Welcoming a Person Who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing

By Matan Koch, RSIP Consultant and CEO, Capitalizability

Your congregation almost certainly includes people who are hard of hearing or deaf. They may read lips so well that they appear less deaf than they truly are. Indeed, they may understand only 80 percent of what is spoken, chanted, or sung, but they may be reluctant to complain. The purpose of this guide is not only to give you tools to serve the people who come to you requesting an accommodation but also to set you up to welcome as many people as possible regardless of what they share.

It starts with the basics

Welcoming people who are deaf or hard of hearing should start before the commitment to special technology or hiring consultant. Consider these three ideas that can begin quickly, and that you can do right away, every time:

1. Communication is key: At the end of the day, welcoming is first and foremost about connection. More important than any individual solution is establishing communication and participation for each person that comes through the door. The key is to do something that works, even if it’s as simple as a pen and paper or typing a message into a smart phone.

2. Show us the pages: It can be easy for anyone to lose their place during worship services, but it can be especially tricky if you can’t hear what those around you are saying. Consider putting up a display of the page numbers that you use in your Prayerbook. Ideas can range from printed lists to numbered placards that can be changed as the service goes on.

3. Prayer is more than the prayerbook: does your service have a sermon? Poetry? Interpretive writings? Announcements? Consider printing copies of these and making them available at the service. For many who are having trouble following them as they are spoken, whether because of a hearing disability or any other reason, the ability to read along allows them to participate in the experience.

4. Be sensitive to seating requests: Some people have mild hearing loss and will be able to participate as long as they sit near the front. Other people listen primarily through lipreading, and for them the key to inclusion is a clear, well lit, line of sight to the lips of the speaker. Remember, you should always accommodate a request if you can without asking the person to justify why.
5. **Making the most of your sound system:** For people with mild to moderate hearing loss, your own sanctuary sound system may be sufficient to help them understand. The sound system only helps, however, if it’s working, and if everyone who speaks uses it. Check your sound system regularly for function and clarity, and make sure that every speaker uses it no matter how loud they think their voice is. You never know who is listening, or at least trying to.

**Assistive Listening Systems**

For many people with partial hearing, Assistive Listening Systems (ALS) can greatly improve their ability to hear. We will share a few common ones here, along with their pros and cons. Remember, an assistive listening system only works if it is maintained and if the speakers make an absolute commitment to using the microphones that feed into it. Three main types of system include:

1. **FM systems:** ALSs that use radio broadcast technology. They offer mobility and flexibility when used with portable body-worn transmitters. Unfortunately, without a specialized transmitter and frequency, they don’t transmit to hearing aids — in some cases, they may even cause interference for hearing aid users. They also broadcast on open frequencies, so anyone with an FM receiver may be able to pick up the transmission.

2. **Wide Area Loop systems:** ALSs that utilize an electromagnetic field to deliver sound. They offer convenience to groups of t-coil hearing aid users because those users do not require body worn receivers. This means that not only will they not interfere with hearing aids, they will likely provide the best experience for hearing aid user. Loop systems can be used by non-hearing aid users through use of a headphone and inductive loop receiver. The biggest weakness of a loop system is that a single loop will not work well over a large area as it will have gaps in coverage based on the shape of the loop. Multiple loops may be necessary for large rooms like sanctuaries.

3. **Infrared systems:** ALSs that utilize light-based technology. They guarantee privacy because light does not pass through walls like radio or electromagnetic technology can. They are the appropriate choice for situations that require confidentiality, but they are also more likely to experience transmission interference than the FM system.

Remember that whatever type of system you use only works as well as the clarity of the microphone system picking up the speaker in the first place. As before, everyone should use a microphone every time they

---

1 The different types of assistive listening system may have different Halachic implications, and different microphones, receivers etc. are designed with different Halachic positions in mind. CJP does not intend that this document should be used as a basis for a halachic decision, but encourages each community to reach out to its own posek (halachic authority) for the standard governing your community.
speak. When possible, use lapel or headset microphones, which are better than handheld or freestanding microphones. If your system has receivers, make sure that they are charged, available, and well maintained. Make sure that there is a clear avenue for the users to report any technical problem.

CJP is developing a separate page to provide information on the experience of other area congregations with installers and systems.

**Interpretation and captioning services**

Some people who are deaf or hard of hearing may not find that their particular barrier to participation can be easily overcome with an ALS or by lipreading. These individuals may benefit from an interpreter, a captioning system, or both.

**Interpreter services:**

Some people who are deaf or profoundly hard of hearing find that they can best participate via an interpreter. The most common form of interpretation in the United States is American Sign Language, though other common examples include Signed English and Cued Speech. When setting up an interpreter for an individual, it is important to ask them which system they prefer. For broad public events, we recommend an ASL interpreter. For general purposes, interpreters can be requested through the State of Massachusetts Department of Health and Human Services at: [http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/gov/departments/mcdhh/request-an-interpreter.html](http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/gov/departments/mcdhh/request-an-interpreter.html)

CJP is continuing to work to identify resources to provide specifically Jewish interpretation services. Please contact Molly Silver at mollys@cjp.org to learn more.

Both those who communicate through sign language and those who read lips benefit from being seated near the front of the worship space, where they will have an unobstructed view of speaker and interpreters. Speakers and interpreters should be well lit, so that their hands and faces can be clearly seen. If your service overflows to multiple spaces, it is best to have an interpreter in each space.

Professional interpreters are critical to a truly participatory worship experience, and one should not advertise interpretation unless it's being provided by a certified interpreter. Also, keep in mind that creating a welcoming environment through the use of sign language is not limited to professional interpreters. Regardless of how often the professional interpreter is used, encourage members of the congregation and staff to learn American Sign Language, Signed English, and/or finger spelling as a way to help deaf congregants feel “at home” within the community.
Captioning or CART services:

Some people who are deaf or hard of hearing will benefit neither from a sign language interpreter or an ALS, but will benefit from some form of captioning. A transcriptionist, either on-site or through an Internet connection, transcribes the event in real time while those captions appear on screen. Computer Aided Real-Time Transcription, or CART, can also be requested through the Department of Health and Human Services at http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/gov/departments/mcdhh/request-an-interpreter.html

Helpful hints

There are a few more things you could keep in mind to be more welcoming to someone who is deaf or hard of hearing:

1. To get a person’s attention before speaking, tap on elbow and speak face to face.

2. If a person is communicating through an interpreter, look at and speak to the person rather than the interpreter. The interpreter may be greeted privately, but, when the interpreter is working, he or she is a transmitter for the person who is deaf and not a participant in the conversation.

3. Speak at a moderate pace, clearly but without exaggeration.

4. Avoid covering the mouth while speaking.

5. Do not stand in front of a window or bright light, since it puts the face in shadow and makes lipreading more difficult.

6. Do not pretend to understand if the speech of a person is unclear. Request that the person rephrase until the point is clear.

7. Participation is not limited to services. Learn about the priorities are for the deaf person and consider using an ASL interpreter for the relevant activities.

8. In an age when text messaging is popular way of communicating, it’s become much easier to ‘talk’ to those who can’t use a typical phone. For those who don’t text, be ready to communicate by telephone with deaf members at home by using relay services. In Massachusetts, our relay system is MassRelay, which TTY and ASCII Users reach at 800-720-3480 and voice and hearing users reach at 800-720-3479. Of course, always ask an individual how they prefer to be contacted.

---

2 This section, and the introduction are adapted from “That All May Worship: An Interfaith Guide to People with Disabilities” Published by the American Association of People with Disabilities, in conjunction with the Interfaith Disability Advocacy Coalition, which can be found in its entirety at http://www.aapd.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/That-All-May-Worship.pdf