

Signs of Belonging

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Congregants attending Kerem Shalom in Massachusetts flow into the building for Shabbat services like participants in shuls (synagogues) around the world; they joyously greet each other, find seats and prayer books and settle into the familiar Friday ritual. Voices raise and fall as they wait for services to begin. An additional attribute also joins the evening rhythm – the rich visual-spatial communication that is American Sign Language. Kerem Shalom or KS is one of several U.S. congregations that fully includes the Deaf community through the use of ASL, captions, interpreters and other elements of connection. KS also is one of a handful of synagogues which offers a Deaf Rabbi. Rabbi Darby Leigh drew from his own experience of marginalization in the Jewish community to create a truly welcoming environment for Deaf Jews to flourish. A spiritual seeker and eclectic leader whose background includes study in Eastern traditions, performances with the National Theater of the Deaf as well as involvement with various rock bands, this Rabbi wanted to sing, dance and pray in the communal space of his ancestors. Kerem Shalom is the realization of that vision. The choir uses ASL, with members signing specific prayers. The traditional Shema wording of “listen” or “hear” is replaced with the sign PAY ATTENTION. At 250 members strong in 2021, congregants continue to enjoy a vibrant community where a detailed Inclusion and Accessibility statement is posted on the website, and hands and voices both play a central role in creating a home for everyone.

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ASL or American Sign Language was not always given equal weight among languages and for many years was not even considered a language at all. Like Native/First Nations survivors of the horrific boarding school system, attendees of oral deaf schools – places where the emphasis was on speech development through therapy and the use of residual hearing as well as a focus on speech reading – were punished for using the language that was natural to them. Punishments included forcing the students to sit on their hands, binding the hands together or the use of shackles, mitten-wearing to prevent easy signing, and whippings by teachers. These practices were common during the late 1800's and early 1900's as the result of the Milan Conference of 1880. This is an infamous event in the worldwide Deaf community that occurred in Milan, Italy. The program only included one Deaf member among 164 participants from the U.S. and several European countries. It was the first international conference of deaf educators and resolved that: "oral education (oralism) was superior to manual education and passed a resolution banning the use of sign language in school."(<https://deafhistory.eu/index.php/component/zoo/item/1880>)

This pronouncement was the result of several resolutions regarding deaf education. The decree led to extensive job loss for white Deaf teachers and other white Deaf professionals; sign language was almost eliminated from that educational realm. Again as in Native residential schools that aimed to destroy the cultures of indigenous people, Deaf students carried on in secret, hiding their language from oral authority figures. Black ASL – also known as BASL – followed a different path due

to racism and institutional segregation. As signing came to be considered “shameful” among the majority in power, BASL retained its place in Black Deaf schools and grew to contain differences from the ASL used by white signers. Today’s “Black ASL Project” at Gallaudet University serves to “.....describe the linguistic features of a variety of American Sign Language (ASL) used by African American signers, often referred to as Black ASL.” Black American Sign Language involves even more facial and body expression than ASL. Some of the signs for the same concepts are also different. This link contains a video of the two languages and highlights some of the features of BASL:

<https://www.3playmedia.com/blog/deaf-culture-black-asl/>

In 2010 at the 21st International Congress on Education of the Deaf in Vancouver, Canada, the organization’s board issued a formal apology for the 1880 Milan ban, citing it as a human and constitutional rights violation. ASL has continued to regain its place as a valid language of instruction and cultural centerpiece, exemplifying the cherished heart of the Deaf community. With greater recognition of the validity and depth of ASL has also come the push by many Deaf people for central involvement in a variety of institutions that once denied them access, including places of worship.

Rebecca Dubowe serves Mose Montfiore Temple, a Reform temple in Bloomington, Illinois. She is the first female and Deaf ordained Rabbi worldwide. Rabbi Dubowe also speaks Hebrew and English. While the congregation is predominantly hearing, Rabbi Dubowe has officiated at weddings and other life events involving Deaf participants, where the services are entirely in ASL. She is known for teaching ASL-based “Introduction to Judaism” courses and states “....my role is quite unique. There are many Deaf Jewish people who did not receive a Jewish education because they had no access.” Rabbi Dubowe is featured here discussing the High Holidays with Respectability’s Shelly Christensen:



With this Rabbi at the helm, Deaf Jews are no longer denied their heritage and community.

Temple Beth Soloman of the Deaf in Los Angeles is the world's oldest Deaf synagogue, and was founded specifically by Deaf Jews in 1960. Jan Seeley is the ASL interpreter at this shul, led by Rabbi Warren Levy, who is hearing. In order to best experience the acclaimed shofar blasts during High Holy Days, congregants hold onto balloons or other objects that conduct vibration, sometimes even clutching the Shofar itself.

Illinois boasts another Deaf synagogue in where else but Skokie – the Reform Congregation Bene Shalom, founded in 1972 by hearing Rabbi Douglas Goldhamer (z"l), who stated in 2021: "I went to different churches and I found deaf Jews as members in these churches because one – there was no Jewish deaf congregation. And two – even if there was a Jewish deaf congregation, deaf people couldn't have parity." Faced with this reality, Rabbi Goldhamer decided to take action and started his own congregation. Bene Shalom's services are ASL-interpreted and currently led by Rabbi Charlene Brooks. Like many religious institutions affected by the pandemic as well as by an aging

membership, Bene Shalom has faced some financial hardships but continues to endure, just as the Jewish people have for centuries.

Congregation Bene Shalom also boasts a famous past congregant - actor Marlee Matlin, the youngest person to receive an Oscar and the first Deaf performer to win an Academy Award, for her role in the 1986 screenplay-turned-movie "Children of a Lesser God." She and her parents were originally members of the Skokie synagogue and enjoyed full participation in shul events, including Marlee's Bat Mitzvah, where the Rabbi signed and spoke. A "JewishBoston" newspaper article about her life as a Jewish woman states: "The day of her bat mitzvah her proud family heard her declare that she was deeply honored to be Jewish and to be part of.....the Jewish people."

The history of the Jewish people is fraught with the dichotomy of joy and terror, life and extermination. What can never be eradicated, however, is the human desire for hope and change. The people of the Jewish Deaf community have always been change makers, resilient in the face of that which sought to deprive them. Black, Jewish and Deaf writer, producer and overall creative Eli Steele explains: "I tell my daughter and my son, you have to develop yourself so you have all that power inside of yourself, so when someone comes and slams that door in your face, you have the resilience to move forward."

In shuls like Moses Montfiore Temple, Bene Shalom, Temple Beth Soloman and Kerem Shalom, rich Jewish lives persist, tributes to those who have gone before and open gateways for those to come. We are all the better for the connections we have to each other, regardless of how we access them.

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Born and raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Sxdni Small grew up in a Jewish household where books and community organizing were household staples. Sxdni is a member of the Wisconsin Writers Association. They are a guest contributor to the Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle. Their pieces have been published in Creative Wisconsin Magazine as well as on additional digital platforms, including The Jewish Writing Project and Kind Over Matter. When not writing, Sxdni enjoys a robust cup of honeybush tea while doing a deep dive into the art and science of dog training.

