

## Ears that Cannot Hear, A Voice that is a Gift from God.

A Sermon of Music and Words, by Cantor Lauren Adesnik

Shabbat of the Senses | February 17, 2017~22 Sh'vat 5777 | Temple Emanu-El

“In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth. The earth was chaos, and darkness upon the face of the abyss. The spirit of God hovered over the surface of the waters; God said, “Let there be light” and there was light.” Genesis 1:1-3

These first verses of Torah introduce us to a central concept of the Jewish religion, that Judaism is a religion based in conversation. God says the words “Let there be light” and at that command, the *tohu vavohu* תְּהוֹ וּבְהוֹ-chaos, becomes light. Through that conversation of words and sound, a connection is forged between God and listener.

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְיָ אֶחָד!

*Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad* Hear/Listen Israel, the Lord our God, The Lord is One. This is our founding belief, a basic tenant of our faith. We are commanded **NOT** to “See” or “Write” or even “Know.” The command is very clear, we are to “Hear”, “Listen” and understand that our God is One God. In the *Bereshit* passage, God’s voiced command is instrumental in creating. Likewise, Moses’s crying declaration “*Shema Yisrael!*” is instrumental in gathering his people together and expounding

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the basic doctrine of the Jewish faith. Take a moment and imagine it: how would you declare a founding doctrine of your faith? How would you use your voice? Would it be loud, booming across a vast desert of people, soft and gentle- allowing the words to roll off the tongue- so faint that one must remain perfectly still for the words to carry? Where would you say those words? What if you couldn't hear them? What if you couldn't speak them? Now imagine that a girl born with a hearing loss ends up in a profession where the concept of hearing and using one's voice to express Torah is instrumental.

Some of you may know that I wear hearing aids, and some of you may not! Some of you have had a taste of my story, maybe more, maybe less. I am grateful to have the opportunity to share a deeper part of my story with you for the first time, *publically*, as your Cantor.

Born with a minor hearing loss in both ears, somehow, I spoke from the age of 5 months, and from a young age developed a deep connection to music. The sounds I often heard were muffled. My world was much like those first verses in *Bereshit*- sounds of *Tohu vaVohu*- a swirl of mixed indistinguishable sound. Music, however, was clear and organic within me.

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Music has always been a source of comfort to me, because it was something I could understand at a young age, and it was something that came from my soul. I pursued music and singing all my life. I sang every week at synagogue, leading services as soon as I became Bat Mitzvah.

I studied classical voice from age 15 and graduated from the University of Southern California with a Bachelor of Music in Opera. After graduation, I sang several years as a young regional professional vocalist. I was performing with some regionally based opera companies in L.A. at the same time I made my decision to become a cantor.

So how did I end up here-? Here I am, your cantor, a member of your clergy leadership team, whose work delves deeply into the realm of faith and connection to God, combined with using music and my voice, my ears, my heart and soul as a vehicle for spiritual growth, connection and transformation. My mission to hear you both on the surface, and from deep within, to help us all connect to God and Judaism, as a synagogue family.

*Pirkei Avot, The Ethics of the Fathers, teaches, "According to the challenge is the reward."* Simply put, the greater the challenge, the greater will be the reward. Overcoming the obstacle my hearing presented and

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becoming a highly trained professional musician, as well as becoming a clergy person with a deep sense of faith has been an incredibly rewarding challenge and achievement.

I journeyed from doctor to doctor, resulting in the ultimate diagnosis of a slight hearing deficit. Having to sit right in front of the teacher makes you different, although I must admit, I think I would have sat right in front of my teacher either way! I had several surgical procedures to restore my hearing quality. That, coupled with when I put in hearing aids for the first time brought me an amazing gift. I heard birds chirping, I heard the dishwasher (that was a scary sound), I heard the rain. I heard the wind for the very first time. I am well-aware that there are many folks who struggled a lot more than I did. *I am so grateful for and lucky to have technology that allows me to live a life with better than normal hearing.*

My sense of faith comes from my ability to sing and connect to people on a profound and transformative level through music. This leads me to believe with my whole heart, that there is something greater than all of us, and that that something is God. It is a sacred privilege to have the opportunity to share my voice with our congregation, and greater

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community, and facilitate a connection to Judaism. It is even more meaningful because facilitating that for others allows me to experience Judaism and God in a unique and deep way.

This month is Jewish Disabilities Awareness and Inclusion Month. I believe that God, or the idea of something greater than oneself is accessible to everyone whatever their challenge or roadblock. I believe in a fully inclusive Judaism; that participation in synagogue and Jewish life should be accessible to everyone beyond limitation and across all spectrums and identities.

We as synagogue family, and a Jewish community, must work together and learn together so that we can understand how to include everyone, beyond limitation or convention. We have some amazing potential to do some wonderful work together. You have heard from our congregants who have faced different kinds of limitations, and outside in the lobby, we have some fabulous members of our synagogue and Jewish community who are engaged in the work of making life and Judaism more accessible than ever. Please take a moment to meet our Koleinu Inclusion Awareness Committee co-chairs Mickey Rosner, Susie Davidow, and

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member of the Jewish Abilities Alliance Gena Rosenzweig in the lobby. Learn about their inclusion work in our community and explore the wonderful tools and resources we have at our disposal, including our very own accessible, multi-media learning center. Going even further, get involved on a personal level. Join myself, Susie Davidow, and Mickey Rosner as we work together towards bringing disability awareness and inclusion to our synagogue and greater community. If you are interested and would like to know more, please be in touch!

*“According to the challenge is the reward.”* I hope my words and reflections about my journey will inspire you to look deeper within, and embrace your journeys, your challenges, your goals, and your faith. The work I do daily is the biggest, most meaningful reward I could imagine. I know your reward will be deep and meaningful as well. *Kein y’hi Ratzon, May this be God’s Will.*

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**בֶּן הָאֱלֹהִים הוּא אֹמֵר, לְפֹם צְעָרָא אֲגָרָא:**<sup>i</sup>

*Ben He He said: According to the labor is the reward.*

*-Pirkei Avot 5:23*