



אַבֶּן מְאָסוּ הַבּוֹנִים הָיְתָה לְרֹאשׁ פִּנָּה:

“*Even ma’asu habonim haytah l’rosh pinah- The stone that the builders rejected became the cornerstone* (Psalms 118:22).” We sing Psalm 118 during the joyful *Hallel* prayer, an opportunity for additional songs of praise to God on holidays and at the beginning of a new month. I always look forward to the exuberant melodies and the moving words of the psalms of *Hallel*, but this verse in particular strikes a deep chord. This verse epitomizes the kind of cantor, educator, and spiritual leader I strive to be. In my work as a teacher in Jewish and secular settings, I have found that every student has an individual spark, a unique point of view shaped by their own particular experience. My students regularly ask questions and share ideas that change the way I see the world. However, the expectations and priorities of a traditional classroom tend to leave the best qualities of many students, particularly those with learning differences, overlooked and underappreciated. Instead of building on their strengths, we end up focusing on redressing their perceived deficits.

When I notice this happening, I try to ask, “What are we missing? What stone has been cast aside that could serve as a strong foundation to build on?” As the student cantor at Temple Sharey-Tefilo Israel, I worked with *b’nai mitzvah* students who celebrate their *simcha* in a flexible alternative worship space. This option is particularly suited to the needs of students with learning differences and emotional challenges. It allows the clergy team to tailor the *b’nai mitzvah* experience to fit each child and ensure they feel proud and successful.

My experience focusing on children with special needs as a student has deeply informed how I approach *b’nei mitzvah* preparation for all students as a cantor. I believe every child deserves to celebrate reaching the age of *b’nei mitzvah* on the *bima*, and that all children can have a meaningful and successful *b’nei mitzvah* experience with the right support. Children and their families come into the *b’nei mitzvah* process with their own particular set of strengths, challenges, and anxieties. I work with each student and family to set goals and expectations that present an appropriate level of challenge

without being overwhelming. In meetings, I focus on developing routines and strategies that work for each individual student and allow them to meet the goals we set together.

I approach community building and pastoral care similarly. Congregants bring a diverse array of gifts to our communities, and often have the potential to contribute to the community in unexpected ways. Identifying these unique potential contributions usually requires the kind of deep listening that only takes place in a one-on-one conversation. As a leader, I feel that I can only discover what I might have otherwise overlooked by building a practice of active and committed listening. Thus, I build dedicated time for one-on-one conversations into everything I do at a congregation. Whether teaching an adult education class, leading a choir or supporting a social action effort, I believe one-on-one meetings are key to understanding a community and building meaningful relationships. I schedule regular times each week for both drop-in and appointment hours in order to ensure I am ready and available.

One-on-one conversations are also key to tackling interpersonal and communal conflicts. In our day to day interactions, it is rare that we have the opportunity to focus exclusively on hearing and understanding someone's perspective. I find that setting aside time to just listen allows me to hear the needs underlying a complaint or conflict, and find ways to address those needs more effectively. In my experience, one-on-one meetings can even reveal that people apparently in conflict have shared underlying concerns. While taking over leadership of a congregation's volunteer choir, I heard a variety of conflicting feedback from members about rehearsals and music choices. Through one-on-one meetings with the choir members, I discovered a shared anxiety about returning to leading the congregation in song after a hiatus due to the COVID pandemic. Ultimately, most of the choir was afraid that the congregation would no longer value or appreciate the choir. In order to address this, I introduced the choir back into congregational worship gradually, having them lead a prayer or section of the service before planning a full choir service. I also balanced repertoire that was familiar and comfortable with new music that I felt was an achievable challenge. As a result, the sense of tension in the choir and frequency of complaints greatly decreased.

Another place I find myself searching for stones that have been rejected is in the vast Jewish textual, cultural and historical tradition. I draw so much wisdom and

hope from the Torah that I have received from my teachers, while, at the same time, I struggle with all the ways that it is incomplete. A kabbalistic teaching that particularly speaks to me is the concept of the “secret Torah.” According to this tradition, each person who was present at Sinai received a unique piece of Torah that was revealed only to them. As feminist theologian Judith Plaskow points out, this means that at least half the Torah--the voices and experiences of the women who stood at Sinai--is lost from the canonical text.

I would extend this idea one step further; I believe every one of us carries within us a piece of Torah that only we can contribute to the Jewish people. To create a Torah--a Jewish tradition and culture--that is whole and relevant, we need to see Torah as a living document. We are another branch of the growing tree of Torah, as much a part of it as the roots that have grown underneath. We can begin to restore the voices that have been excluded by adding our own voices to this centuries-long conversation, contributing the Torah of our own experiences, questions, and challenges. We can create our own midrash, musical, literary, and artistic, that brings Torah into contact with our reality. The stone that the builders rejected--a voice that was historically silent--could become the cornerstone of the thriving and relevant expression of Judaism we now seek to build.