

“Who Opens the Eyes of the Blind” and “Who Directs the Steps of Humans”

An Exercise in Empathy and Awareness

We are grateful to our partner, Yachad, for contributing this activity.

Can you imagine life without being able to see? What would things look like? What would things feel like? How different and/or similar is it from your typical routine?

About seven million adults in America are visually impaired. For some people, this means they can't see anything at all. For others, it may mean that they can see limited shapes and colors.



[Check out more of Yachad's activities.](#)

Activity

Please join us for a moment as you step into the shoes of someone with a visual impairment by completing this activity to the best of your ability. The goal of simulating blindness is to create enhanced empathy and greater awareness. It is not about having pity for the visually impaired, but rather as a way of experiencing different ways in which we encounter the world around us. The goal of experiencing the guide role is to understand how we can be attuned to others' needs, to enable them to become independent and “take their own steps.”

You are taking a trip to the grocery store to buy some bread. Find a partner to go with you.

Supplies

Blindfold, about \$15 broken up in bills and coins (with pennies, nickels, dimes, and quarters), and a wallet.



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Task

1

Designate one person to be the guide and one person to be the learner. The learner should put on the blindfold. Although your eyes are covered, you may still be able to see a little and that's okay! Many people with visual impairment can see some light and forms.

2

The learner is now visually impaired and must be empowered by the guide to organize, sort, and arrange money in order to pay for bread at the grocery store independently.

3

The guide should lead the learner to the money and wallet. With whatever strategies you see fit, the guide should enable the learner to separate the different kinds of coins and bills into different areas of the wallet. Remember, it is important to empower the learner to express what they need and want to learn, rather than assuming that the guide knows it.

Tip: The guide can think about ways to differentiate the money by type. For example, coins of different values are different sizes, and bills can be folded in unique ways. The guide must keep in mind that they are constantly aware of the learner's needs and desires, remembering that the ultimate objective is for the learner to be independent.

4

Spend some time practicing until you feel confident that the learner is comfortable completing this task and the wallet has been arranged by the learner in a way that will allow them to retrieve the money when needed.

Now it's time to put what you've learned into practice. Your task is to take that trip to the grocery store to buy bread. Take the wallet with you.

5

As you walk through the store, the learner will rely on the guide for navigation.

Tip: Many people who are visually impaired find that it is most comfortable and helpful to hold onto the area of the arm just above the elbow of a guide, but of course, permission and consent must always be gained before touching another person. Touching is not necessary; verbal cues also work.

6

Once you find your bread, bring it to the cashier to pay. Here is where the learner must use their new strategies to pay on their own.

Stop and think: As the learner, you can pay in exact change, but if you pay in a larger quantity and receive change from the cashier, how would you know that you received the correct amount of change?



Discussion

- How did this experience feel for the learner? What did you notice? What came easily? What felt more difficult?
- How did this experience feel for the guide? What did you notice? What came easily? What parts felt more difficult?
- From the perspective of the learner, what was one thing the guide did that was helpful?
- From the perspective of the guide, what was one thing you learned from the learner?
- What is one way we can make our surroundings more accessible to individuals with visual impairments?

The impact that trust has on the lived experiences of those who are visually impaired is of great significance. When we say the morning blessing of “Who opens the eyes of the blind,” we can feel grateful to G-d for the sights we see through our own eyes and acknowledge how much people with visual impairments rely on trusting the eyes of others. We thank G-d for what we see and what we trust is there. When we say the morning blessing of “Who directs the steps of humans,” we can be grateful for our G-d-given ability to guide others, to encourage them, and enable them to learn and become independent.

This month, we encourage you to think about how we can imitate G-d’s ways; help keep the eyes and opportunities open for people with visual impairments; and direct the steps of others in a compassionate, empowering, and enabling way.

