

“And *all* the people *saw* the thunder and the flames, the *sound* of the shofar and the smoking mountain” (20:15). Everyone saw and heard. Is it possible that among several million people there was not one single person who was blind or deaf? However, since the Torah states that *all* the people saw-and later we are told that they all heard and answered (24:7), our Chazal (Mechilta-see Torah Temima) derive that all blind, deaf, and mute people were miraculously healed. (Torah represents perfection, and it is fitting that anyone who attaches himself/herself to the Torah, as Bnei Yisrael did at the time of Ma’amad Har Sinai (Revelation), should be cured of all physical imperfection.

Another level of interpretation, as suggested by Rabbi Weiss, could be that perhaps at Revelation, there were those who were not in perfect physical shape and could not hear or see. The Torah is suggesting that even the hearing impaired were able to overcome this limitation by greater ability to see. This could be the meaning of ‘seeing the thunder’. Unable to hear, they compensated with their ability to see. Handicapped people have been known to develop skill in other areas which serve to compensate their shortcoming.

The idea we learn from all this is that all handicapped people, physical or mental, have a place in Judaism, in Torah and Jewish community. Some of our greatest leaders struggled with limitations. Yitzchak couldn’t see; Ya’akov was lame for a period of time and Moshe suffered from a speech defect. Despite these difficulties, they rose to great heights. The Gemara (Eiruvim 54b) tells the story of Rabbi Preida who had a student with a mental disability, which required hearing the same information four hundred times until he finally comprehended the material. Rabbi Preida himself taught this student. I was very pleased to hear Rabbi Shlomo Aviner of Jerusalem answer a woman who asked, “I am a girl in my twenties, should I accept to see a prospective shidduch arrangement with a man who wears a hearing aid?” Rabbi Aviner responded, “Positively yes, he may possess many other good qualities that override his handicap,”

Just as at Sinai, everyone including those with limitations was welcomed so too must we be embracing of Jews in our communities. I am proud to say that my Shul in Boro Park was one of the few shuls that encouraged and welcomed handicapped members of ‘Women’s League’ to join and participate in our minyan.

It is not surprising then that the parasha concludes with the command that *ramps and not steps* should lead up to the Mizbei’ach (20:23). In addition to the issue of modesty, a ramp represents accessibility. Only a shul that is fully accessible to all and embraces all can be deemed a *beautiful shul*. How wonderful it is to daven in a shul where among the mitpallelim are people with canes, walkers, wheelchairs and all standing together in awe while listening to the reading of the “Aseret HaDibrot” [Ten Commandments].