

Opinion  
THINKING ALOUD

# Piercing The Darkness

**Francine Klagsbrun**  
*Special To The Jewish Week*

On the last Passover of my father's life, we had a small seder at his home. My mother had died a few months earlier and my father, sad and very old — he was over a hundred — wanted the intimacy of his immediate family. My husband, brother, daughter, son-in-law and aunt sat around the table with him, secretly wondering how we were going to get through the evening. My father had become almost completely blind and mostly deaf with age, but his mind was sharp. We knew he would insist on going through the entire Passover Haggadah, yet because he couldn't see to read it, he would not be able to participate as he always had. We feared he would feel more alone and left out than ever.

He amazed us. As it turned out, he knew every word of the Haggadah by heart. He recited the ancient phrases clearly, sang the songs with gusto, and seemed transported. It was as though the texts of freedom he had studied through the years had now freed him, pushing away the darkness and, at least for one evening, surrounding him with light.

I thought about that evening a few weeks ago when we read the Torah portion about the blind Isaac, tricked into giving his blessing to the wrong son. Would our history have turned out differently had Isaac been able to see that the "hands of Esau" really belonged to Jacob? Probably

not: the Torah leans toward emphasizing Jacob's role as progenitor of the Jewish people. But Isaac's blindness, like my father's, reminds us of how shut off and vulnerable a person without sight can be, especially an elderly person who had vision all his life.

These ruminations about eyesight led me the other day to check in on an organization devoted to enhancing the lives of people with vision loss, JBI. Established 77 years ago as the Jewish Braille Institute, it has evolved into far more than that name implied. It has become the main provider here and abroad of a wide range of books of Jewish interest for the blind and visually impaired. The numbers of such persons have so escalated over the years that the agency recently expanded its headquarters in Manhattan, complete with state of the art studios for recording audio books (called "talking books") and a climate-controlled archive for storing its vast library of books in Braille and large print.

With people living longer, the number of visually impaired keeps growing. The National Eye Institute estimates that 20 percent of all Americans over 65 cannot read standard print, even with corrective eyeglasses. It has also been estimated that about 250,000 American Jews over the age of 60 have some form of visual impairment. All those figures are expected to double as the baby boomer generation ages.

The ever-increasing figures keep JBI's small staff and cadre of volunteers busy producing materials. Those ma-

terials are available free of charge, and all anyone needs do is contact the JBI at [www.jlibrary.org](http://www.jlibrary.org) and arrange to become a subscriber.



The Jewish Braille Institute intervenes to keep persons who have lost their vision from pulling into themselves and away from others.

The Jewish community, like society at large, always concerns itself with keeping young people committed. With good reason, of course. They are our future. When the young Holtzberg couple was brutally murdered in Mumbai, our hearts crumbled in pain for them, their orphaned child, their bereft parents, and, on another level, all of us. They represented the best in the community; they had so much ahead of them, so much yet to give to so many. It's different with older people. There is less ahead and more behind them. Yet, when the elderly drop out of community life, the community also loses — their smarts, their experience, their dreams. We are blessed in

our community with organizations that both aid the elderly and involve them in vital activities. Dorot, JASA and others have volunteer programs for older people to interact with younger ones, with each helping and learning from the other.

JBI fills a different need. It intervenes to keep persons who have lost their vision from pulling into themselves and away from others. For a visually impaired Cleveland woman who wanted to take a college course in Jewish ethics, volunteers recorded all her required texts. For an elderly man in Israel with low vision, JBI supplied enlarged articles from a favorite magazine. The agency produces large print and audio prayerbooks, from every Jewish denomination, that people may keep permanently. Currently Theodore Bikel and other volunteers are recording the Jewish Publication Society's Tanach, its complete Bible, for audio use.

My father's knowledge of his beloved texts pierced the gloom that might have enveloped his last Passover. As we enter the festival of lights, it's good to know that books can bring light to our elderly, even when they no longer see the words in them. ■

Francine Klagsbrun's most recent book is "The Fourth Commandment: Remember the Sabbath Day."

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