

In Praise of Professional Artists

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Parashat T'tzaveh 5786

This week's parashah is all about costumes—which is apropos since Purim is Monday.

God says to Moses: “Make holy vestments for your brother, Aaron, for dignity and adornment. Instruct all who have wisdom of the heart—those filled with the spirit of wisdom—to make Aaron's vestments, to consecrate him to serve Me as priest.”¹

The priests' garments were crafted from gold, precious stones, and fine linen. Because they were so intricately designed and central to communal life, do-it-yourself costume-making was not an option.²

Rabbi Umberto Cassuto explains that those with “wisdom of the heart”—whom God wants to make the priests' vestments—are the talented professionals, craftsmen well-practiced in their trade.³

See, the Torah recognizes that creating beautiful art requires training and skill. Civilizations have long understood that without art, society becomes spiritually and culturally impoverished.

What would be lost to the world if there were no concerts, no films, no paintings or poetry?

Just as scientists uncover truths about the world through rigorous methods of inquiry, artists reveal beauty in the world through creativity and finely tuned craft.

For example, the tones of the musical scale have always existed—but it took Beethoven to arrange them into “Für Elise.” Marble lay in the crust of the earth for millennia—but it took Michelangelo to sculpt it into “David.”

By shaping God's raw materials into works of splendor, artists add something uniquely good to human life.

That is why it's so important to nurture those with the gift—and the drive—to create. With its emphasis on craftsmanship, the Torah affirms our sense that art is a public good that benefits everyone.

Thankfully, many leaders in our community understand this, too. As a New York State Regent, our TBE past president Roger Tilles helped revise Career and Technical Education guidelines to include the arts alongside fields like computer science, health science, business, and technology.

Just today, the Long Island Arts Alliance honored Roger as “a powerful champion for arts education and for ensuring that creativity remains a core part of every student's learning experience.”

Long Island is home to extraordinary arts programs. This summer, Zachary will attend the Usdan Summer Camp for the Arts, spending his days playing trombone and learning sketch art.

Lindsay works with children at the Gold Coast Arts Center here in Great Neck, where they learn to love dance, theater, pottery, and other art forms.

We also have the Long Island High School for the Arts in Syosset—a public BOCES program where students get to train with master artists alongside peers who share their passion.

Billy Joel, one of its strongest supporters, has said, “I didn’t go to a school like this. It would have been really helpful to know there are other people who wanted to do this and who are trying to learn all the skills necessary to do this.”

It won’t surprise you that my daughter, Lindsay, dreams of becoming a Broadway actress. Unfortunately, the Great Neck Public Schools district doesn’t allow its students to take part in the Long Island High School for the Arts, so she went to a recent school board meeting to advocate for change. (Watch the video below to see her full speech.)



She told the board that “many families cannot afford private lessons and expensive programs that prepare students for a career in the arts. This leaves those students at a huge disadvantage,” she said, which is why public-school arts programs are so important.

I am proud of her—and proud that our state recognizes the arts as more than an extracurricular activity. It is an important and meaningful profession, too—one that enriches humanity immeasurably.

As Stephanie, our wonderful cantorial soloist, says, “A career in the arts is not for the faint of heart.” It requires years of training, technical mastery, passion that transcends material comfort, and the resilience to hear “no” again and again—and keep on going.

Those who persevere give the world the sublime gift of beauty. That’s why the Torah calls them people who have “wisdom of the heart.”

As the father of two children who love the arts, I am grateful to educators and mentors, like Dr. Pam Levy and Shy Kedmi, and policymakers, like Roger Tilles, who encourage that spark.

May God bless and strengthen them—for the craftsman’s work is indeed holy.

¹ *Exodus* 28:2–4.

² See B'khor Shor, commentary to *Ex.* 28:3, who explains that those who would be wearing the vestments were not permitted to make the vestments; rather, God required that the priests' garments be made by qualified artisans.

³ See Cassuto, commentary to *Ex.* 28:3.