

## SPOTLIGHT

O

a Community

Coverage by  
Devorah KleinEtz Chaim Center and JADE Partner  
To Bring Zoom *Shiurim* to the Deaf

During the past few months, countless *shiurim* and classes have been conducted via teleconference and Zoom, utilizing technology to facilitate the continuation of *limud haTorah* in *Klal Yisrael*.

But what about the Jewish Deaf population? How could they access these *shiurim* as well? Enter JADE (Jewish Advocates for Deaf Education at the Macks Center for Jewish Education) and Etz Chaim Center, which partnered together to make Etz Chaim's classes accessible to the Deaf community.

During "normal" times, JADE, which is under the direction of the highly dedicated Mrs. Yael Zelinger, will provide ASL (American Sign Language) interpreters for events in the Jewish community, making them accessible to the Deaf population. Through an Access Grant established by the Center for Jewish Education (CJE), JADE will cover the costs of the first hour of a sign language interpreter for any community event. This program has been a tremendous benefit to the Jewish Deaf community in Baltimore and has been utilized countless times.

However, the COVID-19 brought a new challenge: Would it be feasible to set up an interpreter for Zoom *shiurim*?

"This situation created a whole new set of challenges for the Jewish Deaf and hard-of-hearing community," explains Mrs. Zelinger. "We knew how to provide access for live events and prerecorded videos, but making online programs accessible in real time was new territory for everyone."

JADE was not daunted. With

the help of Martha Goodman, another member of the Disability and Inclusion team at the Mack's Center for Jewish Education in Baltimore, they learned how to provide an interpreter and closed captions on Zoom, Web X and Microsoft Teams in a manner that maximizes the accessibility of the program for the Deaf viewers. In fact, the OU and Agudah reached out to CJE's Disability and Inclusion team to learn how to make their online programs accessible, too.

Then JADE approached Etz Chaim to partner with them to make their programs accessible for the Deaf community. "I approached Etz Chaim, because I thought their lineups are most appropriate for the Jewish Deaf community in general," says Mrs. Zelinger. "Etz Chaim programs can be appreciated by beginners through advanced learners and their audience represents all types of Jews who share an interest in learning about Torah Judaism. There's something there for everyone to learn. I asked Rabbi Pomeranz if they would offer interpreters on their promotional materials so that Deaf people reading an Etz Chaim flyer would know they are welcome at this organization.

"After they agreed to this partnership, I did a training for their staff on how to communicate properly with people who are Deaf or hard of hearing. This way, when people with a hearing loss join an Etz Chaim event, their staff will know to face the person when they talk, to speak a little more slowly and clearly, and even how to use the interpreter if the Deaf participant has a question or comment."

Etz Chaim has hosted several *shiurim* via Zoom in the past few months, and some were made accessible via sign language interpreters. In particular, on Thursday evening, June 25, a session on "Meditating in Isolation," with Rabbi Dov Ber Cohen, had approximately 15 Deaf participants following the sign language interpreter.

Rabbi Zev Pomeranz, direc-



Yossi Globman asking a question during the *shiur*.

tor of Etz Chaim, noted, "What hit me on Thursday night was that the community became more aware of what we are doing for this sub-community. Everyone (on Rabbi Cohen's presentation) saw the interpreter front and center and realized what we are doing. We even had one of the Deaf listeners ask a question via the interpreter!"

In order for the program to qualify for the Access grant, the requester must be a Baltimore resident. However, because of the virtual platform, anyone, anywhere, could take advantage and participate in the *shiur*. Indeed, a silver lining in this time of COVID-19 has been that several recent local presentations drew participants who are Deaf or hard of hearing from all over the world.

Mr. Moishe Mordechai Tzvi Coleman explained how meaningful this program is to the Deaf community. "Honestly, even before the pandemic, way before Zoom was even on anyone's mind, I was used to seeing videos with interpreters next to speakers online. Now more than ever, many *shiurim* and events, originating mostly from Baltimore, include interpreters upon request via Zoom or other social media platforms.

"While it has sometimes been a challenge on occasion due to tech-

nical difficulties, or because some people just can't figure out how to 'pin' the interpreter or make the interpreter 'bigger,' most of the time, it's a success.

"The thoughtfulness of the community is most touching. They haven't forgotten us, and regardless of the situation, many are doing the best they can to accommodate the Deaf population.

"When COVID-19 was still raging before Pesach, there were many who were at a loss and uncertain about what would be. To fill the void, there was a series of lectures offered by a certain Rav in the community who also ensured that there was an interpreter present on Zoom, so that Deaf people could also know what needed to be done for Pesach.

"Furthermore, some of the programs also ensured that live captioning would be provided onscreen for those who do not know sign language or for those who prefer to read the text than watch the interpreter.

"No words can describe how great a feeling it is to know that we are being looked out for. The multiple programs offered by the Jewish community of Baltimore means so much to so many of us on different levels. *Mi Kamcha Yisrael!*"