Learning through their fingertips

By Cara Hogan

Like most 13-year-old Jews, Diya Holladay is preparing for her bat mitzvah. The only difference is instead of reading from the Torah, Holladay uses Jewish education books translated into Braille. She was born blind and autistic, but with the help of Gateways: Access to Jewish Education in Newton and the New York City-based Jewish Braille Institute, she and her family have continued her Jewish education.

“If it wasn’t for Gateways, we would need to have a tutor or organize our own program for Jewish education,” said Holladay’s mother Caryl Navy, who also suffers from a degenerative eye disease that left her blind at age 11.

Gateways provides Jewish education for 60 local children with disabilities through programs that include a Sunday school, a b’nai mitzvah program and a teen program that focuses on mitzvot and social action.

Nancy Magier, Jewish education program coordinator at Gateways, said the organization creates a curriculum that works for children with all different levels of abilities, which is sometimes a challenge.

“Our Hebrew school is very much like other Hebrew schools, but all of our students have special needs,” said Magier. “They have diverse learning needs. All of our lessons always have special accommodations so every student can be included and taught in the way that they learn best.”

For a blind student, Mager said Gateways teachers would usually Braille the student to learn through touch. But because of autism, Holladay is resistant to touch. Instead, they focus on teaching her through language and especially song.

“She really loves music and dance and that’s been an important part of helping her learning into the Gateways program,” said Navy. “She’s been learning Hebrew words here and there, but she hasn’t been reading Hebrew in Braille yet.”

Navy said the teachers thought that learning Hebrew would be confusing because her daughter’s reading skills are still elementary. The difficulty is compounded because Braille uses the same characters no matter the language. An Aleph is the same as an A.

So Holladay learns most of her Braille at home with her mother, who teaches her using materials available through the Jewish Braille Institute.

“Do try to raise awareness for religious schools, should they have a child who is visually impaired,” said Radich. “We can produce custom materials for the student. If a child needs math or science textbooks, they go to the state for that; but there’s no resource other than JBI for Jewish materials.”

Navy partners with JBI through Duxbury Systems Inc., where she and her husband both work. The company produces software for JBI that translates text into Braille in different languages, including Hebrew. She also ordered books from JBI when she was a child.

“For me, JBI actually taught me Hebrew Braille when I was growing up,” said Navy. “They provided a tutor and helped me prepare for my bat mitzvah.”

Between Gateways and JBI, Navy has the resources to make sure that her daughter will not miss out on any aspect of her Jewish education.

For more information about Gateways: Access to Jewish Education or the Jewish Braille Institute, go to www.gateways.org or www.jbraille.org, respectively.