

DECEMBER 2025: SENSORY DISABILITIES

BELONGING BEGINS WITH **US**





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Welcome to the very first edition of *Belonging Begins with Us*. Our goal is simple: to help every member feel not just included but deeply connected and at home in Jewish life. We chose “belonging” because it goes beyond inclusion - belonging means being valued, heard, and embraced as part of the whole.

Each edition will focus on a theme, share practical steps, and amplify voices from across our communities. You’ll find sections like Organisation Spotlight, Lived Experience, and Torah for All, alongside tools and resources. My hope is that these pages spark reflection and action - because belonging begins with each of us.

Launching this newsletter as we approach Chanukah feels deeply symbolic.

Chanukah is a festival of light - a reminder that even the smallest flame can push back darkness.

This month’s theme is sensory loss - vision and hearing. Chanukah celebrates light and resilience, yet for those living with sensory loss, light and sound can feel distant. Sensory loss is often invisible, but its impact is profound: the missed word in conversation, the struggle to follow a service, the isolation that follows. Small changes - captions, clear signage, assistive devices - can transform exclusion into dignity and welcome.

As we light the menorah, may we commit to kindling not only physical light but the light of connection for every member of our community. I’d love to hear your thoughts, questions, and stories - please share them for future editions.

Please contact me at dneifeld@theus.org.uk to discuss all things inclusion and belonging.

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**Rabbi Dovi
Lebrecht**

Rabbi of Shenley
United Synagogue

Blindness, Blessing and Light

A striking pattern runs through the Torah: moments of physical blindness often coincide with moments of profound blessing. Yitzchak blesses Yaakov when “his eyes were dim.” Yaakov, once he “can no longer see,” blesses Ephraim and Menashe and then all twelve tribes with prophetic clarity. Even Bilam, the hostile prophet, is called “the one with a closed eye” when uttering his most famous blessing.

The message is subtle yet profound: blessing requires vision beyond what physical eyes perceive. Sight anchors us in the present; blessing demands an inner vision reaching into eternity.

This theme echoes through Jewish history. Rav Sheshet and Rav Yosef - two towering Talmudic sages - were blind. Yitzchak the Blind, an early Kabbalist, shaped Jewish mysticism. For these figures, blindness was not a diminishment but a sharpening of inward sight, an opening to dimensions others overlook.

A modern figure who sensed this truth deeply was Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein (d. 2015), described by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks as “the finest exponent of Torah and wisdom in our generation.” Rav Aharon combined astonishing Torah mastery, a Harvard PhD, the Israel Prize, and profound humility. Among the moving details of his life was his devoted care for his elderly, blind father.

It is no coincidence that Rav Aharon began one of his essays - on whether a blind person must light Chanukah candles - with a remarkable dedication:

“Dedicated to the descendants of Yitzchak and Yaakov, the disciples of Rav Sheshet and Rav Yosef, who accept their lot with love and serve their Creator in silent anticipation.”

His dedication alludes to John Milton’s famous line about his own blindness: “They also serve who only stand and wait.”

Before addressing law, he acknowledged a spiritual reality: those without physical sight often cultivate a distinctive, powerful form of divine service - different, more internal, but certainly not lesser.

The mitzvah of Chanukah candles is fulfilled with physical flames - yet mystics teach that the candle hints at a far deeper light: the Ohr HaGanuz, the hidden primordial light reserved for the World to Come. Over eight days we light thirty-six candles, paralleling the thirty-six hours this light shone for Adam before sin. The physical flame is only a faint trace of spiritual radiance. The darkness of those who cannot see often conceals a deeper illumination.

Note: This article does not intend to romanticise the real challenges of blindness but highlights how our tradition finds spiritual meaning even in life’s greatest trials.



Jonathan Abro

Member with Vision
Loss

It's the People, Not the Building

When Jonathan Abro walks into shul, he's not looking for sympathy - he's looking to belong. As someone who is blind, his experience of Jewish communal life is shaped not by the building, but by the people within it.

"I can stand at a kiddush surrounded by dozens of people and still feel completely alone," he shares. "It's not that people are unkind - they just don't know how to approach me."

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Jonathan's story is a powerful reminder that inclusion begins with awareness. From struggling to remember prayers like Kaddish without a siddur, to navigating communal events where visual cues are everything, his challenges are real - but so are the moments of deep connection.

One of the most meaningful experiences came during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, when a family in his shul quietly took on the role of guiding him - letting him know when to stand or sit, helping him kiss the Torah, and walking him to the bimah. "They weren't doing it out of pity," he says. "They were doing it because they could, and they wanted to."

Jonathan also highlights the importance of accessible communication. "I can do my banking, send messages, even get my phone to describe a photo. But when a synagogue sends out a poster that my screen reader can't interpret, I'm excluded again."

His advice to community leaders is simple: ask. "Ask what would help. Ask how someone wants to be supported. Don't assume. And don't wait for someone to speak up - not everyone has the confidence."

Inclusion isn't about grand gestures. It's about small, thoughtful actions - opening both doors when someone arrives, whispering a cue during a service, or simply saying hello and introducing yourself by name.

As Jonathan puts it, "We don't want to be singled out. We just want to be seen."



9 Things You Should Know About Jewish Blind & Disabled's Sight-loss Support Group Led by Toni Lewis

Toni Lewis stepped into working with people with physical disabilities or vision impairments with compassion and curiosity.

With a background in mental health at Jami, Toni joined Jewish Blind & Disabled (JBD) two and a half years ago and has established two support groups for people with sight loss

There are two monthly groups - and they're growing.

One meets in Borehamwood (second Tuesday of the month), and another is currently in Finchley but moving to Mill Hill East (second Thursday of the month).

The group drives real change.

Members have helped shape educational sessions for community leaders, and as a result of the RNIB coming to talk at one of the groups, JBD has hosted a local low-vision clinic with RNIB and welcomed a range of speakers from different organisations including Transport for London and Friends of Moorfields.

Sight loss can be isolating—but shared experience builds belonging.

Two members discovered they both had Charles Bonnet Syndrome, a condition causing visual hallucinations. Though it affects around one in ten people with significant sight loss, it's rarely spoken about. Their connection helped reduce isolation and build understanding.

JBD is here to help communities become more accessible.

From advice on inclusive design to connecting with local services, JBD supports welfare officers and community leaders in making meaningful changes.

JBD is now a recognised voice in sight loss advocacy.

Local councils have approached JBD for input when making accessibility decisions as part of their consultation processes and it was —a valuable opportunity for them to gather insights from people with lived experience.

The Sight-loss Group is a warm, welcoming community.

Launched 18 months ago, the groups offer connection, peer support, and practical advice for people navigating sight loss.

Misunderstanding is one of the biggest barriers.

People with sight loss are often either overlooked or over-assisted. Toni encourages communities to ask individuals what they need, rather than assume.

Getting to shul is part of inclusion.

Helping people physically access communal spaces—and supporting them once they're there—is key to making Jewish life more inclusive.

For more information or to join the Sight Loss Group, please contact Toni Lewis at JBD toni@jbd.org or 020 8370 6611 ext 620



Jeremy Freeman
Member who is deaf

Being Heard Without Sound: A Personal Perspective on Belonging and Barriers

I've been part of Borehamwood & Elstree for over twenty years. My wife and I were both born deaf, as were our two children. While our children received cochlear implants as young kids, my wife and I wear hearing aids and rely primarily on lip-reading.

I can follow the service perfectly well and I read Hebrew fluently. What I find harder is staying in sync with the rest of the congregation. If I can't hear clearly or see who is speaking, I often lose track of where

we are. I usually rely on silent prayer, reading at my own pace and keeping my own rhythm. It is the only way I can stay connected without constantly trying to catch up.

Shul environments present real challenges. Kiddush halls are noisy, crowded and full of overlapping conversations. People often speak without facing me, which means I miss most of what is being said. During services, the rabbi's mouth may be obscured by distance, the layout of the room or facial hair, all of which make lip-reading difficult.

One of the biggest myths is that hearing loops or BSL work for everyone. They are not helpful for me personally. I have never signed, and my communication needs are different. Lip-reading remains my main method of understanding what is being said.

I have appreciated practical steps like captioned videos from BES. It is a simple gesture, but it shows that accessibility is being considered. I have also suggested receiving a short summary of the sermon in advance or during the service. Something discreet and practical. I am not asking to be singled out, just to be included like anyone else.

I rarely attend community events. It is not because I don't want to be involved, but because accessibility is so often an afterthought. I am often asked after an event what could have been done differently. My question is why accessibility is not part of the planning in the first place. It is also worth remembering that I am not alone. One in four people in the UK has some form of hearing loss. Many others in our shul, particularly older members, may also struggle to follow what is being said. They may not identify as deaf, but that does not mean they are hearing everything clearly. Good accessibility benefits more people than you might think.

One aspiration of mine is to take part in a Poland trip that is accessible for deaf participants. I have never had that opportunity. I know the United Synagogue is beginning to explore how to make this possible and I hope it becomes a reality. What matters most is that deaf people are part of the planning from the beginning.

If we want a truly inclusive community, accessibility has to be built in from the start. It is not something to add later. It is something to design with from the beginning.



**Padraic Garrett
and Andrew
Goodwin**

Hearing Matters in Our
Community Service
Managers

Hearing Matters: Making Jewish Communities More Accessible

When Padraic Garrett and Andrew Goodwin launched Hearing Matters in Our Community, they were responding to a troubling reality: many people with hearing loss felt excluded from Jewish communal life. Despite good intentions, organisations were unknowingly creating barriers - from inaccessible buildings to communication methods that relied solely on phone calls.

The programme was born out of a report revealing widespread dissatisfaction among people with hearing loss. JDA's own survey echoed these findings, prompting them to offer a free, expert-led service to Jewish organisations. Over 30 have already engaged, including JVN, Paperweight, and local communities.

Their approach is practical and empowering. "Often what's good for hearing loss is good for communication in general," Padraic explains. They assess environments - acoustics, lighting, entry systems - and help organisations develop action plans. These can be as simple as asking members about access needs or rearranging seating to avoid shadows that hinder lip-reading.

Andrew shared a personal story about his mother, who struggled to manage her finances due to hearing loss. The organisation she needed only listed a phone number. She was too embarrassed to ask for help, and her son had to call on her behalf. "It's not just about access - it's about dignity," Andrew says.

The programme also trains organisations to think inclusively. Hatzola NW, for example, adopted new equipment after a simulated emergency training highlighted how hearing loss affects crisis response. They even installed tools in their ambulance.

Technology plays a vital role. Free apps like Live Transcribe (Android) and Dictation (Apple) can transform meetings and social events. Automatic captioning helps volunteers with hearing loss stay engaged, reducing dropout rates.

Looking ahead, Padraic and Andrew hope every synagogue becomes a place where people feel comfortable disclosing their hearing loss. "There's so much love in our communities," Padraic says. "We just need to make sure it reaches everyone."

To bring Hearing Matters to your community, contact Padraic and Andrew at andrew@engagecare.co.uk and visit the JDA website for helpful resources: www.jdeaf.org.uk Inclusion starts with listening - literally.

Belonging Builders



Josh Moont
Chair of BES

Making Inclusion Visible - One Caption at a Time

When Josh Moont, Chair of Borehamwood & Elstree United Synagogue, prepared his annual Chair's Report, he chose to present it in video format. His goal was simple: make the content more engaging. But what happened next was a quiet revolution in accessibility.

Josh used a video tool that offered built-in captioning. It was easy to use, so he enabled subtitles - and the impact was immediate. Members of the community with hearing loss reached out to say they felt seen. Some of the feedback came from individuals who aren't usually active in communal life, highlighting how small changes can open doors for broader participation.

"Workload is small but impact is huge," Josh reflected. While captioning isn't yet consistent across all Borehamwood content, the community is working toward making it standard practice. Most platforms now offer automatic subtitling features, requiring only light editing. The benefits go far beyond hearing loss: captions help people watching in quiet environments, those unfamiliar with Hebrew or Yiddish terms, and anyone who simply prefers reading along.

Josh's initiative is a powerful reminder that inclusion doesn't always require major resources - just thoughtful choices. By making content more accessible, Borehamwood & Elstree United Synagogue is setting a meaningful example for other communities.

Take Home Tips



**Transcribe
your
messages**

**Caption all
videos**

**Offer
Personal
Lighting
If Possible**

**Ensure
appropriate
set-up for
lip-reading**

**Offer
magnifiers**

**Provide a
written
version of
sermon**

**Live Closed-
Captions at
Events**

**Provide Alt-
Text on
Images**

We understand that every community is unique. Please contact Daniella to tailor these tips to best suit your community

Speaking Of



Inclusive language helps everyone feel welcome. Aim for respect, not perfection - people with access needs prefer honest effort. Explore these quick tips for talking about sensory loss.

Use

Person who is blind/deaf

Person with Vision/Hearing Loss

Member of the *Deaf Community

(*Capital D refers to cultural identity, not just hearing status.

Avoid

Vision/Hearing Impaired

Suffers from Vision/Hearing Loss

*Some individuals prefer identity-first language ('blind person') and some prefer person-first ('person who is blind'). When in doubt, ask.

Resources



Jewish Blind & Disabled

Jewish Blind & Disabled (JBD) is dedicated to providing a life of independence, dignity, and choice for adults with physical disabilities or vision impairment.



Transcribe Me

Transcribe Me is a transcribing service specifically for WhatsApp Voicenotes. It's incredibly simple, affordable and accurate.



Jewish Deaf Association

JDA aims to improve access, independence, equality and inclusion for people with hearing loss



JBI Library

JBI Library is dedicated to assisting visually impaired and reading disabled individuals by providing free access to religious publications in large-print, braille, and audiobook.

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Thank you to everyone who contributed to this edition of Belonging Begins with US