

Courage, grit and determination

Michael Plaskow goes to great lengths to see that the deaf do not miss out on the major religious milestones of life. One gap he has discovered is the need to teach Judaism not only to deaf children, but also to the children of deaf parents. "They can miss out just as much, because they cannot learn so easily from their parents."

When hearing children are born to deaf parents, responsibility is put on their shoulders early. They are the ones who must answer the telephone and open the front door.

Benny Steiner, who acted as interpreter at the JDA Seder, is one of four hearing children; his father, mother and uncle (his mother's brother) are all deaf.

"Until I was 12, I thought all parents were deaf," said the 20-year-old art student. "I was born into it. I picked up sign language at home, although later I did take a proper course in it. I always made the phone calls and spoke to the waiters in restaurants.

"Within the family unit, no one felt left out. But outside, I felt my parents were being patronised." His father is director of a family haberdashery business in Brick Lane, in the East End.

Jeremy Silver, of Hendon, also took to responsibility early. His deaf father works with the accounts department of a Jewish charitable organisation, but it was Jeremy who telephoned the "Jewish Chronicle" to see if a reporter would be interested in the story of his barmitzvah, where, by an unfortunate oversight, his father was not called up to the Reading of the Law.

His mother, also deaf, had been ill before his barmitzvah. Her problem of finding the right hospital not only to treat her illness, but to communicate with her to help her through it, illustrates one of the many problems deaf people face.

Despite the extra workload, Jeremy and his younger sister, Melody, are normal children who like nothing better than whizzing round the block on their bicycles.

Ilan Dwek, whose father is an engineer and mother a tourist guide, went to deaf schools in London and the home counties before taking a degree in maths and statistics at Hatfield Polytechnic, a college with a strong social conscience. His concentration on his studies paid off when he won the college's main prize two years ago. He now works as a computer programmer.



Ilan Dwek: won college's top prize

For Sandra David, aged 31, of Finchley, training to become a teacher of the deaf has been a long and expensive struggle. Like Ilan Dwek, she went to the prestigious Mary Hare Grammar School for the Deaf in Newbury, Berkshire, which has an annual intake of only 30 children. She has had to find £13,000 through educational trusts and sponsorships to pay for an interpreter for her postgraduate course at Hatfield Polytechnic.

Sandra, the only child of deaf parents, clearly does not let handicap stand in her way. After leaving school, she spent six months on a kibbutz and three months working in an Israeli hotel. With the money she earned, she travelled round Europe with a friend for three months.

She graduated from the City Literary Institute's centre for the deaf, trained to teach deaf children. Her last hurdle, the Hatfield course, is a qualification in teaching hearing children, to complete an all-round training.

Not everyone has the talent, grit and dedication of this courageous young woman. But all deaf people know they have to struggle harder to make their way through life. They can achieve it. But they desperately need our awareness and support.