

JUST GIVE US A CHANCE

[Jewish Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Awareness Shabbat]

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Guthrie Nutter grew up in Oregon a half hour from the California border. Born deaf he and his family worked to maximize his considerable intellectual and social gifts. The young man who sat in my office had both a compelling story and personal style.

Guthrie's resume reflected two business degrees, significant experience in the field, as well as stints on Broadway and television. His evident conversational abilities, punctuated by frequent humor, conveyed the unmistakable impression of a person comfortable in his own skin.

Soon the conversation turned to his plans to trek across California. Wow, I thought to myself, look at what this deaf man has accomplished. How far he has come, how far we all have come in dealing with people of special needs in this great country.

I was not prepared for the abrupt shift in tone. "Push backs," he blurted out. "All we get is push backs." "To go on this trek," he continued with rising exacerbation, "they told me I needed a sign language interpreter at a cost of \$7000.00. Guess who's supposed to pay for that? If you don't comply, at the first sign of danger they will kick you out of the group." Clearly this is far from the first time that Guthrie felt driven away with little regard for the feelings of this incredibly talented, accomplished and sensitive man.

Deaf people always have had to deal with people and institutions who are deaf to their feelings as well as their aspirations. Sad to say Jewish tradition is no better in this regard.

לא-תקלל חרש ולפני עור לא תתן מכשל ויראת מאלהיך אני יהוה

Thou shalt not curse the deaf nor shall you put an obstacle before the blind, but you shall fear the Eternal One, I am your God. [Leviticus 19:14]. In laying out standards for holiness the Torah admonishes us not to speak in an obnoxiously vulgar way because we believe the victim will not be able to know or discern. A person might do this, suggest the famed commentator Rambam [Lev. 19:14] because one might be inclined to curse the deaf and put a stumbling block before the blind “*since he does not fear them because they know not neither do they understand.*”[See Psalms 82:5] What an inexcusable insult to the deaf or blind person!

Trust me: even if in a particular instance they cannot make out the specific words, deaf people will know by facial expression and body language that they are being cursed out. Deaf people I know have extraordinary sensory antennae.

Similarly in need of reorientation is the Talmud’s teaching that, “*All are required to read the Megillah except the deaf person, a mentally deficient person and a minor.*”The assumption is that since they cannot hear what they are chanting they cannot represent the community. Why? The Talmud continues, R. Eleazar ben Azariah: *one who recites the Sh’ma must do so audibly as it says, “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is One,” which*

implies 'let thine ear hear what thy mouth utters.' Rabbi Meir adds, "According to the concentration of the mind, so is the value of the words."

The Talmud here links the lack of hearing with lack of comprehension.

Clearly these texts were written long ago with little awareness of the Deaf Community's incredible mental and emotional capacities. But these texts are out there. Sadly they are presented as Judaism's position concerning the status of deaf people in our midst and become part of the misperceptions members of the Deaf Community confront every day.

I'm not advocating ignoring these writings, but in true Jewish fashion it is time to reinterpret them. Why don't we read the text this way?

Thou shall not curse the deaf with a self-congratulatory mindset that our society is so much more sensitive and helpful than ever before.

Thou shall not curse the deaf with push backs that seem to happen with aching regularity.

Thou shall not curse the deaf with a lack of basic information on hearing loss.

Thou shall not curse the deaf by lumping together all members of the Deaf Community.

Thanks to my friend and congregant, Dr. Nancy Crown, a psychologist who has worked with deaf people, here are some facts that will prove useful for those who truly want to know what deaf people confront daily:

- One in five Americans age twelve and older experience hearing loss severe enough to interfere with day to day communication. [*One in five Americans Age 12 and Older Experience Hearing Loss Severe Enough to Hinder Communication*; by Mikaela Conley, Nov. 15, 2011, ABC News; <http://abcnews.go.com/Health/americans-hearing-loss/story?id=14949805>]
- The population of people with hearing loss is very diverse. In addition to the expected variations in ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, educational level etc., major differences result from such factors as the age at onset of hearing loss, the degree of hearing loss, how good communication is between family members, whether the person comes from a deaf or a hearing family, and what type of school they attend.
- The Deaf Community is a minority with a distinct culture and language. There is a rejection of the idea of impairment or disability.
- Over ninety percent of children who are deaf are born to hearing parents and for a variety of reasons most of those parents never learn to communicate adequately in Sign Language. Therefore the child is very isolated within the family and the most important vehicle for learning about the world is severely compromised at best.
- The technology for assistive devices like hearing aids and cochlear implants has improved vastly but depending on many factors including degree of deafness,

which frequencies are affected, etc. not everyone is a good candidate for these devices. Deaf people often say that hearing aids only amplify what they can hear and do nothing for the frequencies where the hearing loss is. As computer technology has become part of our everyday lives this has enabled people who are deaf to be better connected to the world around them.

- Since communication is a real barrier, those of us who are hearing typically have no idea how challenging or impossible many simple things that we take for granted are for deaf people, such as: getting a job, finding a doctor or lawyer they can communicate with, communicating with a child's teacher if you are a deaf parent of a hearing child, going through security in the airport and not hearing the Homeland Security officer ask you to step aside for further screening, communication in stores, on the street, and pretty much everywhere.
- The Deaf Community is reacting to a history of oppression and misunderstanding by the hearing majority much like other minority groups. Becoming aware of and attuned to Deaf Culture is critical for people wanting to be trusted, accepted and respected by this community. There is a lot of hurt and anger over past mistreatment. Many deaf people are assumed to be unintelligent and/or incapable of things that hearing people can do.

Guthrie is a real case in point. "I have two business degrees and a lot of experience and I still can't get a job," Guthrie exclaimed in a tone of resignation. "I also have a strong Broadway background, I can't get a job. Even roles calling for deaf characters go to hearing actors." Guthrie who speaks beautifully, signs perfectly and reads lips

magnificently is not even hired as a sign language instructor. Those jobs, he states, go to other hearing candidates that may not be as qualified for the same tasks.

Finding friends and mates is also a particular challenge. Often we are curiosities, Guthrie explained, people want to get to know us because they're intrigued. But then they move on. More doors slammed in our face.

Those who live with and love deaf people have come to realize that their senses can be enhanced and their lives enriched immeasurably through these relationships.

When Olympic gold medalist Vonetta Flowers received the Children's Hearing Institute's *Hearing Hear-O-Award*, she said the following:

Tonight I stand before you as a parent of a child who has a hearing loss... I accept the *Hearing Hear-O-Award* on behalf of all the people who have been touched by your medical advancements and technology, your financial contributions and the life changing devices that enable our kids to hear. Just a few years ago I knew nothing about the Deaf Community. I thought I had the perfect life. My teammate and I won the gold at the 2002 Winter Olympics, my husband and I were pregnant with twins, and all we needed was a dog, a white picket fence and we would have our chance of living the American Dream...

We never imagined that at thirty weeks I would deliver twin boys, who weighed 2 lbs. 9 oz. and 3 lbs.8 ozs. ...that they would have to spend six to seven weeks in hospital's NICU...that one of our sons would be born with a profound hearing loss, that we would have to learn sign language in order to communicate with him...

After speaking with doctors in California, New York and Alabama, we were introduced to a new procedure the ABI. Dr. Colletti, an Italian doctor, gave us hope...the Auditory Brain Stem Implant had been successfully implanted in adults in the U.S. but it had not been approved by the FDA for kids under twelve. Finding this option gave us a new enthusiasm and helped us to keep our dream alive of Jordan hearing our voices and eventually learning how to speak.

Jordan's life did not turn out the way we planned it, and that's okay, because he has already impacted more lives than we ever expected...over the past few years he has taught us how to be more thankful, he's helped us to be more appreciative of each gift that God has given us and encourages us to fight for issues that affect our community. No, our life isn't the way we planned it, but we couldn't imagine it any other way...

People who are deaf or their families can hope and pray for such perspective precisely because of these advances in medical knowledge and technology. But such scientific progress must be accompanied by social progress, by the opening of more doors and reducing push backs in every aspect of life by hearing people such as you and me.

“We don’t want pity,” Guthrie said with obvious emotion. “We just want a chance, we want the power of real choice.”

Guthrie is going on the trek to California and is not paying \$7000.00 for a sign language interpreter. He is hoping to prove them wrong and thus open doors for other deaf people who just want the same chances that anyone else would expect. I am sure that Guthrie would agree that instead of push backs it wouldn’t hurt if deaf people would get a push forward every once in a while. All they’re asking for is a chance.

May it be God’s will, but first may it be our own.

Amen.