



אַבֶּן מַאֲסוּ הַבּוֹנִים הָיְתָה לְרֹאשׁ פִּנָּה:

“*Even ma’asu habonim haytah l’rosh pinah- The stone that the builders rejected became the cornerstone* (Psalms 118:22).” Psalm 118 is sung 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 for me, this verse in particular strikes a deep chord. “*The stone that the builders rejected became the cornerstone.*” Our medieval commentators understood this verse as a metaphor for the experience of the people of Israel. The builders who rejected the stone represent the nations of the biblical narrative who scoffed at the children of Israel, unable to recognize the unique contributions they had to offer the world.

For me, this verse holds layers of meaning that remind me of the kind of cantor, educator and spiritual leader I strive to be. In my work as a teacher both in Jewish settings and public school, I have found that every student has an individual spark, a valuable point of view shaped by their own particular experience. My students have asked questions and shared ideas that have changed 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 strengths, we focus on redressing perceived deficits.

When I notice this happening, I try to ask, “what are we missing? What stone has been cast aside that could be used as a strong foundation to build on?” As the student cantor at Temple Sharey-Tefilo Israel, I work specifically with *b’nai mitzvah* students who celebrate their *simcha* in our flexible alternative worship space known as the chapel. This option is particularly intended to accommodate the needs of students with learning differences and emotional challenges and allow us to tailor a *b’nai mitzvah* experience that makes them feel proud and successful.

I value this approach in community life as well. Like students, community members also bring with them a diverse array of gifts, and the most valuable of these are often not what we are expecting. When these gifts are seen and accepted, the giver feels valued and the life of the community is enriched--a win-win. Yet, in my experience, identifying these unique potential contributions usually requires the kind of real, deep listening that only takes place in a face-to-face conversation. A questionnaire or survey can only provide information that fits into what the designer was expecting. 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.

Through my training and experience community organizing, I have come to consider the one-to-one meeting an invaluable tool. It provides a rare opportunity to completely focus on hearing and understanding someone's perspective. As a leader, I find that this strategy is essential for addressing communal or individual needs. An accurate diagnosis is an essential first step in formulating an effective response, and diagnosing a need is rarely simple or straightforward. Behind the apparently disparate needs that people express, I have found that there is sometimes a deeper, shared need. I consider it part of my responsibility as a leader to seek out what lies below the surface of an idea, opinion, or complaint. As the sole cantorial presence during my internship at Garden City Jewish center, one-on-one conversations with congregants greatly informed my planning of Shabbat and holiday services. These conversations provided me with valuable insight into which choices resonated with congregants and what they hoped to get out of a prayer experience.

Another place I find myself searching for rejected stones is in the pages of our vast textual, cultural and historical tradition. The Torah that I have received has been a valuable source of insight, self-reflection and creative inspiration, and served as an anchor at rough and stormy times. Even as I draw wisdom and hope from Jewish tradition, at the same time, I struggle with all the ways that it is incomplete. There is a kabbalistic concept that each person who was present at Sinai received a special part of Torah, revealed only to them. According to theologian Judith Plaskow, this would mean

that at least half the Torah--the half revealed to the women who stood at Sinai--is missing from what we regard as 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. In order 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 those 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 experiences, questions, and challenges. We can create our own midrash, musical, literary and artistic, that bring Torah into contact with our own 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 are seeking to build.