



Shabbat Trumah 5777 /March 3, 2017

Dear Shir Tikvah:

As we think about all that Wendy Goldberg has brought to Shir Tikvah's spiritual life and her impending departure this coming June, I am inspired by the teaching of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's, "On Spiritual Leadership." May their Torah of song lift your soul and show you a glimpse of the Divine.

"The only language that seems to be compatible with the wonder and mystery of being is the language of music. Music is more than just expressiveness. It is rather a reaching out toward a realm that lies beyond the reach of verbal propositions. Verbal expression is in danger of being taken literally and of serving as a substitute for insight. Words become slogans, slogans become idols. But music is a refutation of human finality. Music is an antidote to higher idolatry. While other forces in society combine to dull our mind, music endows us with moments in which the sense of the ineffable becomes alive.

"To attain a degree of spiritual security one cannot rely upon one's own resources. One needs an atmosphere where the concern for the spirit is shared by a community. We are in need of students and scholars, masters and specialists. But we need also the company of witnesses, of human beings who are engaged in worship, who for a moment sense the truth that life is meaningless without attachment to God. It is the task of the cantor to create the liturgical community, to convert a plurality of praying individuals into a unity of worship.

"The right Hebrew word for cantor is ba'al t'filah, master of prayer. The mission of a cantor is to lead in prayer. She does not stand before the Ark as an artist in isolation, trying to demonstrate her skill or to display vocal feats. She stands before the Ark not as an individual but with a congregation. She must identify herself with the congregation. Her task is to represent as well as to inspire a community. Within the synagogue music is not an end in itself but a means of religious experience. Its function is to help us to live through a moment of confrontation with the presence of God; to expose ourselves to Adonai in praise, in self-scrutiny and in hope.

"Perhaps this is the way to define a ba'al t'filah. He is a person in whom a spiritual equation takes place -- the equation of song and soul, of word and mind. The self and prayer are one."

Shabbat Shalom,

Michael