Chol HaMoed Pesach 5786
April 4, 2026
Disability Awareness, Acceptance, and Inclusion Shabbat
Responding to Gabriel Gojman

Gabriel, thank you for teaching us about Pesach Sheni, the second-chance Passover that you read about today and that the Jewish people will be reading on Tuesday. We're so glad that your family was able to figure out this second-chance bar mitzvah right here in our CBE community. As you taught us, it is this adaptive, pivoting, second-chance kind of thinking that has given resilience to the Jewish people throughout time.

In our parasha this morning, we find ourselves right in the middle of a very dramatic second-chance kind of moment at the foot of Mount Sinai. In the previous verses, Moses, seeing the people worshipping the Golden Calf, throws the tablets with the Ten Commandments to the ground, shattering them. The calf is then destroyed, the people are punished, and then God refuses to accompany them through the wilderness to the Promised Land. Given that on the way they're going to face many armies, that threat is catastrophic. Also, they don't even have the tablets of the covenant anymore.

So Moses tries for a second chance. He approaches the Tent of Meeting to speak directly to God. In this conversation, Moses convinces God not only to inscribe a second set of tablets with God's own hand, not only to let Moses see God's presence and know God's nature, but also to accompany the Israelites through the Sinai wilderness and all the way to the Promised Land. That's a second chance if I ever heard one.

In fact, God's self-description, known as the thirteen attributes, spoken to Moses in our parasha, features the word "*chanun*, gracious." The word "grace" in English can sound foreign to Jewish ears, can sound Christian, but as we can see here, *chen* is an idea that goes all the way back to Torah and to God. In Judaism, *chen*, grace, is unmerited kindness. In other words, kindness that you didn't have to earn, it was just given. *Chen* is an important ingredient in second chances.

Today is Disability Awareness, Acceptance, and Inclusion Shabbat at CBE, and on this day I'm thinking about the ways that the members with disabilities of this community give CBE second chances, the ways the members with disabilities offer *chen*, grace, to this congregation. We are very far from getting it right. Just look behind me at this bima, which cannot be accessed by people who use a wheelchair or for whom stairs are an obstacle. That's the most symbolically central limitation, but across the street we have a

seven story building with no elevator. We have bathrooms that are not accessible. And as we consider the many different kinds of visible and invisible disabilities that our members are living with, the list of obstacles to full inclusion and participation goes on and on.

Rather than dismiss us, rather than just opting out or leaving (as some have surely done), many members of CBE who have disabilities have chosen with patience and *chen*/grace, to advocate for incremental improvements. You, members of this congregation, have given us second chances again and again. Maribeth Batcha, our Director of Membership and Engagement, is working steadily with a group called the REDI Team to identify what needs to change here and to make those changes one at a time. It's not quick, it's not easy, but we are making real progress.

It started with our Neurodiversity Committee, which advocated for the hiring of accessibility and inclusion staff in both our Early Childhood Center and Yachad, our Hebrew School. These staff have supported families and created alternatives and adaptations not just for neurodiverse kids but for kids with a full range of different learning and accessibility needs. On holidays like Purim and Hanukkah, we have sensory sensitive programs. In the back of our sanctuary and chapel, we have fidgets, reading glasses, and headphones to block noise. We have large print and braille siddurim/prayerbooks. Our b'nei mitzvah program works with any and every young person who wants to become b'nei mitzvah, adapting the service to their needs and abilities. Soon we will begin to ask about accessibility needs on every registration form f for every event, class, and program, so that we can do better and so that we can better understand the needs of our members.

We are blessed with incredible advocates and experts in our community. I want to share with you today some words from our member Serena Krombach, whose brother Darby Leigh is a deaf rabbi. Together they authored a chapter of a new book called *A Different Spirit: Creating Meaningful B'nai Mitzvah for Students with Disabilities.* Here's what Serena wrote:

"My brother, Rabbi Darby Leigh, was asked to contribute a chapter on working with deaf b'nei mitzvah students to a groundbreaking book, *A Different Spirit: Creating Meaningful B'nai Mitzvah for Children with Disabilities,* which was just published. Darby is the rabbi of a hearing congregation in Massachusetts and one of just a few deaf rabbis in the country. He communicates well in the hearing world: he uses hearing aids and speaks and reads lips (now commonly called "speech reading," which is really more accurate). Since I'm a writer and an educator, not to mention a hearing person who grew up witnessing and having to mediate the communication

barriers my deaf brother and parents experienced—and since I'm also Darby's favorite sister (he only has one sister)—he invited me to write the chapter with him.

We started by reflecting on our own experiences becoming b'nei mitzvah in the 1980s. We have mostly fond memories, but some still sting: At the time of my bat mitzvah, our synagogue refused to locate, hire, or pay for sign language interpreters to make the service accessible to family members and friends. When Darby began his bar mitzvah study, he was discouraged from chanting Torah, despite his skill in oral communication and eagerness to learn.

We reached out to other families and heard some painful stories of encountering harmful assumptions about deaf b'nei mitzvah students' potential for learning and achievement. For example, rather than help her to find meaning in her Torah portion during her preparation, Dina (names are pseudonyms), whose first language is ASL, remembers:

> Correct pronunciation was the only goal, and the cantor was only trying to get his job done. To me, it all seemed to be simply speech therapy….I felt ignorant. Something was wrong.

About her experience of the ceremony, Dina wrote:

> I couldn't even read the words on his mouth. . . . My mind was trying to bail me out by trying to hear better, but my ears wouldn't cooperate. All decoding attempts failed. . . . I stood there feeling foolish, betrayed. This was the holy ritual in which I was to become a woman in the eyes of Jewish tradition. But I didn't feel the joy I was entitled to. After twelve months of speech therapy with the cantor, I felt the rabbi and the cantor stole the show.

Dina told us that because her clergy and tutors would not break down the barriers to communication she faced, "I knew I could never make peace with God in the hearing world." But the imperative to do so comes from Torah itself! The book of Exodus says that every member of the community received Torah as Moses revealed it at Sinai, and "All the people saw the sounds" (chapter 20, verse 15). Maybe this was literally so—in that moment, people who

used their eyes to communicate accessed Torah equally to those who used their ears. Or, as Rabbi Yochanan taught, "When God's voice came forth at Mount Sinai, it divided itself into seventy human languages, so that the whole world might understand it, and every nation heard it in their own language'" (Shemot Rabbah 5:9). In Darby's translation of the first line of the Sh'ma, "Hear O Israel," into ASL, instead of the literal "hear," which doesn't feel right, he prefers the sign for "pay attention"—an interpretation that ensures that those who can't literally hear are fully included in *am Yisrael.*

Shira's experience of her recent bat mitzvah, retold by her mother, stands in stark contrast with Dina's:

> [Being tutored by a Deaf rabbi] completely shifted her framework as a Jewish person . . . We felt very prepared and truly embraced by our community and by the rabbi—she was able to really push our community to support our daughter more fully. Shira now has an interpreter at religious school and is truly a part of the Jewish community. This was an incredible experience for our family.

Everyone, Deaf or not, who joins with Deaf students on their learning journeys should be guiding them toward a future in which they feel Judaism belongs to them, and they belong in the Jewish community.

Two Torah verses explicitly mention deafness. In Exodus, chapter 4, Moses is in dialogue with God at the burning bush. Moses responds to God's charge that Moses rescue the people of Israel from slavery by protesting that he is "slow of speech and slow of tongue." God replies, "Who gives humans speech? Who makes them dumb or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, GOD?" As all people are created in God's image, so, God emphasizes, are those with these disabilities, and Moses can thus rise to lead the people despite it—being "slow of speech" does not excuse him from his obligation!—or even because of it.

Leviticus, chapter 19, verse 14, is among the cluster of verses often known as the Holiness Code. The beginning of the verse reads, "You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block

before the blind." According to Rashi, "the deaf" are specifically mentioned to simply emphasize a general statement about all people: you shouldn't insult anyone, even those who can't hear you insult them!

We read [present tense] these verses as a rationale for encouraging and supporting Deaf people's inclusion in the Jewish community and among its leaders. Nonetheless, the ancient rabbis categorically excluded deaf people from full participation in Jewish ritual life. Deaf people were assumed to lack intellectual ability; but deaf people were often not given access to language, and language deprivation can indeed have negative cognitive effects. "Deaf and dumb," a term that arose in English in the 19th century, may have meant simply "deaf-mute" to some, but Deaf people have throughout the generations generally been treated as if they were unable to learn and succeed just as well as those who can hear. In 2011—not that long ago!—the Conservative movement performed a legal analysis of the rabbis' proscriptions against people with disabilities and found instead Talmudic text to refute them, declaring in an official statement that sign language translations of Torah from the bimah fulfilled the mitzvah of reading Torah on Shabbat. Today, many movements within Judaism and numerous synagogues across the country affirm, in statement and practice, the full inclusion of all people.

CBE has been working hard to increase our awareness of the particular needs of our members with disabilities and to improve access to all of our services and programs. Giving access to people who are deaf and use sign language requires a fair amount of work to find and hire interpreters and collaborate with them on logistics, reserve front pews for deaf guests, and share the rabbi's sermon in advance (though it's not always written that far in advance!) for guests to read—all of which CBE did for my older son Declan's bar mitzvah in 2018. (My younger son Griffin's bar mitzvah was during the pandemic, so deaf guests had access through Zoom captions, which were not quite accurate but good enough.)

All through Declan's bar mitzvah I kept remembering how uncomfortable I used to feel sitting with my parents in the synagogue where Darby and I went to Hebrew school, knowing that none of the spoken English (of which there was a lot in those old-school Reform services!) that I could hear meant anything to them. The joy I felt as a parent seeing my son become bar mitzvah was

exponentially increased by the joy I felt as a daughter, seeing my parents experience one of the greatest simchas known to Jewish grandparents everywhere without barriers to understanding."

We do hire sign language interpreters when we know in advance there will be ASL users in the congregation or at any of our programs – in fact we just had ASL interpreters here in the sanctuary two weeks ago – and starting today we are implementing the use of ListenWiFi, an assisted listening system that will allow members with mild to moderate hearing loss to stream our audio content through their smart phones into their hearing aids or earphones. We're testing it in our Sanctuary and will be expanding its use to the chapel and all other events. If you need help getting connected, Maribeth can help you. If you're using it, please give us feedback.

But it's not only technical adaptations, and ultimately a massive construction project, that are needed here. We all have a role to play in making this congregation fully accessible, aware, and inclusive. We can find a key to our role in the parasha. When Moses walks into the Tent of Meeting to appeal to God to give them a second chance and accompany the people through the wilderness, God replies in an interesting way. If you just read the English, it doesn't sound so interesting. It's commonly translated: "And God said, I will go in the lead and I will lighten your burden." Sounds like a pretty straightforward win for Moses, exactly what he was asking for.
But in Hebrew the words are:

וַיֹּאמֶר פָּנַי יֵלֵכוּ וַהֲנִחֹתִי לָךְ׃

The Medieval commentators Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Ramban all agree that the word *panai* should be read non-literally as "My presence, My self, I." And you could interpret the word *panai* to also mean "in the lead" as the English translation suggests, because the word *panai* with a *lamed* in front, *lifnei,* means before. So we see how the English translation came to be what it is. "I will go before you, I will go in the lead." But the word *panai* literally means "My face." In other words, God says "My face will go with you."

This is important because rather than suggesting that God is going in front, it suggests that God is traveling right along with the people. And rather than an amorphous self or presence, we have the very evocative image of God's face. This matters, specifically because God's face turning toward us, or lifting toward us, is associated with protection and with blessing. Think, for example, of the second and third blessings in the threefold priestly benediction:

יָאֵר יְהוָה | פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וִיחֻנֶּךָּ׃

May God's face shine upon you and be gracious with you. (There's that word "grace" again)

יִשָּׂא יְהוָה ׀ פָּנָיו֙ אֵלֶ֔יךָ וְיָשֵׂ֥ם לְךָ֖ שָׁלֽוֹם׃

May God's face lift toward you and grant you peace.

Our member Joan Peters came to meet with me a few months ago to advocate for people with disabilities in this community. One of her requests went to the heart of this verse. She said that one of the most upsetting things to her at CBE was our welcome statement, the statement we read at the beginning of our announcements each week about how everyone is included. This statement was so painful to her because it implied total inclusion while further making people with disabilities invisible. She said, "You say we're all welcome, but you don't even acknowledge that some of us can't get into the room." It's like we were trumpeting how much we care, without even seeing the people who are excluded. She was right. If you listen carefully next time, you will know that the welcome statement is different now in response to her advocacy.

Isn't that what we all need – to be seen? I don't mean literally the faculty of vision. I mean for our faces to turn toward one another in acknowledgement, in welcome, in awareness, in inclusion?

Yes, one day, after our capital campaign, the ramps to this bima are going to matter. Yes, one day when we build it, the elevator across the street is going to matter. Yes, accessible bathrooms are going to matter. But all of those changes will be incomplete until we, the members of this community, turn our faces toward the people with disabilities in our midst.

"My face will go with you," God says, "and lighten your burden." That's it. Across the full spectrum of disabilities and abilities, that's what every one of us needs. And that's what every one of us has the power to do.

Shabbat Shalom.