

December 22, 2020
7 Tevet, 5781

Dear Ben,

We grew up in the age of the Cantor in the cupboard. He was cloistered there amid books and clutter with little personalization of the space. Periodically the Rabbi would bring him out, wind him up and nod for him to "commence the davening."

For Bob, religious services were dominated by a choir that gave preference to "May the words of my mouth..." over "Shema Yisrael..." with a seemingly endless vamping of "Avinu Malkenu..." The Cantor droned on clearly demonstrating his training where the words dominated the music, but both were rather unintelligible and best avoided.

In Beth's congregation, the Hazzan with perpetually silver hair, competed with an independent choir where none of them sang exactly the same music. He was a nice man, but went back to his cupboard to recover from his periodic performances. The real davening came from a lay member who did not have a trained voice, but his ruach elevated the congregation as he communicated for everyone.

Our initial enlightenment at NSS Beth El came from the realization that a clerical team could work together, but until you arrived, we were unaware of how the relationship between Rabbi and Hazzan can be synergistic. You brought so much more to the clerical relationship, the congregation, and to our spiritual and intellectual growth. Professionalism, pronunciation, melodic innovation and ruach are compatible!

Initially we thought that someone with your talents wouldn't stay more than a year or two and might be unapproachable as an individual. Happily, we found that character, warmth, and even a certain humility can coexist with charisma. Our minyan encounters were a revelation. As you settled into your new position, the minyan camaraderie increased, the davening took on greater meaning, and we ourselves became real participants.

And as you brought more showmanship to NSS Beth El, our appreciation for your talents grew. The concerts were huge tasks and clearly a labor of love. An Evening at the Copa brought out facets of your expertise that had been hidden. As a performer, MC, and stage manager, you clearly had a great time and so did your audience. Everyone loved sharing in your enjoyment.

In the intimacy of our living room the interplay between you and your accompanist was fascinating. Despite many seasons as Lyric regulars, we had not realized how the staging and costumes often overshadowed the vocal performance. We missed subtleties and nuances in pronunciation, pitch and expression that you found so easily. It was an unforgettable learning experience.

As you move ahead, please remember always to stay out of the cupboard. You bring so much more to an audience or congregation than training and talent. You bring passion and we will miss your warmth and spirit.

We're wishing you "b'hatzlacha" in all of your future endeavors. Stay safe.

Fondly,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Beth + Bob Finkle". The ink is dark and the handwriting is fluid and personal.