

# Bar mitzvah boy breaks down barriers for the deaf community

Josh Malinsky's family say that preparing for the bar mitzvah has enabled them to connect with their Jewish heritage for the first time

[Daniel Ben-David](#)



The Jewish community is rightly proud of its emphasis on its inclusion of a broad spectrum of individuals, but when it comes to making accommodations for deaf people, it would seem that there is still some way to go.

The Malinsky family, parents Tina and Darryl, and children Josh and Eve, all of whom are deaf, “just kind of let go” of Judaism and disconnected from the community due to what they consider a lack of concerted engagement with deaf people.

Sitting with her family and signing over Zoom through BSL interpreter and family friend, Vicki Ashmore, Tina says: “We feel let down by the Jewish community.”

Tina, 48, a sixth-generation deaf person, grew up in a Jewish family and “always felt and always knew” she was Jewish but, despite marking major holidays, has never felt able to fully engage with Jewish services or embrace the community.

Being interviewed shortly before Deaf Awareness Week, which runs until May 11, she says: “Honestly, for deaf people, there still exists many barriers to entering regular society. But trying to enter the Jewish community is even worse because we can’t access synagogue services or join in on celebrations. We have tried, but we really can’t. We don’t fit into the hearing Jewish community. It’s really difficult to build relationships with people or be useful.”



Josh Malinsky with his family

Some efforts have been made by shuls to accommodate deaf people, but one of the main obstacles is that for small communities with limited financial resources, it is not cost-effective to make services accessible for them when deaf Jews are so few in number. But it is a problem that requires a solution, lest the British Jewish community further alienates deaf individuals, and the experience of the Malinsky family is repeated.

“We feel much more a part of the deaf culture community than the Jewish community,” Tina says. “I think because it is that one that made us feel most welcome, whereas we don’t feel represented in the Jewish community.

“Especially since I’ve had my kids, Josh and Eve, who are both deaf, we are shifting more towards non-Jewish families with deaf children who we can befriend and with whom we feel more engaged.”

Nevertheless, the Malinsky family has, in the last few months, “begun a journey of return” to engage more with Jewish customs, thanks to the upcoming bar mitzvah of son Josh, which is proving to be a learning experience for the whole family. All it took was some engagement from a person able to bridge the divide. Before Vicki joined us to teach us about Hebrew and Judaism, we weren’t terribly interested,” Tina said, but through preparing for Josh’s bar mitzvah, the family has become members of East London & Essex Liberal Synagogue (ELES).



Josh Malinsky with his bar mitzvah teacher Vicki Ashmore

Once Josh, who turned 13 last month and is the seventh generation of his family to be deaf, expressed his desire to have a bar mitzvah, his mother arranged for him to study with Vicki, whom she had met at the March Against Antisemitism in November 2023. Together, the three are building Josh's bar mitzvah "from scratch" so it best suits him. It will be the first time Vicki has helped prepare someone profoundly deaf for their bar mitzvah.

Josh goes to a residential deaf school during the week, where he has lots of friends. He explains: "My friends understand what a bar mitzvah is a little bit, because I've been telling them about it – that it's a ceremony where I become a man."

Tina asks him: "What does it mean to become a man to you?", to which he responds: "Responsibility."

It is Josh's hope that more people would take the time to learn some basic sign language in order to be more inclusive but, in the meantime, he is "looking forward" to his bar mitzvah, which is taking place this coming Shabbat.

He and Vicki have now been preparing for just under a year. On the day, Josh will finger spell the words of his parashah, and Vicki will be standing nearby to speak the words he signs.

Josh Malinsky preparing for his bar mitzvah

Vicki said: "It's a very powerful experience to reintroduce a Jewish family to their cultural roots, teaching them why Jews do what they do, like why we eat challah on Shabbat or why Israel is important to us." New York City-born Vicki was raised in an Orthodox community and attended a seminary before moving to the UK in 1995, where she worked in a cheder in Bromley, south-east London, eventually becoming head teacher and bar/bat mitzvah tutor at Bromley Reform Synagogue.

In the Jewish Deaf Association (JDA) centre in Finchley, she has overseen a visit from the Board of Deputies and their Jewish Living Experience Exhibition, which is for Jewish and non-Jewish members of the deaf community to view and to educate themselves about Jewish beliefs and practices.

She is also the creator of DeafShul, a recently launched monthly Friday Night service to enable deaf people to participate and learn about Judaism.

The Malinsky family with East London and Essex Liberal Synagogue rabbi, Richard Jacobi

There are approximately 900,000 people in the UK who are severely or profoundly deaf, or roughly one to two people per 100.

Vicki believes it to be a “complete injustice” that Jewish people who happen to be deaf are still, today, not able to fully engage with their community or with Judaism, and it is why Tina and Darryl, by their own admission, hardly know anything about Judaism. It is Vicki’s aim to “change the philosophy” of the community and its approach to deaf people, so it can become more aware and inclusive.

She said: “The deaf community really is special, and it is suffering at the hands of hearing people, who just don’t understand the challenges they face.

“Anyone who is Jewish and profoundly deaf are members of our community as much as any of us. They are our members and our people, and they have been excluded for far too long.”