare pays for the services in many cases, both Orloff and Seiden said that hospice care is always offered regardless of one's ability to pay.

"If there is a Jewish family in Pinellas County, and they have a family member who is pretty sick, we encourage them to contact us," Orloff said.

Why only Pinellas County? Although Menorah Manor, located in St. Petersburg, is a six-county regional Jewish nursing home and geriatric center, the Jewish Hospice program is mainly limited to Pinellas residents because there are several hospice programs elsewhere in the Tampa Bay area. The programs cooperate and try not to infringe on each other's territories.