

ROSH HA SHANAH FEATURE

IN HONOR OF ROSH HA SHANAH, JEWISH NEW YEAR OF 5734, THE LAS VEGAS ISRAELITE WILL PUBLISH A SERIES OF STORIES TO COMMEMORATE THE HOLIDAY WHICH FALLS ON THE FIRST TWO DAYS OF THE MONTH OF TISHRI, THURS, SEPT. 27, & FRI, SEPT. 28. ROSH HA SHANAH MARKS THE BEGINNING OF THE 10 DAYS OF REPENTANCE, AWE-INSPIRING, DAYS CULMINATING AT YOM KIPPUR, ONSAT., OCT. 6th

Jewish Blind Equality

by GERALD M. KASS

(Asso. Dir. Jewish Braille Inst. of Amer.)

At a recent convention of over 1500 blind in New York City, Dr. Jacob Freid, Executive Director of the Jewish Braille Institute of America said, "The blind will no longer remain as wards of society but will determine their own destiny exercising their abilities and talents as full-fledged members of their communities." In so expressing a growing belief that the blind by right shall assume positions in accordance with their capabilities, Dr. Freid summarized the mission of the Jewish Braille Institute of America whose efforts he has directed for nearly a quarter of a century.

The origin of the Jewish Braille Institute

can be traced to 1931 when Leopold Dubov, a blind insurance agent and musician, assisted by Rabbi Michael Aaronsohn who had been blinded in World War I appealed to the organized Jewish community to support an institute that would enable blind Jewry to participate on an equal basis with sighted Jews in their historical, religious and cultural birthright. Prior to that time such equality was unconsciously denied. There were no masterworks of Jewish literature in braille; the blind Jew had no prayerbook with which to attend synagogue and no blind Jewish youngster had ever been able to master the traditional Hebrew language since Hebrew braille was non-existent.

The Jewish Braille Institute, whose headquarters are in New York City, now makes its services available throughout the U.S. and forty-three countries the world over, including Israel. These services include a monthly magazine in braille, The Jewish Braille Review, edited by Dr. Freid, a braille library of over 50,000 volumes circulated free-of-charge; and an assortment of material given to the blind such as Bibles, Prayerbooks, Passover Haggadahs and a comprehensive selection of educational materials. The Institute sponsors an International Literary Competition Contest helping to promote the talents of blind writers. Past judges of this competition have included Pearl Buck, Mark Van Doren and Eleanor Roosevelt.

For the JBI equality for the blind does not mean equality to receive services. Equality is not achieved when the Jewish blind only reap the advantages of a 4,000 year tradition. No man is truly free until he is part of the creativity and labor bringing about that which he treasures. The Jewish blind have now become leaders within the Jewish community making positive contribution to a vibrant heritage of which they are now creators as well as inheritors.

Steve Cassell was brought to the JBI as an 8 year old blind child who would be the first male in his family's history not to participate in the milestone of Bar Mitzvah. His parents' sadness was lifted to hope and then joy when they were told -- "Your son will learn Hebrew braille and become a Bar Mitzvah just as his father and grandfather have done." To date over 200 blind boys and girls have become Bar or Bat Mitzvah and over 1200 have attended their synagogue religious schools. A dream of being a cantor. The dream has been achieved. Steven is now 30 years old and his voice inspires those whom he leads in prayer -- he has become the first cantor in Jewish history who was blind from birth. Other blind students, male and female, now attend cantorial institutes and Jewish teachers' colleges. It is anticipated that the first rabbinical student, blind from birth, will soon begin his seminary training. These young people shall emerge as leaders of the Jewish community as did Neil Freeling, the first blind man to serve as President of a congregation.

Lea Levavi has been described as the most prolific newspaper writer in Israel. Born in Brooklyn, she grew up with the JBI's philosophy strong in her mind and the JBI's services constantly available to her. In a personal search to find professional and spiritual fulfillment, she migrated to Israel just two years ago. She now writes a weekly column for the Jerusalem Post and is a respected journalist with expertise on Arab-Israel affairs. She covers as many as four interviews a day and through her writing educates her readers on a variety of topics crucial to life in Israel. Another JBI alumna in Israel is Ellen Rubin a rehabilitation counselor for the blind who has published in the field. She is currently working at the George Simmons Center in Beesheva teaching skills to the blind of the Negev.

The new generation of Jewish blind, imbued with the JBI philosophy, is emerging. They create and inspire within the Jewish community and the larger community as well. They are college educated, professionally employed, heads of households and civic leaders. Included in their ranks are teachers, doctors, lawyers, management consultants, businessmen -- they enrich all fields in which talented people are welcome.

The Jewish Braille Institute joins the blind in their quest for equality. "The JBI is not merely an agency for the blind" explained Dr. Freid. "We are of the blind. Leading board members of our Institute are blind. Our goals are determined by the needs that blind people tell us they have not by what we assume they should be." He continues, "the ethics of the fathers command us saying 'separate thyself not from the community.' The Jewish blind are fulfilling this commandment in the joy of creative-participating. They are achieving the equality that blind people in general have been seeking for thousands of years."

WASHINGTON (WNS) -- Sen. Walter Mondale (D. Minn.) plans to propose legislation for joint Israeli-American research and other activities regarding education for disadvantaged children.

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