

## Vision Statement - Ilana Mulcahy

In my years of singing in choirs, I often heard the instruction to “listen louder than you sing.” Singing without listening to one another makes us stick out like sore thumbs, as we are not being attentive to the dynamics, tempo, or timbre of the group. Likewise, I see my role as a cantor as one that requires as much listening as singing.

In Chapter 24 of the book of Exodus, the Israelites stand at the base of Mount Sinai, waiting to receive the Ten Commandments. Moses recites them to the Israelites, who then respond, “*Kol asher diber Adonai, na’aseh v’nishma*,” meaning, “All that God has said, we will do and we will listen.” When I lead services, I relish in the beautiful melodies and sacred words emanating from the lips of my congregants while I pray along with them. I pay attention to how the congregation is engaging with the liturgy and with each other, and I respond to what I am hearing, tweaking my approach with every repetition. I am honored to play this small role in facilitating the marriage between our people and our traditions. Similarly, when working with my B’nei Mitzvah students, I tailor my level of support to their unique needs as I listen to their chanting. I feel proud to affirm the connection they are forming to their ancestors, and the commitment they are making to carrying our rich inheritance—our customs and values—into the future.

The listening does not stop when I step off the bimah. I want to be a part of the community as much as I want to be a spiritual leader for it. This requires noticing who might be struggling and who could use a helping hand. It requires anticipating people’s needs and responding to what cannot be foreseen. It requires action along with continuous listening, just as the Israelites vowed to do.

I started to understand the power of listening in a new way when I began my internship as a hospital chaplain. At first, I worried about not knowing what to say during my encounters with patients and families. I yearned for a collection of stock phrases: a drop-down menu of tried-and-true comments that I could pull from in order to ensure that my responses to their problems would be effective. However, I soon realized that listening was often more important than speaking. During my first visit, I sat with a patient as she

rambled at a frenzied pace about her anxiety, political opinions, and love of cats. After nearly an hour had gone by, she told me, “Thank you so much for listening to me. You were born to do this job.” I had hardly gotten a word in edgewise, but my presence and gentle affirmations meant everything to her. Over the course of the internship, I learned to listen for themes, identify the source of someone’s distress, and help people facing tough decisions reach a point of clarity. I discovered that I would never be able to create a drop-down menu of useful phrases, because I had to listen in order to determine how to support the unique person in front of me. Sometimes, the support needed was actually an action—making a cup of coffee or finding a warm blanket—rather than words of comfort. Listening and giving our undivided attention is often more valuable than anything we might say, as it informs our actions.

Judaism is an action-oriented religion, but we cannot take action without listening. I vow to do both as I soon step into the cantorate. I will do and listen—never one without the other.