>> Yael Zellinger [Through Interpreter]: I want to acknowledge and thank RespectAbility. That's a national organization that advocates for the rights of people with disabilities and they have a representative here tonight, Debbie Fink, and she's been in touch with me and with Rabbi Darby Leigh. And she's been, it's been wonderful to work with her and she's joined our meetup and she's very supportive and she's a co-sponsor for this presentation this evening. So thank you very much. We have a wonderful speaker and we appreciate RespectAbility and all the things that they do. All the things that they do for the disability community. I would like to thank Rabbi Leigh for joining us tonight. He's very approachable and he has a big heart and an open mind. And we're all looking forward to sharing the evening with Rabbi Darby Leigh. Here you go.

>> Darby Leigh [through interpreter]: I want to say thank you so much to Yael and thank you to JADE and the Center for Jewish Education for inviting me to speak and share some of my stories with you this evening. I'm really excited. And thank you also to RespectAbility and to Debbie Fink, also, for their support. I want to thank my home synagogue in Massachusetts. The name is Kerem Shalom, and of course I must thank our interpreter tonight, Sheryl Cooper and our captionist. They will both make sure that everyone has access and can understand everything through the evening. Is everybody understanding everything so far? Excellent, great. So as I look at it around, I see many friends in the audience. I see some family members. Many of you know me. You already know my story. So this may be a little repetitious for some of you, but maybe I can give you a new perspective. And I welcome my, welcome to my fireside chat. But before for anything else, I want to apologize because I might lie a little bit. I have to admit, I might have to lie. Why, because there's no fire here. There's no fireplace where I am. So it's not really a fireside chat. So I'm just being a little sarcastic. But it's kind of perfect because this month is the Jewish month of, do you know what you wish month it is now? This is the month of Adar. The month is called Adar. And what do we do during the month of Adar? What is special? It's fun, it's light. And the Talmud tells us that when we're in this month of Adar, when it starts we should be more happy. We should increase our joy and enjoyment and we should be fun and sarcastic and teasing and so forth. So I'm hoping that you won't be disappointed that there's no fireplace here. Everybody good, okay. So let me tell you a little bit about my story which is kind of a conflict between my Judaism and my deafness. I was born deaf, yes. My parents are deaf and oh, I do see my mom here tonight. Hi Mom! Okay and it's nice to see my parents. So I grew up mainstreamed. I have a strong identity as a deaf person. My mother's parents, my grandparents on my mother's side were from Europe. They survived the war, World War II and I know that since I was young, it was a very powerful life changing experience. Being Jewish was really something important for them and for all of us. And when I was a kid, when I was young I lived in New York city. My family was connected to a synagogue for the deaf. The name was Temple Beth, or for the deaf. Maybe some of you went there. You may remember it. Maybe some of you, that's in Queens, New York, and it's near the Lexington School for the Deaf. So at Temple Beth, or for the deaf, it was great. There were, it was a whole Jewish deaf community, very strong. We went there for the high holidays, different Jewish celebrations, services, all kinds of get-togethers. Deaf people would come and sign. Family members were there. And one experience hit me really hard at that synagogue or Temple Beth, or of the deaf. We got together in, it was another larger synagogue. I believe it was either a conservative or reform synagogue. And it was a very fancy building. It was big and had lots of space, lots of rooms. And we would enter through the front door and we'd make a left and walk down a long hallway, all the way to the end and go through a doorway on the left. And then we would go into another, that was like the primary praying place. That was the main sanctuary. And I remember looking in there and thinking, wow, the pews, the benches. There were so many beautifully carved wood benches and people sitting there on red velvet cushions and soft comfortable seats with a big bema. The arc was big and very impressive and ornate and the Torahs were behind the curtain. But where we deaf people, we didn't have that much space where we were. Those, that was for the hearing people. What were the deaf people doing? We had to keep on walking down the hallway to the right and then we had to go down some stairs into the basement, into the M P R, the multipurpose room. In that multipurpose room is where we met. There were bright, bright lights. There were fluorescent lights in that room. It was very harsh. The seats were plastic seats, not very comfortable. They weren't permanent. They moved around. The arc was a temporary arc that got moved around. The community that, the community was there. The spirituality was there, but I wanted to know why couldn't we use the fancy room? Why did we deaf people have to be separated? Why did we have to be less than? Why were we relegated to the basement? Why couldn't we mix in with the hearing people? And that experience hit me really hard. Later, I moved to a different synagogue in New York city in, in another area. And I went to a different synagogue, a Jewish synagogue. And I, sometimes I would complain, you know. I was trying to develop friends, friendship, with my rabbi. And I remember that, maybe I was a teenager. Maybe I was like 12. And my sister, we knew some, my sister was older than me and she was hearing. And she was studying for her bat mitzvah and she was 13 and we were reform. And I remember that my family was thinking, "will we have an interpreter "for my sister's bat mitzvah service?" So I guess I was about 11 at the time and I was walking with my parents into the rabbi, the senior rabbi's office and my father sat down and asked the rabbi, he said, "my daughter's gonna become a bat mitzvah. "She's been going to Hebrew School here for many years. "We've been supporting the synagogue. "We've been members and so forth. "Our family has joined, but you know, the mother and father of the bat mitzvah are deaf. "We have a lot of deaf friends who will be coming "to the bat mitzvah. "I would like to know, "will this synagogue provide an interpreter, "a sign language interpreter "for our daughter's bat mitzvah?" And the rabbi looked at my father and said, "no, we don't do that. "No, no, we don't do that." That was it. Simple, short and sweet. I remember as a kid looking and saying, "huh, what, what" Where was the discussion? There was no willingness to try to figure out how we're gonna compromise. That was back in like the 1980s, maybe the early 1980s. So it was a different time. And that experience really hit me hard, that the synagogue was not willing to provide an interpreter. They said, "if you want, you can provide an interpreter. "We wouldn't object if you bring your own interpreter "and put your own interpreter on the bema. "But no, we the synagogue, we don't do that." I was fascinated. But it, it really stuck with me, like kind of traumatized me. I thought Judaism is really important, but the Jewish community, maybe they don't want me. Maybe my participation is not important. Maybe my participation doesn't matter. Deaf people had such difficulty gaining access to the Jewish religion and I kind of lost interest. I graduated high school and I'm like, whatever. I said, phlah, phlah. I've had enough of Judaism for awhile. I thought, I've been bar mitzvahed. I'll move on. But I was curious about other communities and other religions and other stories. And I wanted to see how other people lived. I wanted to see, you know, what other groups that were around. What was the point of life? I was a very curious person. I wanted to look at other faiths and other traditions. You know, I knew enough about Judaism. I had studied things in college. I studied world religion. I studied other peoples' religion, except my own. That was kind of ironic. I didn't study my own religion. I thought I already knew it all and didn't need to study it, actually. Later, this, it really hit me hard. There've been many situations that have happened in my life that have had impact on me and some have been very painful. I've been searching for meaning and for the point of life. And so in my travels I came back. I thought maybe I didn't know everything about Judaism. Maybe I was fascinated with all these other religions, but maybe I should be fascinated with Judaism, too. But I hadn't yet looked at Judaism deeply. I hadn't studied it until there came a point where I decided to go back to graduate school and get a Master's degree in World Religions. But I wanted to take that opportunity to learn more about Judaism because I had missed that growing up. What was there? So I studied at graduate school in New York city. I came back home to New York city, the Big Apple, and I went to Columbia University and I studied graduate school there at Columbia. You know, Columbia university? Everybody know what I'm talking about. Okay, so Columbia, it was interesting at Columbia. They had a relationship with different colleges on the upper west side of Manhattan. And there was JTS, the Jewish Theological Cemetery the Jewish Theological Seminary. And there, that was the primary Yeshiva for the conservative Jewish rabbinic studies. The conservative movement is kind of centered there and Columbia University graduate students were permitted to take courses and learn at JTS. That was very eyeopening for me and it opened my heart as well, and I realized that I was finding out new things. I learned about other religions, but I learned about Judaism, too. It was very inspiring to me. It made me think. I thought, do I wannna get a PhD? No, but maybe I want to be a rabbi. I don't know. I hadn't had any role models as a deaf rabbi. Could a deaf person become a rabbi? Could I do that? That was a big question. I wasn't sure. You know, rabbis have to sing. I can't sing. Many rabbis have to chant the Torah and they have to do all these things. I have to know the trope. I can't do that. I can speak, but not sing. So I learned the Hebrew language, 'cause I didn't know the Hebrew language at that time. I was deaf. I thought, could I learn Hebrew as a deaf person? But I wanted to investigate and find out. So I guess at that point I was in my mid to late twenties. I went to JTS. I set up a meeting with the Admissions Department of the Rabbinical School. I introduced myself and I let them know that I am deaf and Jewish and I was a grad student at Columbia University. I was not just coming in off the street, but I was motivated and interested in learning about Hebrew language and learning more about the Torah and thinking about possibly going to Rabbinical School. And so I asked many questions about how a deaf person could do that. Could I do that? How could I do that? And during that appointment, I sat down with them and I explained. Now, I want you to understand that in my mind, I thought that they would be very excited. Wow, interesting. He's a deaf person coming and he's motivated. He wants to study and learn Torah. A Jewish, deaf person. He could be our role model. He could bring our faith to the community. We can share Judaism with the deaf community. Wow, what a great challenge. He can, wants to learn the Hebrew language and can teach it to other deaf people. We can brainstorm. We can figure out how to do all of this. But I was a little bit big headed and egotistical. And I thought that I was going to challenge them as educators at the Yeshiva. And then I thought, oh, we could pray together. So we sat down. I introduced myself and I explained my background and why I had come there and my goal. That I was a deaf person and I wanted to learn these things. And the person sitting across from me said, "I'm sorry. "We don't have anything here for people like you." That was kind of traumatizing. That is just frozen in my mind. I was shocked. I said, "wait a minute. "People like me, I'm Jewish, too. "I wanna teach Torah. "I want you to teach me the Hebrew language. "What are you talking about? "I don't understand." And they said, "I'm sorry. "We don't have anything here for people like you." I said, "what?" And then when I left the office, in the hallway, I cried. I just felt rejected. And I was kind of back to the same old story of growing up in a Jewish community. I did not feel motivated. I felt like I didn't fit in. Some of you may know my mom. Raise your hand if you know my mom. So almost all of you. Okay, many of you know my mom. Okay, so you know my mom, Dr. Irene Leigh. She's here tonight. She raised me with a very strong motivation and a strong work ethic. Don't let your deafness stop you. You want something, go for it. And don't let your deafness stop you. And don't ever say, "I can't do it because I'm deaf." That's not permitted. So I really appreciate being able to share this story here. And what's more, it taught me that if someone tells you that you can't because you're deaf, you have to prove that person wrong. You have to move forward. Don't accept when somebody says you can't. Prove them wrong. So I have a little bit of that fire from my mom. So when that person told me, I couldn't, I thought, all right, you told me I can't. That you have nothing here for people like me. We will find another way. I am even more committed to the Jewish path. I became more committed that day. My heart felt like there was something wrong with that. I'm going to teach them. That is not correct behavior. That was not the right response. For a person with a disability to be told they cannot have access. All Jews should have access to the Torah. All Jewish people should have the ability to learn the Hebrew language. All Jewish people should have the right to our faith and our traditions and our history and our heritage and all the things from our past, our ancestry. All people should have that motivation. It was time for me to roll up my sleeves and get to work. I found a tutor. I was committed to learning the Hebrew language. I went to visit different rabbinical schools. I talked to people. Would you accept a deaf person? Would you accept a deaf person? And I found two. Two places said they would accept me. I went to the first one and here's a little bit of history. Today, this month of Adar is also February. Adar is like February, right? So I'm sure you knew that. February is what? It's J D A I M. Jewish Disabilities Awareness and Inclusion month, right. Yes, no, yes, well... I feel a little bit mixed about that inside. I really have mixed feelings because as a deaf person, I do identify as a person with a disability. I know, we all have different opinions about the word disability. That deafness isn't really a disability. We're a linguistic and cultural group. But I feel like we can identify with a disability group. But in February, my life is as a person who is Jewish with a disability. I'm a person with a disability 12 months a year, not just in February. Not just Jewish Disability Awareness and Inclusion month. And then next month after it's not Jewish Disability Awareness and Inclusion month, I'm not important anymore? So for those, like, 27 or 28 days of February, that's not enough. I don't want to have just one month where I'm important. But at the same time, I know that in many communities, maybe people don't think about people with disabilities and access. So for them, those people need J D A I M and I appreciate it. But inside, I have to admit my mixed feelings, my personal mixed feelings because I think we deserve to be treated equally all the time. About my background. I got a strong message that the Jewish community did not want me. They did not want deaf people. And now with J D A I M meaning now they want us. What changed? What happened? So I want to share with you a few key issues from Judaism that fed my strong identity to my commitment to Jewish learning and to ultimately becoming a rabbi. At first, at my bar mitzvah, my Torah portion, you know, we had to read the Torah at a bar mitzvah, and so my Torah portion was from the book of Exodus. It was a Hebrew language. In Hebrew they say shemot. And that parshah or passage was Yitro. Y I T R O, Yitro. And in that parshah is the story of the Mount Sinai where God gave the Commandments, the 10 Commandments to Moses at Mount Sinai. You all know that story? You know, you're familiar with that story, okay. So it was very fascinating. That experience described how the mountain shook and the thunder and the lightning came down and, you know, it was out in the skies and the story is very powerful. And at my bar, and it was in my bar mitzvah parshah. And there was one line that really hit me hard, which in the Hebrew language, I'm gonna translate it for you. The Hebrew language says, "all the people "were gathered around Mount Sinai "and they saw the voice," the voices. "They saw the word Kol," K O L. The word kol can mean thunder. The word kol can mean thunder. It can mean voice. It can be the word Bat Kol. What does that mean? Bat Kol is the voice of God. Kol is voice like thunder or sound or noise. And the Torah says that all the people were watching. It doesn't actually say they heard it. It says they saw it. That was made a big impression on me. That spoke to my experience as a deaf person. It matched my oral background because I see things with my eyes. I'm a very visual communicator. Visual access is so important. So it was a very visual experience for me. So all of us deaf Jewish people, we see to communicate. We see for communication, right? Am I right? Give me some feedback here. So in the Torah, it says that the most holy sacred moment was when God met Moses on Mount Sinai and all of the people heard, no. They saw communication. Wow, that spoke to my personal experience. Very inspiring to me. Secondly, I want to talk about the first place that God called to Moses and said, you know, to free the slaves from Egypt, like our holiday of Passover. You know the whole Passover story, right? So Moses objected. Moses says, "I can't, I can't, I can't. "I don't want to, I don't want to. "Not me, not me. "Don't pick me." Why, God said, "there's no excuse. "Here's a whole long list of reasons. Moses says, "but I don't speak well. "I can't be a leader. "I don't speak well. "I have a heavy tongue. (speaking in foreign language) Moses says, "I don't speak well. "I have like a speech impediment." And again, that is related to the deaf experience. It's hard for deaf people to speak. And that, I felt connected to Moses because I don't speak perfectly either. And God permitted no excuses, just like my mother. Just like my mother said no excuses, God said to Moses, no excuses. So I decided I had to go ahead and I decided to get, oh, Moses brought an interpreter. His brother, Aaron. Aaron was the interpreter for Moses. Aaron helped communicate to the people. That was a very proud opportunity for Aaron to be the interpreter and Moses was okay with using an interpreter as his voice. That really spoke to me also. The third point, well, maybe there's two more. Some of you may know the word, deaf, D E A F. In the Hebrew language, what is it? Heresh, H E R E S H. It can be C H E R E S H or H E R E S H, heresh. How many times is the word heresh in the Torah? Do you know how many times? Take a guess. One, two, 10, what do you think? How many times do you think heresh is in the Torah? Five, I see five. I see one, 10. Three, people are guessing. No, no, no. The answer is two, two times. Two times the word deaf or heresh is in the Torah. It's in the Tanakh more frequently, but you know, in the five books of Moses, in the original five books, the word heresh shows up two times. In the first place is the same. It's the argument with Moses about, you know, go to Egypt and free the slaves. And Moses says, "no, no, no, I can't. "I can't, I can't speak well. "My is tongue heavy," blah, blah. And God and Moses are arguing and God is getting frustrated. Moses knows God's frustrated with him. Who makes people deaf? Who makes people blind? Who makes people who can speak? Who makes people who can't speak well? Me, God! Go, got it? So God said, "I made deaf people." As a kid, I was very impressed with that. I thought, wow, God made us deaf. Some people might say being deaf is a mistake. There's something wrong. There's something broken. It's not supposed to be that way. You're supposed to be hearing and you are messed up or broken. And people try to fix us because we're broken. No, maybe some people think that deafness is a disability or a punishment. You know, maybe somebody broke a law and they had to be punished by being given a disability or some crazy talk like that. No, I can't accept those interpretations. The Torah gave me the best answer. God made us that way for a reason. God made us that way for a purpose. We're not broken. We're not wrong. We're not a mistake. We're not a punishment. God made deaf people and that made me feel good. God made me this way and I thought that was a wonderful understanding. You know, God made some people singers. Like Lady Gaga, you know, Lady Gaga, some of you. So she's a famous singer and she's famous because she was born this way. She wrote a song, Born This Way or Born That Way. And I thought I was born this way. I was born deaf. God made me this way. That made me proud. That was a healthy image, a good identity. I'm Jewish and I'm deaf. And the last thing I wanna mention, the fourth thing, oh, I'm looking at the time. We're running out of time. But anyway, the last thing I wanna mention, later, there's a parshah called Kedoshim and in that parshah there's a very famous line that says, "do not," "that you can't get it in the way of the deaf person. "You can't block the deaf person." And I like that 'cause I like to joke with the Jewish community. That's my favorite line in the whole Torah, that you can't get in my way. You can't make fun of me. But that taught me that deafness itself is something to be cherished, to be proud of, to value, to take care of. It's not something less than or to be looked down on. That is really worth being respected for and being recognized for. We are whole. We are complete. We are beautiful, blah-blah-blah. And so finally, I decided that I was going to go ahead and become a rabbi. And I got into my Jewish studies. I learned the whole Torah, everything spiritually. And I realized that my experience and my background growing up, you know, between hearing people and deaf people was different. So I was trying to teach the hearing Jewish community that they missed something without us. If they didn't have deaf people or people with disabilities in their community, it would be their loss. They have missed something. That they would not have such a deep and rich experience without us there. And so my life's work now is to prove that some people made a mistake. When they're sorry, they said, "we don't have anything "for people like you." It's their loss. It costs them, not us. So now I'm trying to teach hearing, the hearing community why we need to value ourselves. So finally, I wanna say I do support Jewish Disabilities and Inclusion month. And I've been visiting different hearing communities and explaining why I think it's so important for our Jewish community to see what we all look like. That God made all of us. He made us of different colors and different abilities, different sexual orientations, different genders, different expressions. We don't all look alike, but we all look like God. We don't all look the same. We don't get the full experience, the religious and spiritual experience of having a relationship with God if we're all the same. So I think I wanted to, maybe I've shared too much and I'm sorry if I went over my time, but I know that it's really important during this fireside chat to give you a chance to speak also. So I apologize if I went too long and now we'll open it up to the chat. So if you have any questions or topics that you want to get into a little bit more, feel free to type your questions in the chat, and Yael will read them and pick out some of the questions. And then we can have a little discussion together. Thank you for your time.

>> Rachel Turniansky: So I am going to voice a question, Sheryl. This is Rachel. I'm asking a question from Susie. Susie asks, "what can we do as individuals "to make meaningful change "and ensure accessibility of synagogues?

>> Rabbi Darby Leigh: That is a wonderful question. Does everyone understand the question? Do you want me to repeat the question, okay. There's no one right answer. There's no one magical answer. Every synagogue has a different culture. Every synagogue has a different rabbi who cares about different issues. So every answer really depends on the specific situation. Which synagogue, who's the rabbi, where is the community? Do they have deaf people in the community and so on. My best suggestion is to start one-on-one talking with the rabbi. Confront the rabbi. Get in touch with the rabbi. Introduce yourself and explain, you know, who you are, what your background is, what your interests are, the reason you're contacting the rabbi. That you're interested in the synagogue, what you cherish, what's important, what you feel comfortable with, what kinds of, that you want to build a supportive relationship. See if the rabbi seems supportive and then contact me, so I can, you know I can give you some tips. But you want to start with the individual and establish a relationship. You can't just show up at any synagogue and expect them to be ready. It might be a very cold experience. It might be a very alienating experience. The best thing to do is contact one of the leaders, the rabbi or even a lay leader, like a board president, you know, ahead of time. Contact the person in the community. Say, "hey, I'm a deaf Jew. "Something's missing in my life. "I really want to know more about my Jewish identity. "I feel like I don't know enough about my identity. "I know about my deaf identity." I know about if I'm a man or a woman. I know my gender, my profession, if I'm retired or working and so forth. But you know, I know so many things, but I don't know enough about my Judaism. And then maybe, I want to share with you about this book. This book called Deaf Identities. This book is about different deaf identities and it's written by who? My mother, again, Dr. Irene Leigh. But there's a chapter in that book on religion and deaf identity together. And it's kind of a conflict and how we can make that more compatible. The second author on that chapter with another wonderful scholar, a deaf man, but I'm the second author with another deaf man. But the point is that if we ignore our Jewish souls, we miss something in our lives. We miss part of our life experience. Most rabbis need to be aware and I hope that rabbis are willing to work with you and negotiate. And I hope that the synagogues will do what they can to enable you to learn Torah, give you access to the synagogue and will allow you to build a relationship. That's the place to start, I think. But again, there's no one magical answer. No one right answer. It really depends on the synagogue and the individual circumstances. Another question?

>> Rachel Turniansky: Yes, here's another question. This is from Ronald Stern. He says, "a very basic question here. "Do you have a personal interpreter for your work as a rabbi?"

>> Rabbi Darby Leigh: Ron Stern is who's asking that question? Hey Ron! Nice to see you. Wow, it's been a long time. I don't see you. I'm looking for you in the Zoom. I'm looking, well, I'll look for you later. Anyway, personal interpreter, no. I have a very strong oral background. I do communicate with hearing people pretty well. Mostly it's ironic. When I tell people that my struggle with communication, I do struggle with communication. So where did I find a job? If I'm in the room, I tend to be the person who speaks. You get it. Because most of the time I'm talking. I always understand myself. So if I'm leading a service, I'm the person who's speaking. If I'm teaching a class, I tend to be the person who's teaching the class. In a one-to-one meeting with members of our community. I see some of you there, members of Kerem Shalom. Thank you for joining us tonight. So if I meet with a member one-on-one, I can communicate pretty well, no problem. The challenge is where? When we have like a board meeting, a committee meeting, that, where lots of people are taking turns and talking. That's a challenge. So sometimes I will hire an interpreter for that situation. And my synagogue is committed to access for all, including me. So if we have an event like the annual meeting, that's a big event with a lot of people coming, lots of different people giving speeches and so forth, I will ask for an interpreter for the annual meeting. So I've been there for a year and we all live on Zoom now. So the captioning also gives me access on Zoom. So I've had a lot of access with Zoom and captions. And I use interpreters for special situations, like meetings, when I feel I will need them. But full time, all day interpreter, no. Does that answer your question?

>> Rachel Turniansky: Okay, we have another question from Michele Landau, is asking about how religious institutions are not required to abide by the ADA in the USA. So how does that work with the fact that every person counts and we want to be accommodated?

>> Rabbi Darby Leigh: Well, if I understand the question about the ADA not applying, I'm not a text expert, but I believe that the religious institutions don't pay. I'm not a tax expert, sorry. I believe that religious institutions don't pay taxes. So I think that that's really a major point. But the bigger point is that I agree 1000% that all religious institutions should feel morally and ethically obligated to make sure that everyone has access to the traditions that they want. I was shocked growing up as a young, in my early twenties, and I'm sorry that we had, when they said, "I'm sorry, we have nothing for people like you." Shocked, that was such the wrong attitude from the rabbinic, from the religious community. They were supposed to support me. They were supposed to give me more support in that situation. You know, who lives in a world that doesn't meet our needs. I'm trying to create a world that meets all peoples' needs. That gives all people access. I wanna make a strong point behind the spirituality and the religion and the traditions. I think that in the mainstream religious community, people need to learn. There's a lot to learn. We meet lots of people. We are shocked. We realize some things are wrong. And that's part of my role. That's my role as an educator. I like to educate people. If somebody has missed something, if the world is missing something, we have to have 1000% access for everybody. The law does not matter. We shouldn't even have to have the ADA. Wish people should want to give access to each other. We don't, we shouldn't need to have a law to make us do things. People should just want to. Something is missing. We need, I hate to be preachy, but I like to teach. I wanna lead by example. That's what I think is really important. I hope I answered your question. Is there another question?

>> Rachel Turniansky: Yes, there's another question from Dr. E. Lynn Jacobowitz. She asks, "how did you convince hearing people "with disabilities, including," sorry. "How did you convince hearing people "that people with disabilities, "including deaf, are worthwhile? 'I understand the richness of diversity, "but they see disability as a huge cost."

>> Rabbi Darby Leigh: Hi Lynn, thank you for coming tonight. I'm very, it's, you Lynn, you are a very funny lady and I'm thrilled to see you. And I hope you have a joke for me after the presentation. But that aside, the point is, it's a wonderful point. How do we convince people to work together? It's, there's, like I said before, no magical answer. Wait, can you say the question again? I wanna make sure I understood the question. How do we convince the hearing community that people with disabilities have value? Is that what you're asking? Is that right?

>> Rachel Turniansky: Hold on. Let me find it. And maybe it might be a good time to have Dr. Jacobowitz speak for herself, but hold on.

>> Rabbi Darby Leigh: So the issue--

>> Rachel Turniansky: How, the question is, "how did you convince hearing people "that people with disabilities, "including deaf, are worthwhile?" They see, "they see disability "as a huge cost instead of seeing "the richness of diversity." - I don't know if I do. I hope I do. I've committed my life to trying to do that. Am I successful or not? I don't know. I hope I'm successful. Sometimes, yes, sometimes I fail, but I keep on working. I keep on trying. And especially in February, I'm going to all different hearing synagogues and community organizations and trying to educate people to look at the big picture and see, you know, we want a warm welcome into our community, that we want every synagogue in the United States to all be saying the same thing, that we are warm. We are welcoming. We are a welcoming community. Really, we want people to be saying that. Imagine, you know, all the different experiences when people arrive and they don't have linguistic access. You know, if somebody's blind, they might need a braille prayer book. What if the synagogue says, "I'm sorry "we don't have them here." So what is the cost? We want to think about more than money. We want to people to have a safe, independent life. We want to teach people in the community. If you buy a large print book or a braille book and give it to that person, they are ready to go. They're ready to be involved. It's just a small cost, but it shows the warm and welcoming kind of a community by providing that. Just, you know, tips. I think if you give the leaders, the lay leaders and the rabbinical leaders, you show them, you know, ways to do it, then their heart will be in the right place. So, you know, in 10 or 15 years, I think we'll see more and more awareness, more and more realization, more and more awakening, more people saying, "oh, a rabbi with a disability, okay." We can show them by our experience, by our stories. And again, I want to impress that this year's like a broken record. I'm saying the same things again and again. People need access, people with disabilities. Who's going to benefit the person, not just the person with a disability, wrong. No, not just the person. The benefit is to you. The hearing people, the benefit is to them. That's what I'm preaching. And slowly, slowly, over the years, people are starting to get the message that change doesn't happen over night, never. It's a slow process. We have to teach people one at a time. Thank you.

>> Rachel Turniansky: We have a question from Marsha Zisman. Maybe this could be our last question, 'cause it's kind of a good one. She wants to know, "did you ever return to Columbia University "and inform them that you did become a rabbi?"

>> Rabbi Darby Leigh: That is a good question. So again, I want to clarify the message. It was not from Columbia University. It was from J T S, the Jewish Theological Seminary. And again, it was a long time ago. It was the 1990s. It was the mid nineties. And did I go back, no, no. Maybe that person learned something. Oh, maybe he found out, oh, that deaf man became a rabbi. Maybe he found that out later. But no, I don't live in the past. I live in the present and I think about the future.