

May 13, 2016

‘Healing the world’ matters to Marlee Matlin

Jewish upbringing helped celebrated deaf actress break barriers to success

by **Debra Rubin**
NJJN Bureau Chief

May 13, 2016

[+](#) Share | [f](#) [t](#) [e](#) [r](#)

For Marlee Matlin, being deaf was not the most difficult challenge she faced on her way to becoming an Oscar-winning actress.

“The most difficult thing to overcome was not within me but within the attitudes and barriers that people put up,” Matlin told *NJJN* via e-mail. “As I say in my presentations, the real ‘handicap’ of being deaf does not lie in the ear; it lies in the mind. Once you realize that, deaf or not, anything is possible.”

Matlin will be guest speaker at the Main Event luncheon of the Women’s Philanthropy of Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey. The event, on Sunday, May 22, at Ocean Place Resort and Spa in Long Branch, will also honor the Friendship Circle, Hand in Hand, and Yachad, organizations that assist individuals with special needs and their families.

Matlin said she will talk about “Healing the World One Person at a Time,” a topic inspired by the Jewish Federations of North America’s Living Generously fund-raising campaign.

Her focus, she said, would be “about how my Jewish upbringing helped shape and guide my life, helping me to overcome barriers to achieve success.”

Becoming bat mitzva, Matlin said, played “a big part” in her journey to that success. She read her Torah portion by learning Hebrew phonetically and was later interviewed for the book *Mazel Tov: Celebrities’ Bar and Bat Mitzvah Memories*.



[+ enlarge image](#)

Oscar-winning actress Marlee Matlin said the best thing to do for people “who have special needs is to communicate with them.”

[+ more images](#)



Sidebar

She declined to elaborate on the role the religious rite of passage played in her life, preferring to save it for the program.

“I love the opportunity to share it with people who have come out to support the federation,” said Matlin, who will address the audience with the help of Jack Jason, the interpreter who has worked with her for the last 30 years. “He’s very familiar to audiences, having appeared with me on numerous TV appearances,” she said.

Although many synagogues have in recent years taken steps to become more accessible to people with challenges, Matlin has some advice for them.

“The best thing you can do for people who have different abilities and special needs is to communicate with them,” she said. “Ask them what they would like to have. You’ll find that the changes needed are slight but what you get back is enormous. Remember it’s all right there in our heritage — what we call tikun olam. We need to remember it’s our duty to heal the world, even if it’s one person at a time.”