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Mt. Airy's Shawn Zevit: author, rabbi, musician, actor teacher

By Carole Verona

Synchronicity. It's a word that describes how Mt. Airy resident Rabbi Shawn Zevit's many talents – as a writer, singer, composer, arranger, producer, actor, and teacher – have all come together at this particular time in his life. His book, *Offerings of the Heart: Money and Value in Faith Communities*, was recently published by The Alban Institute, and he recently performed songs from his new CD, *Sanctuary*, at the Tin Angel in Center City. He is also a founding member of the acting troupe, Playback Theater Company. He currently serves as Senior Consultant and Director of Outreach and External Affairs for the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation.

With several rabbis in the family, Zevit remembers a childhood brimming with Jewish spirituality, tradition and song. His father and grandfather loved to sing and often used music to settle family conflicts. If a disagreement arose, one of them would start singing. Others in the family would then have to stop arguing and join in to harmonize!

A second generation Canadian, Zevit was born in Winnipeg and later moved with the family to Toronto. While in college, one of his professors invited Zevit and other theater students to start their own professional company. "I spent 10 years with a social and educational theater company, working with an ensemble in schools, work places, churches and synagogues to put on performances about anti drinking and driving, AIDS education, or equity in the workplace. Out of that I developed my own organizational training and consulting company," he said.

At age 33, he was teaching a course on creative communication, specifically how to put your soul into the way you relate to other people. One of the participants shared how she always thought about becoming an Anglican minister. And here she was at age 52, still debating. That experience served as a catalyst for Zevit to pursue something he always wanted to do. He came to Philadelphia in the early 1990s to study at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Wyncote.

The idea for a book about Jewish wisdom and teaching about money came from Zevit's years of conducting workshops for members of various religious and communal organizations. Zevit believes that traditionally many congregational

leaders place spirituality on one side of the aisle and finances on the other. He further believes that there's a uniquely Jewish perspective on money that can enhance the way any organization approaches fiscal management.

To make a point during his workshops, Zevit leads an exercise to discover what's in peoples' wallets. "What if someone found your wallet today and opened it to find out how to get it back to you? Does what's in your wallet tell a story about who you are? Are there photos of people you care about? Or is the real meaning in your life separate from money and credit cards?" he asks. This leads to a discussion about each participant's personal relationship to money and a discovery about the values attached to it. Zevit uses the Biblical story of Exodus to help explain Jewish wisdom about money. In the Bible, he says, money and other resources are used as a way of bringing the community together to build a sacred center. Money is seen as a tool to be used to achieve a holy end.

In his book, Zevit shows how to apply this wisdom to an organization's process of developing a mission statement, budget, short- and long-range plans, and even to the development of capital campaigns. "We're not just raising money now, we're building community," he reminds us.

Based on Zevit's writings and workshop outlines, The Alban Institute asked him to submit a proposal for a book based on Jewish values. The Alban Institute is an ecumenical, interfaith organization which supports congregations through book publishing, educational seminars, consulting services and research. This is the first book on Jewish values that Alban has ever published.

On the musical side, Zevit began writing songs when he was a teenager. He taught himself to play guitar, keyboard and percussion instruments. For his new 15-track CD, Zevit recruited a group of experienced local musicians who have worked with Sly and the Family Stone and Van Morrison. Going into the recording studio, Zevit told them that it wasn't going to be a Jewish liturgical CD, but it combined elements of soul with rhythm and blues. "I was writing songs out of the pain and joy of my own experience," he said. Through his vulnerability, he invites listeners to feel more of their own truth.

"We have such a gift and godly potential in life," Zevit said. "How can we use our resources – the songs of our heart, what we have in our wallets and bank accounts – in a way that also enhances other people? The welfare of the planet and of our communities is intimately tied to our own individual welfare," he concluded.

(For further information about Rabbi Zevit's book, go to www.alban.org. For information about his CD, go to www.cdbaby.com/zevit2) and in general: www.rabbishawnzevit.homestead.com