WHAT IS A CANTOR?
THE EMERGING CANTORATE OF THE 21ST CENTURY

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Cantorial Investiture

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January 24, 2005
14 *Shevat*, 5765

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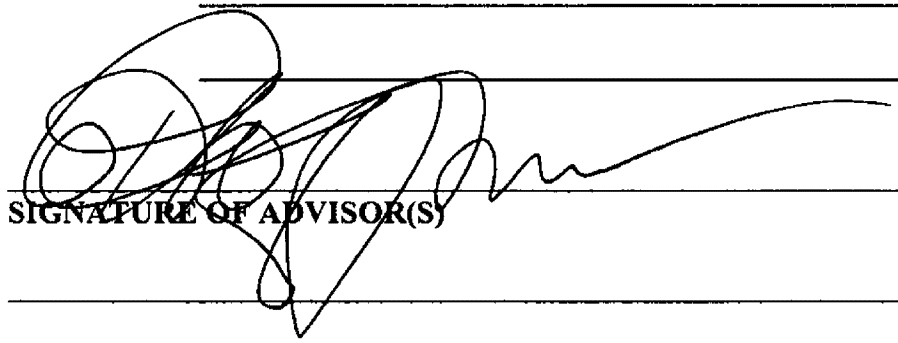

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The Emerging Cantorate of the 21st Century
Summary

The goal of this thesis was to explore the role of the 21st century cantor, and to provide a new definition of cantor. It explores the need for a definition of the cantor that is modern, that is easily understood, and that is descriptive of the job of the Reform cantorate of today.

In order to do that, I begin with a brief history of the cantorate from the time cantors first arrived in America up to the present day. In the second chapter, I explore the three major institutions that affect the cantorate; HUC-JIR SSM, the ACC, and the URJ. I also discuss Synagogue 2000's affect on the cantorate.

In the third chapter, I follow the personal journeys of three different cantors: Cantor Rachelle Nelson, Cantor Ted Aronson, and Cantor David Lefkowitz. Their stories came from personal interviews I had with each of them, and cover their childhoods, education, and professional lives.

Chapter four is an exploration of the challenges and fears faced by many of today's cantors. This chapter was largely created from a series of emails I received from a number of cantors answering the question: What is your greatest fear for the cantorate?

In the conclusion, I suggest a modern definition of cantor, and tackle the major challenge that the cantors in chapter four describe.

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> All in all, it is not easy to summarize the role the *hazzan* plays. We have seen that throughout history the American synagogue has expected a variety of skills from its professionals, and in recent decades the level of demand has sharply risen, almost to the burden placed on the multiple functionary or sole clergyman in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. To the extent that *hazzanim* will continue to be popular in the United States, it is hard to imagine that congregations will expect any less of them.[1]

It happens to me all the time. I mention that I'm a student, and the next question is invariably, "What do you study?" "Do you know what a cantor is?" I ask. Nine times out of ten, the answer is, "No – what's that?" And the struggle to define what I'm about to become begins.

I usually start with "Do you know what a rabbi is?" "Oh yes," is the common answer. "Ok," I say, "A cantor is a member of the Jewish clergy, like a rabbi, but our main focus is the musical life of the congregation. We do all life cycle events, counseling, teaching – many of the things that a rabbi or a priest or pastor would do, but in worship and in our teaching, music is how we communicate and what we focus on."

So that's the definition I've stumbled across after four and a half years of studying to become something that I can't easily define. And that's ok – I have no problem understanding what my role is to be with its many facets and layers. But getting other people to understand – therein exists a challenge and a problem.

The challenge, as previously described, can be somewhat humorous, especially when the question is posed by strangers or new-found friends. But, when the question is posed by congregations, that is, when congregations that are potential employers do not

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[1] Slobin, Mark. *Chosen Voices: The Story of the American Cantorate.* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 165.

understand what a cantor is, what role the cantor plays, why the cantor's involvement is so important, then it becomes a problem.

Abraham Idelsohn defines the *chazzan* as "the permanent precentor,"[2] the leader of the main part of the public service.[3] Mark Slobin, in his book *Chosen Voices*, defines it as "the traditional 'messenger to God.'"[4] The *New Harvard Dictionary of Music* defines a cantor as "In Jewish and Latin-Christian liturgical music, a solo singer . . . (2) In the Lutheran Church, the director of music of a church [see Kantor]."[5] The *Encyclopedia Judaica* states, "*Chazzan:* Precentor who intones the liturgy and leads the prayers in synagogue; in earlier times a synagogue official."[6] Though these definitions differ slightly, all of them limit the cantor's definition to the musical presenter during worship, and all are insufficient.

We need a definition of the cantor that is modern, that is easily understood, and that is descriptive of the job of the Reform cantorate of today. So, what is that profession? Who is that cantor? How has the cantorate of today changed from the cantorate of twenty or fifty years ago? Who decides what a cantor is, what skill sets are needed, and the ideologies and philosophies behind the cantorate? What is the definition of "cantor"?

This thesis is a look at the role of the Reform cantorate in today's synagogues. I explore the answers to the questions I have posed above by following the journeys of three cantors, and by looking at the major institutions affecting the Reform cantorate.

In Chapter 1, I provide a short history of the American cantorate. How did it begin?

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[2]Precentor: One who directs the music in services.
[3]Idelsohn, Abraham. *Jewish Music: Its Historical Development*. (NY: Dover Publications, 1992), 108.
[4]Slobin, 4, 8.
[5]Randel, Don Michael, ed. *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music*. (Massachusetts, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986).
[6]*Enclyclopedia Judaica*. (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House 1974).

Where did we come from? On what do we base our traditions? What are the major changes seen and why did they occur during the course of that history? How did we get to where we are today?

Chapter 2 explores the institutions affecting the cantorate: The Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, School of Sacred Music; the Union for Reform Judaism; and the American Conference of Cantors. For reasons that will become clear, I also explore Synagogue 2000 – a relatively new presence, but one with far-reaching consequences. What is each institution's vision of the cantorate? How do the institutions interact with each other and with the cantorate? How do they aid the cantorate?

Chapter 3 follows the professional journeys of three cantors: Cantor David Lefkowitz, Cantor Ted Aronson, and Cantor Rachelle Nelson. How did each find his/her way to the cantorate? What was each person's vision of the cantorate when he/she entered school? Graduated? Now? How has each person's cantorate changed over time? How does each person's dream of his/her cantorate differ from the reality of what his/her cantorate has become? What is each person's greatest hope for the cantorate, and what does each person fear?

Chapter 4 examines the current challenges faced by today's cantors. It draws from a number of cantors' comments describing what they fear most about the future of the cantorate, and I respond to those fears.

Chapter 5 examines the findings of the previous chapters in order to reach a new definition of the 21st-century cantor. What is the cantor of today, and what is the cantor's role and job description? I hope that this new definition will give all of us a clearer vision of the purpose of our role, and deeper insight in to how we might best fulfill it.

Chapter 1

A Brief History of the American Cantorate

> The evolving attitude towards prayer paved the way for the gradual emergence of the *hazzan*. Prayer was defined as being most effective if it was communal, rather than private, and sung rather than spoken. . . The importance of the *hazzan* rises and falls with the enthusiasm of the laity for its sacred singers.[7]

The earliest *chazzanim* in America, from 1674 when Jews first arrived in New Amsterdam (now New York), until the 1840s when ordained rabbis first made it to these shores, were the sole clergy of their communities. They performed circumcisions, educated the children, officiated at life cycle ceremonies, and led services. In short, they performed the jobs of both rabbi and cantor, though they were neither well paid nor well respected.[8]

Between 1825 and 1875, with the massive influx of Jews from Eastern Europe, also came German Jews who had already begun to modernize their traditions and worship. They brought with them the organ, the music of Solomon Sulzer and Louis Lewandowski, and a tidy way of worship that left no room for *nusach*, *chazzanut*, or the *chazzan*.

In 1849, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, the "father of American Reform . . . effectively changed the language of prayer in American Reform temples"[9] by abolishing the position of cantor at Anshe Emeth Temple in Albany, NY and, with a group of other rabbis, publishing a series of hymnals which used mostly English and German texts. This was a radical change, which threatened the end of the *chazzan*. Before this, cantors were the *sh'lichei tzibur*, transmitting Jewish text and worship to God on behalf of the congregants

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[7] Slobin, 4, 8.
[8] *Ibid.*, 31.
[9] Levine, Joseph. *Synagogue Song in America.* (Indiana: White Cliffs Media Company, 1989), 179.

through song. With Wise's abolition of the cantor, the role of *shaliach tzibur* went to the rabbi and choir.

By the end of World War I, however, the synagogue itself had begun to evolve. According to Cantor Benjie-Ellen Schiller:

> Second-generation Jews, those who were born in America and acculturated from birth, moved with their families to new areas, where an altered agenda for synagogue music included the following goals:
> 1. to stimulate congregational singing;
> 2. to inspire Jewish devotion;
> 3. to revive values of Jewish melody:
> 4. to exclude, as far as possible, non-Jewish music and poetry;
> 5. to provoke in the children of our religious schools a love for Jewish poetry and song;
> 6. to encourage an earnest study of Jewish music in the religious schools.[10]

This list of goals for music in the synagogue could well have been written in 1990 instead of 1930. Each one falls under the job description of the modern-day cantor. The 1930s therefore heralded a musical, and thus cantorial, transformation for the Reform movement, though it would take time for the change to materialize in practice. With Wise, the pendulum had swung all the way to one end, but by the 1930s, slow progress was being made in the opposite direction.

Opposite the staid formality of the music of Classical Reform – four part professional choir, organ, and music that sounded Protestant-Hymn-like, was the well-known "Golden Age" of the cantorate which stretched from the 1880s to the 1940s. Based mostly in New York, these *chazzanim* were Eastern Europeans who raised worship music to an art form. Coloratura and soaring melodies sought to call forth the meaning of the liturgy and cast it into the hearts of the worshippers – or, at least, that was the ideal. Some of the *chazzanim* of the "Golden Age" were incredibly well-educated in what they did, and

[10]Schiller, Benjie-Ellen, "Musical Change in Reform Synagogues," quoting CCAR Yearbook 40 (1930), in *Sacred Sound and Social Change: Liturgical Music in Jewish and Christian Experience*. Hoffman, Lawrence and Walton, Janet eds. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 196.

others hardly knew Hebrew at all. Orthodox and Conservative synagogues competed for renowned voices and people flocked to the pews to hear them. But the life of the *chazzan* back then was not an easy one. As Mark Slobin states:

> Even a glance at the views from the end of this era, in the 1930s, confirms the unchanging image of the cantorate as a marketplace. . . For selected stars, life was easy, but even they had to struggle with the competitive, bruising world of job hunting and board pleasing that lay at the core of the cantorate and to some extent still does.[11]

With the advent of the Holocaust, the link that had kept American Jews in touch with the Old World vanished. Slobin says:

> What the period of 1939-1945 did was to drastically accelerate the change in orientation and activity initiated in the previous two decades, because the destruction of European Jewry severed the precious transatlantic link that had kept American Jews in touch with Old World sensibilities and that had brought a steady flow of new talent to the cantorate."[12]

The Holocaust spelled the end for the Golden Age of the cantorate. It also spelled the end of immigrant *chazzanim*. A new generation began to emerge – steeped in the traditions of their fathers, but also in American music and customs. The cantorate was changed as a result, and the effects are still being felt.

Before World War II, training in America for the aspiring chazzan was not so different from that of a *chazzan* in Europe. Though the student *chazzan* did not have a long-term apprenticeship, he was immersed in the music and life of a *chazzan*, with his career "centered on home, neighborhood, religious school, and oral transmission, with a strong dose of admiration for the giants of the pulpit."[13] After World War II, this began to change.

The other main shift in the cantorate during this period was the start of its

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[11]Slobin, 112.
[12]*Ibid.*, 75.
[13]*Ibid.*, 74.

professionalization. The process began with the formation of three professional associations – the Cantors' Assembly in 1947 (Conservative), the American Conference of Cantors in 1953 (Reform), and the Cantorial Council of America in 1960 (Orthodox). These associations fought for the improvement of the cantor's status in American life and the recognition of the cantor's status as a professional.

One important aspect of professionalization is the training of those who wish to become professionals, and, to that end, in 1947 the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion opened its School of Sacred Music. The Conservative movement followed with the Cantors Institute of Jewish Theological Seminary in 1951, and the Orthodox established the Cantorial Training Institute of Yeshiva University in 1954.[14] Proper training was important and necessary for the professionalization of the cantorate, but the important tradition of learning through immersion in cantorial culture, through osmosis and oral tradition, was lost.

But what did this "professionalization" mean for the cantorate? First, a definition of "professional" is needed. George Ritzer defined this term in Mark Slobin's book *Chosen Voices* as follows:

> Where a person lies on the individual professional continuum depends on how many of the following he possesses . . . a) general systematic knowledge; b) authority over clients; c) community rather than self-interest which is related to an emphasis on symbolic rather than monetary rewards; d) membership in occupational associations, training in occupational schools, and existence of a sponsor; e) recognition by the public that he is a professional; f) involvement in the occupational culture.[15]

For the cantorate, professionalization can be a sticky subject. After all, one of Ritzer's points on the continuum is recognition by the community. To the detriment of

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[14] *Ibid.*, 95.
[15] Ritzer, George, in Slobin, 95.

the professionalization of the cantorate, many congregations give their soloists the title of "cantor" even though the soloists do not belong to a cantorial association, nor have they undertaken the years of intensive training the cantorial institutions require for that title to be earned. The American Conference of Cantors requires its members to either have completed their studies at HUC or JTS,[16] or to have been certified – that is, completed and passed a series of exams and been approved and "certified" as cantor (again, the title having been earned by the recipient). The organizations recognize the importance of the academic institutions in the professionalization of the cantorate.[17]

In an article titled "The New Cantor," Heather Robinson takes her readers on a short journey through the history of the Reform Cantorate. About the changes in the 1950s, she writes:

> Throughout the 1950s, Americans increasingly affiliated with religious institutions, and Jews were no exception . . . Husbands and wives increasingly regarded cantors and rabbis not just as religious leaders, but also as counselors and mentors for their children. As a result, the role of the congregational cantor expanded beyond his primary function of sacred singer to encompass lifecycle events, education, youth programming, and pastoral care. In short, the cantor became a central player in synagogue life.[18]

In the 1960s, three trends had a major influence on synagogue music: the *chavurah* movement, the popularization of Israeli folk-music, and the NFTY folk-style of worship. One of the *chavurah* movement's hallmarks was an emphasis on participatory worship. "A *chavurah* was a countercultural community, usually of young Jews intent on radical democracy, equality, and cultural self-sufficiency. Its members worshiped and celebrated

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[16]The ACC has a reciprocity agreement with the CA, so the two organizations allow their members to join both easily. The ACC has no such agreement with either the Orthodox cantorial movement, or the Reconstructionist school. Cantors from graduating from those movements' seminaries would need to apply for membership to the ACC.

[17]The requirements necessary to join the Orthodox or Conservative cantorial associations is beyond the scope of this thesis.

[18]Robinson, Heather, "The New Cantor." *Reform Judaism*, Winter 2003, 28.

in an informal setting, celebrating smallness of size, personalized relationships, a recovery of tradition, and the importance of participatory worship."[19] The emphasis on the importance of participatory worship had a huge affect on synagogue worship that is still felt today.

Israeli folk-music began to emerge in American Reform Jewish culture in the 1960s as well. The music of composers like Shlomo Carlebach was wildly popular among the youth of that time, and such music gradually made its way into the synagogue, though not without opposition. At the same time, NFTY (the North American Federation of Temple Youth – the youth movement for the Reform Movement) was creating its own brand of music. This music reflected the music of the time in popular American culture – folk music (music that was accessible to all), jazz influences, and the early era of rock and roll. This was music with a beat and an informality that was foreign to the music of the synagogue previous to this point. This music helped fill the need of the *chavurah* for participatory worship, and the larger synagogue communities were not immune to its influence.

The 1970s and 1980s also saw great change in the American cantorate. A national surge of interest in spiritual matters did not bypass the Jewish community. Indeed, it led to a resurgence of interest and commitment by many individuals. An even larger change was the new role of women in the clergy. "As part of restructuring identity, women have found a niche at the heart of ritual, culminating in the ordination of female rabbis in both the Reform (1972) and Conservative movements (1985) and of female *chazzanim* among the Reform (1976) and Conservative (1987)."[20]

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[19]Schiller, 206.
[20]Slobin, 112.

The "camp movement" left its mark on the synagogue music, as indicated by the new "hymnal" of that time – *Sha'arei Shirah*. Cantor Benjie-Ellen Schiller writes:

> *Sha'arei Shirah*: Gates of Song, was published only in 1987. The makeup of its board of editors bears witness to the successful professionalization of the cantorate in the Reform movement and the growing number of graduates of the School of Sacred Music. Each hymnal since 1897 represents the work of rabbis of the CCAR with musical suggestions from a single music editor such as Binder. By contrast, the editorial committee of *Sha'arei Shirah* was composed of members of the American Conference of Cantors (ACC), the CCAR, a music editor (also a cantor), and a professional Jewish music publications editor. . . The book was intended from the outset for congregational use . . . It serves solely as a musical compendium for use by the congregation (aided by cantor and organist) in order to encourage congregational participation in worship.[21]

Though the *chavurah* movement, Israeli folk-music, and NFTY have all left their marks on the music of the synagogue, the cantor is the main focal point behind the synagogue's musical life. As American Jews have struggled to produce and define "*nusach* America," the cantorate has had to incorporate this shift in the way congregational worship is created. Accompaniment, choreography, when to include the congregation and when not to include the congregation, when and where to teach a song and when and where not to, choir use – all of these things now play a large part in the shaping and building of the musical menu in a worship service.

"*Nusach* America," the musical tradition of American Reform (and to some extent Conservative) Jews, is defined in this thesis as Jewish music which has a distinctly American sound, some of which reflects the European art music, and some of which is in a different style – folk, rock and roll, jazz, and the like. The evolution of a *nusach* America is at the very heart of issues regarding the cantorate and dividing the Reform movement. It combines the modes and *nusach* with Western harmonies and rhythms, for

[21]Schiller, 208.

a sound and a feel that is uniquely American, yet still extremely "Jewish." Some compositions seem to be very far removed from their Eastern European roots, others draw from the Sephardic musical traditions, and still others lean very heavily on *chazzanut* for a less "American" sound. The range of style and color is broad, and will be explored further in my senior recital.

Leading worship through music has changed, but, simultaneously, as we have seen, the responsibilities of the cantor, especially during recent decades and especially within the Reform movement, have expanded. "Cantors are increasingly partaking in ritual, educational, administrative, and counseling duties along with their rabbinic colleagues. The result is nothing less than a transformation in synagogue life."[22]

[22]Robinson,. 23.

Chapter 2

Institutions That Affect the Cantorate

The Reform cantorate is served, educated, informed, and helped by three primary institutions: the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, School of Sacred Music, which trains and invests new cantors into the field; the American Conference of Cantors, which serves as the cantors' professional organization; the Union for Reform Judaism, which is the umbrella organization for the Reform movement's over 900 congregations. Of late, Synagogue 2000 has been added to the mix. It provides education and information about synagogue transformation in all areas, with worship being the one that most strongly affects the cantorate. These four institutions work closely together to provide the Reform movement and the Reform cantorate with the necessary education, inspiration, and guidance it needs.

The Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion created the School of Sacred Music after the decimation of European Jewry in WWII. Recognizing the need for the professionalization of a cantorate that had just lost its major source for new talent and its base of tradition, HUC-JIR decided to provide training for those men (and later women) who wanted to dedicate their lives as *chazzanim* to the Jewish people.

Over the years, the School of Sacred Music has constantly had to redefine the image of the *chazzan*, and, therefore, restructure its programming. As the Reform movement and Reform synagogues have demanded different skills and knowledge of the cantors, the school has adjusted accordingly. The cantors coming out of the school today, therefore, have different skill sets and educational backgrounds to draw upon than did the cantors who were invested even ten years ago.

Through the 1980s and 1990s, synagogue membership grew. The baby boomer generation, born in the 1940s and 1950s, began to swamp congregations. This new generation of leadership was looking for different things from their synagogues. As a generation who was taught that they could be, do, and have anything they wanted, they wanted a very hands-on role in the running of their synagogues. As a result, the congregations started to call upon their cantors to function beyond the role of worship leader, for which they had been trained. New responsibilities ran the gamut from officiating at lifecycle events to counseling and teaching. In order to meet the needs of the congregations, the School of Sacred Music restructured its program, and in 1983, under the direction of Rabbi/Cantor Jon Haddon, who worked closely with his successor, Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, it became a four years Master's program.[23] Rabbi Hoffman succeeded Rabbi/Cantor Haddon in 1984, and, in 1986, succeeded in adjusting the program further, requiring cantorial students to join their rabbinic student colleagues in Israel for their first year of studies.

Rabbi Hoffman's primary agenda item as director of the School of Sacred Music was to address the main problem he perceived in the cantorate: "It was not fully professionalized, and not viewed as such by the rabbis or by the Union [for Reform Judaism]."[24] In order to solve this problem, Rabbi Hoffman raised the standards for both admission to the School of Sacred music and the certification program, "asserting the right of the HUC-SSM to determine what a cantor should be."[25] Rabbi Hoffman also hired a full-time cantorial faculty for both the Israel and New York cantorial programs.

In addition, Rabbi Hoffman undertook the struggle to assert the cantorate's

[23] Robinson, 44.
[24] Hoffman, Lawrence. Interview by author, December, 2004.
[25] *Ibid.*

professional status with the Union and the CCAR. He states:

> In a meeting with Rabbi Alex Schindler, we decided to form the Music Commission, the goal being to engage the Union's lay leadership in championing the cantorate. We created a tri-partite commission with the ACC as an equal member to the Union and the College. Within a year, we managed to put cantors into the coming biennial (Chicago, 1984) – a tremendous step forward. We also got the right to feature the ACC at the Friday night Shabbat plenum. In a wildly successful evening, we featured cantors and SSM students in a program called "The History of Jewish Identity Through Music." Ever since then, the Union has demanded that the cantors lead services at biennials.[26]

The curriculum has further expanded, and now includes liturgical studies, Jewish education, philosophy, professional development, counseling, guitar, and a class called "Empowering the Congregational Voice." In addition, to accommodate the many required additional classes, the program is now five years – mirroring the rabbinic program. As Robinson notes in her article, "cantorial students are taught how to meet the challenges of the contemporary synagogue. This training has led to increased roles for cantors as administrators and counselors."[27]

Cantor Israel Goldstein worked closely with Rabbi Hoffman, and took over the position of director of the School of Sacred Music in 1986 when Rabbi Hoffman decided that the position should be filled by a cantor and stepped down. Although Cantor Goldstein was supposed to stay for only one year as an interim director, by the end of that year the students and faculty asked him to stay on. Having had a year-long taste of what the position involved, Cantor Goldstein decided he enjoyed the challenge, and, luckily, his duties in the congregation he served allowed him the flexibility to work out schedules that could have otherwise conflicted.

When Cantor Goldstein began his tenure as director of the School of Sacred Music,

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[26] *Ibid.*

[27] Robinson, 44, 74.

the vision the school had of the cantorate was "not all that lofty." In fact, it was incredibly simple – the vision was for every Reform congregation that had the means to do so, to engage graduates and/or those who were certified. That vision hasn't really changed, but it has expanded.

> The school is trying to give the cantor more musical autonomy, to make the cantor more responsible for the musical personality of the congregation, while being a team player at the same time. We need to increase the cantor's participation in all aspects of synagogue life as opposed to the one-dimensional focus of music. But this needs to be done in a way that has credibility with the rabbinic community, and that way is through additional courses in Jewish texts, pastoral counseling, and the like.[28]

The role of the cantor has broadened to include skills that, at one time, were not necessarily considered cantorial. For the School of Sacred Music, this means a never-ending challenge to educate the students in all aspects of congregational life with which they will need to be familiar once they graduate, and, for the American Conference of Cantors, it means a never-ending challenge to help those already out in the field keep up with the new demands placed on them.

Cantor Goldstein has worked hard to forge closer ties with the American Conference of Cantors. The ACC, in turn, has been extremely supportive of the school. Cantor Goldstein credits the support of that organization with giving the SSM the impetus to continue in many ways, both subtle and overt.

Cantor Richard Cohn, the current president of the ACC, believes that "the SSM and the American Conference of Cantors should effectuate a seamless continuum of ongoing education, linking cantorial students with cantors in the field under a common agenda of professional growth."[29] Cantor Cohn recognizes the need for continuing education for those cantors already out in the field. Congregations are demanding skills from their

[28] Goldstein, Israel, Interview by author, October, 2004.
[29] Cohn, Richard. Personal essay. October, 2004.

cantors for which they may not have been specifically trained unless they are more recent investees of the SSM. One challenge the ACC faces is how to help those cantors gain the skill sets their congregations want them to have. An even closer partnership between the SSM and the ACC than currently exists would enable that process, as well as providing the current crop of students with access to the knowledge of those already out in the field. It could only benefit everyone.

The music of the cantorate has also changed in the eighteen years since Cantor Goldstein took a hold of the reins of the school. He states:

> There is a dichotomy that has sharpened – that of participatory music as opposed to esoteric music – the division has sharpened. The cantors feel compelled to immerse themselves more in what they perceive to be what the congregations want (or what they've been told is wanted) on a musical level.[30]

The challenge for the school in this regard is to provide the students with not only a broad repertoire of music, including *chazzanut*, classical Reform, and participatory music, but to also provide the students with the knowledge of how to stylistically present each type of music. The skills needed to encourage a congregation to sing and become involved in the music are different from those needed to chant *Hin'ni* as a representative of the congregation before the open ark on Rosh Hashanah evening. And cantors need other skills in order to fully integrate the many different styles so that worship does not become solely one style of music or the other, but reaps the benefit of all.

As I write this, Cantor Goldstein has decided that it is time for him to move on. A new director will surely bring his or her own vision for the cantorate to the school, and thus will affect the future of the cantorate just as prior directors' vision and leadership have. In particular, Cantor Goldstein has had a lasting impact on those cantors who went

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[30]Goldstein, Interview.

through the school during his time. The students and faculty will sorely miss him.

> I never dreamed of being involved in so many lives – I'm a very private person. But I've found it extremely gratifying to be able to help the students succeed in the years they've been here, and also to succeed in their congregational lives. I hope the school and myself have had an affect on them.[31]

Upon graduation from the SSM, newly invested cantors are automatically admitted into the ACC, the analagous organization to the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR). The ACC provides support to its membership, both personally and professionally. It provides placement services, programming, and represents cantorial interests to the CCAR, the URJ, HUC-JIR, and the Progressive Jewish movement world-wide. The Mission Statement for the ACC reads:

> The American Conference of Cantors supports its members in their sacred calling as emissaries for Judaism and for Jewish music. ACC leadership draws upon the energies and aspirations of its individual members, while responding to the expressed needs of the larger membership and the Reform Movement. The Conference inspires its members to embrace a shared dynamic vision of the cantorate. This vision is realized through programs and initiatives that will ensure a strong and successful organization. Each such effort is conceived according to carefully determined goals and criteria. Through our members we provide our communities with a compelling experience of text, music, learning, relationship to one another and connectedness to God. We establish our organization as a self-assured and securely funded entity, acting in full partnership with other representational bodies of the Reform Movement and worldwide Jewry.[32]

The ACC provides support for its members through conferences, shared vision, and placement proceedings. An Ethics Committee insures that the members conduct themselves in accordance with the by-laws of the ACC. As stated in the Mission Statement, "the Conference inspires its members to embrace a *shared* dynamic vision of the cantorate."[33] "Shared" and "dynamic" are two key words here. "Shared" implies that the membership agrees on what the vision of the cantorate is. "Dynamic" implies that that

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[31] *Ibid.*

[32] American Conference of Cantors, Constitution and By-Laws.

[33] *Ibid.*

vision is constantly changing and growing with the realities of the role of the cantor. Both terms contain within themselves challenges for the ACC.

A "shared" vision of the cantorate is a challenge when membership consists of a large number of cantors with different educational backgrounds, and differing visions of what the cantorate is. The ACC has within its ranks cantors from many generations with varying conceptualizations of the jobs they are doing. The ACC, having just entered into its fifties as an organization, is now taking a close look at the cantorate in all its various aspects.

In Cantor Cohn's presidential address to the ACC plenary session in June of 2004, he stated:

> We are relatively few in number and incredibly busy in our pulpits, so clarity of purpose, integrity of process, and efficiency of action are essential to the fulfillment of our vision. That's why so much energy has gone into ACC internal structures, alongside the programmatic work for ourselves and for the Movement. Building on five decades of devoted leadership, we have strengthened our foundation and prepared the way for a renewed vitality.[34]

The current leadership faces the challenge of moving ahead while still making certain that the leadership of the past, who are still very active, do not feel as though their work was in any way insufficient or unnecessary. "Their work was incredibly important," said Cantor Cohn. "Without what they built, we wouldn't be here today, able to move to the next level."[35] Each generation of leadership stands on the broad, strong shoulders of those who have gone before.

The previous leadership of the ACC had to deal with completely different issues than does the current leadership. As stated earlier in this thesis, in the 1940s and 50s, the ACC was established in order to help improve the cantor's standing in the synagogue as a

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[34]Cohn, Richard. ACC Presidential Message. San Diego, June 2004.
[35]Cohn, Richard. Interview by author, October, 2004.

professional who is broadly empowered in the life of the congregation – not merely a *shaliach tzibur*. That mission of the ACC is still active today.

The ACC faces other challenges as well. One of those challenges is the music in worship. Cantor Cohn states in his address that this challenge is "to advance music of diversity and comprehensive expressive impact, so that *kavanah*, *ru-ach*, interpretive nuance, beauty, and congregational empowerment will blend into prayer experiences that engage and transform the spirit."[36] This is the challenge of how to blend artistry and musical quality with congregational participation and involvement on a deep level in worship. This challenge is sizable, and of great concern for the majority of cantors in the field today.

Cantors, in most cases, do not plan or envision services alone. The rabbis who work with them have their own ideas of what appropriate music should be for services. HUC-JIR has had a large impact on worship as New York-trained rabbis and cantors who studied liturgy with Rabbi Hoffman have entered the field with a strong interest in worship. Along with this interest in worship, many of these rabbis are also part of the move towards involvement and engagement as New York rabbinical students have had, in recent years, the opportunity to enroll in many Synagogue 2000 oriented classes.

A culture-gap has developed between cantors trained without an emphasis on congregational involvement and participation and many of today's rabbis raised in the camp tradition who don't have a full understanding of Jewish music. In the rabbis' perspective, the cantors are too focused on music that doesn't allow for congregational participation and which sounds too florid and sophisticated. From the cantorial

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[36] *Ibid.*

perspective, the rabbis are undermining the musical integrity of the service and trying to do away with the richness of the Jewish musical tradition. Until recently, HUC-JIR did not do anything to decrease that cultural gap. Currently, however, with the expanded curriculum and a closer integration of rabbinic and cantorial curricula, that issue is beginning to be addressed.

The ACC recognizes that it does not exist in a vacuum – as an organization, it recognizes the need to work closely with the Union for Reform Judaism, the CCAR, and the College-Institute, as well as collaborating with several other organizations. Some of the programs and partnerships include:

- Advocating for Jewish music and cantorial issues within the educational programming arms of our Movement.
- Representing the cantorate in the essential work of the Joint Commission on Worship, Music, and Synagogue Living which envisions and enacts elements of the music agenda for the Reform Movement.
- Developing a consciousness of cantors' relationships to the URJ on a regional basis and representing the interests of the cantorate in those regions.
- Participating formally in advocacy efforts of the Movement for social causes of concern in the Jewish world.
- Collaborating with the CCAR in efforts to foster stronger relationships between the cantorate and the rabbinate and between individual cantors and rabbis.
- Supporting the activities of the College-Institute and assisting with recruitment, development, and other concerns, in coordination with the Cantorial Alumni Association.
- Collaborating with ARZA-World Union on international programming and advocacy in Israel and elsewhere.
- Cooperating with the Cantors Assembly in matters of mutual interest.[37]

The programs and organizations with which the ACC is concerned are varied, and that variety speaks volumes about how the cantorate has evolved. No longer (as was previously stated) is the cantorate solely concerned with music and the leading of services. Music is still a large part of the focus, but now the cantorate is also concerned with other things as well – clergy relationships, ARZA, social action and more. That

[37]Cohn, Richard. "Who We Are." ACC Weblog.

expansion of focus is a reflection of the job of the individual cantor.

But is that expansion of focus necessarily a good thing? Not everyone thinks so, especially some rabbis who may see a stronger cantorate as a threat. But even cantors are divided, some of whom want to be engaged fully only in music which is their true love. A broadening definition of the cantor's role means that the energy and time of the cantor's job is correspondingly stretched to fit various needs. At one time, the focus of the cantorate was primarily worship. Now, worship is but one of several foci, and therein lies a challenge of its own.

Rabbi Eric Yoffie, the president of the Union for Reform Judaism (formerly the Union of American Hebrew Congregations), threw down the gauntlet at the National Biennial convention in Orlando, FL, in 1998. His target? Worship transformation. Rabbi Yoffie stated in that biennial address:

> I propose, therefore, that at this Biennial Assembly, we proclaim a new Reform revolution. Like the original Reform revolution, it will be rooted in the conviction that Judaism is a tradition of rebellion, revival, and redefinition, and like the original too, this new initiative will make synagogue worship our Movement's foremost concern.[38]

Rabbi Yoffie's sermon challenged rabbis, lay leaders, and cantors to reach further, work harder, and work together to create worship in the synagogue that would be inspirational, fulfilling, and exciting. The greatest challenge, however was given to the cantorate. "And what will be the single most important key to the success or failure of our revolution?" asked Rabbi Yoffie. "Music. . . Because ritual music is a deeply sensual experience that touches people in a way that words cannot."[39] With these words, Rabbi Yoffie placed the bulk of the responsibility of worship transformation squarely on the

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[38]Yoffie, Eric. "Presidential Sermon." 65th General Assembly, Orlando, 1999.
[39]*Ibid.*

shoulders of the cantorate.

> The [URJ's] commitment is to a vibrant synagogue-based American Judaism. That's what we're devoted to. For the foreseeable future, worship issues will be the center of our concern. Worship has begun to dramatically change for the better. The cantors are the critical people in this ongoing process. We've reached the point where they need to be the leaders. We hope and expect that they will step up to the plate; it will be tragic for our Movement if they do not.[40]

But what would the music of this new, transformed worship look like? Congregational participation would definitely need to play a part, but is that the only type of music that can be present in a "successful" worship experience? It certainly seemed so in the beginning! Rabbi Yoffie went on to say "Because East European melodies – soaring and rich – are often too difficult to sing; a simpler, American *nusach* is only now being developed."[41] Wait – does that mean that *nusach* America can only be simple, congregational melodies? If all we keep of Jewish music is simple congregational melodies, what happens to traditional *nusach*, to *chazzanut*, and to the rich musical heritage that is our inheritance and our responsibility to keep alive and pass on to future generations?

Herein lies another challenge for the cantorate – educating the rabbinate, the Union, the congregations about traditional *nusach*. To those who grew up surrounded by the sound of the Eastern European cantorial tradition, the current *nusach* America would be anything but simple. And for those of us who grew up never hearing the *chazzanut* of cantors like Rappaport and Ganchof, the Eastern European *nusach* can seem overwhelming. *Nusach* America is multi-dimensional. It contains within its best compositions a firm hold on the modes, cantillation, and traditional *nusach* of our Eastern

[40]Yoffie, Eric. Interview by author. October, 2004.
[41]Yoffie, Eric. "Presidential Sermon" Orlando, 1999.

European tradition, while branching into the sounds and styles that mark American music today.

Synagogue 2000, in its formative years, realized that the cantor's involvement in the process of both synagogue and worship transformation was vital. The founders, Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman and Dr. Ron Wolfson discovered in their preparatory work of creating the first synagogue pilot for Synagogue 2000 that the laity were looking for a voice in worship, literally. In working to empower the laity in those formative years, Synagogue 2000's major mistake was one of politics – by not working through the cantors, they alienated the cantorate, which then saw Synagogue 2000 as a threat. From the beginning, Synagogue 2000 insisted that the cantors were partners with the rabbis – over the objections of some. Eventually, Rabbi Hoffman and Dr. Wolfson discovered that they needed to work more closely with cantors both to help them develop needed skills and to realize that Synagogue 2000 was not a threat. Merri Lovinger Arian, a noted educator and songleader, was hired in 2002 as the Director of Music for Synagogue 2000 to deal specifically with those issues.

Rabbi Hoffman said,

> Synagogue 2000's vision from the beginning was that of an expansive *nusach* America, complete with traditional *nusach* and the modern sound. Synagogue 2000's early mistake was not in its vision, but in its failure to reach out sufficiently to many cantors who were unequipped for the change or who feared that control of Jewish music would be taken away from them. Intending to be an ally of the cantorate, Synagogue 2000 was frequently seen as a threat, and its vision was mistakenly understood by many to be entirely populistic. The second stage of Synagogue 2000's growth, therefore, engaged Merri Arian specifically to reach out to the cantorate and engage with cantors themselves in building good will, developing cantorial support groups, and furthering the Synagogue 2000 vision with the knowledge of music that only the cantors have.[42]

Cantors saw the early model that was being used by Synagogue 2000 to demonstrate

[42]Hoffman, Larry. Interview by author, December, 2004.

worship transformation as too uni-dimensional in its scope, relying heavily on the folk genre. Many cantors were uncomfortable with this. Ms. Lovinger Arian actively invited the cantors into the conversation, and worked hard to correct the misunderstanding that the only kind of music Synagogue 2000 endorsed was congregational. She states:

> Our conference began to model participatory folk music alongside engaging and uplifting listening moments, and the cantors were up front and center, helping to demonstrate this breadth of musical style. We now include workshops where the importance of the *chazzan* as the highlighter of Jewish text is discussed and demonstrated. There is a tremendous need for the congregational voice, but there are also times when the congregation cannot do with the liturgy what a *chazzan* can do. There needs to be a synthesis of musical styles. Synagogue 2000 is not suggesting that the music of worship be one color, but rather a tapestry of many colors. Some of that music may be music that is too sophisticated for the congregation to voice themselves, yet it will be music that will enhance their worship in a very special way. We believe that within one service there needs to be musical moments that include solo, choral, *chazzanut*, *nusach*, and participatory music. And striking the balance among these various musical styles needs to be informed by the text and the prayer moment that is being enhanced.[43]

This, then, is an answer to Rabbi Yoffie's previous statement about *nusach* America. Ms. Lovinger Arian made an excellent point about *nusach* America when she said to me, "We can compose pieces that are reflective of *nusach*, but written in a way that involves the congregation. But until the cantor teaches the congregation what *nusach* is, it will not have meaning to them. We need to bring an understanding, and, in doing so, a relevance to the *nusach* in the music we use – we need to breathe life back into *nusach*."[44]

Towards that end, Synagogue 2000 includes a unit in their Prayer Curriculum entitled *The Vocabulary of Music*. This chapter seeks to educate the congregants about the history of Jewish music, the relationship between music and text, and the use of *nusach* to organize and punctuate Jewish sacred time.

Synagogue 2000's model of worship transformation meshes well with Rabbi Yoffie's

[43] Arian, Merri Lovinger. Interview by author, October, 2004.
[44] *Ibid.*

vision – and, in fact, the Union has supported and encouraged congregations to work with Synagogue 2000 on worship and congregational transformation. Rabbi Yoffie is afraid, however, that the broadened role that cantors are playing does not leave them enough time or energy to concentrate on worship issues. He said to me, "To what extent can or should the cantorate play a broader role in the congregation apart from those issues concerning worship and music? Does a broader role pull them away from worship issues? I'm in favor of cantors doing other things in their congregations, but not at the expense of their expertise in worship."[45]

These four organizations, HUC-SSM, the URJ, the ACC, and Synagogue 2000 are all closely intertwined in their influence upon the cantorate. HUC houses Synagogue 2000 within its New York campus, and the required courses in guitar and "Empowering the Congregational Voice" are two classes that are the direct result of Synagogue 2000's influence on the school. Synagogue 2000 has also worked closely with the URJ on its agenda of worship transformation.

The ACC is involved in HUC, though, as noted earlier, the involvement is not as much as could be desired or, some would say, is needed. The ACC is working closely with the CCAR, composing a *Brit* document that will outline "how cantors and rabbis can work together effectively in their often overlapping roles, to meet the needs of our synagogue membership and *K'lal Yisraeil.*"[46] The ACC has done some work with Synagogue 2000, though not a lot. Cantor Cohn has presented at a Syngagogue 2000 conference, representing the ACC, and Synagogue 2000 has been invited to ACC conventions.

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[45]Yoffie, Erik. Interview by author. October, 2004.
[46]ACC and CCAR. "Towards Creating Sacred Partnerships" – Draft Document, 2004.

"Advocacy" means a comprehensive campaign to engage our partners in the Movement around the core mission of the cantorate. *We need to gain clarity for ourselves around that mission.* Then, in our relationships with the laity, the rabbinate, the seminary and the allied professions, we will articulate and emphasize the commonalities between *our* precepts and goals and *theirs*. This process should lead, in turn, to covenants that further secure our role in the constellation of Reform institutions.[47]

What does the cantorate still need from these organizations? As Cantor Cohn advocates, we need them to work more closely together – to align themselves with regards to their visions and coordinate for continuing education as well as an education that prepares students for all facets of the profession they will be entering.

[47]Cohn, Richard. Presidential Message. San Diego, June 2004.

Chapter 3

Personal Visions and Reflections on the Cantorate

A. Cantor Rachelle Nelson

Cantor Rachelle Nelson entered Hebrew Union College's School of Sacred Music in 1984 with a vision of the cantor as a very strong spiritual leader as well as a role model for all ages within the synagogue and community. That vision has remained intact throughout her career, even as she has faced the sometimes daunting and challenging aspects of her pulpit.

Cantor Nelson grew up in an extremely culturally Jewish home. Though her parents were not exceedingly observant in their Jewish practices, their home was filled with Jewish music, art, literature, and the smells of her mother's Jewish cooking. Her family had a long history of artists and musicians dating back to Eastern Europe. Her great grandfather was a *chazzan* and a *mohel* in Brooklyn. Cantor Nelson's grandmother was a singer of Yiddish music, Cantor Nelson's first piano teacher, and a pianist who taught piano lessons into her 80s. On a typical Shabbat evening in Cantor Nelson's home, the family gathered around the piano, singing Yiddish melodies, while Cantor Nelson joined her grandmother in improvisation at the piano. These are but a few of the memories that inspired Cantor Nelson as a young child. Singing Yiddish melodies was "almost like a pair of shoes that fit so well on my feet,"[48] said Cantor Nelson.

During her college years, Cantor Nelson worked as a soloist at Temple Israel of Greater Miami. She worked with Cantor Jacob Bernstein, the Senior Cantor at Temple Israel. He became one her mentors, as she admired his magnificent voice and tremendous

[48]Nelson, Rachelle. Interview by author. August, 2004.

devotion to his congregation. Cantor Nelson stated, "In some areas, my cantorate reflects Jacob's cantorate. He ministered to his people, he performed a vast amount of life cycle ceremonies, he was an educator, and was loved and respected within the entire Jewish community of Miami."[49]

Cantor Nelson's current role in her congregation is multi-faceted and constantly growing and changing. She wears many hats, from fundraiser to performer, from *shaliach tzibur* to educator. In our interview, she stated:

> Listen, you're not going to be just a beautiful singer. As *chazzan*, you are going to be singer, teacher, spiritual advisor, psychologist, politician, creator, performer, and so much more. We wear so many hats, and we need to learn how to wear them well. What keeps me in my job, makes me hard to replace, is that I'm willing to do so many things. If I just sang, rested on my pretty voice and Shabbat services, I would have been gone along time ago. A cantor has to be multi-faceted and multi-talented. We have to be far more than just musicians.[50]

Cantor Nelson learned how to wear those hats from different rabbis with whom she worked. During her years at HUC-JIR, she became ill and took a leave of absence from the school. She came back to Miami to recuperate, and, while there, worked at Temple Israel in Kendall, FL as their soloist. When the year ended, Cantor Nelson returned to school with improved health and a strong desire to complete her studies with excellence. She continued to work for Temple Israel, commuting back and forth from New York to Miami, flying down on Thursdays and back on Sundays, as Temple Israel had made an agreement with her to fly her to Miami every weekend while also paying her a salary. It is no surprise that after investiture, Temple Israel hired her as their *chazzan sheini*.

Temple Israel was the perfect first pulpit for a young cantor fresh out of school. Rabbi Haskell Bernat and, later, Rabbi Rex Perlmeter guided Cantor Nelson through

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[49] *Ibid.*
[50] *Ibid.*

those first vulnerable years. Both rabbis, though different in leadership style and personality, mentored the young Cantor Nelson. Rabbi Bernat taught her the choreography of the service – "he was ahead of his time in creativity and flexibility on the pulpit. He made the pulpit into a stage and magically pulled in the congregation."[51] From Rabbi Perlmeter, Cantor Nelson learned how to truly partner with a rabbi – he wanted her to be his partner, and treated her as such. Both rabbis participated with Cantor Nelson in composing new musical settings for the liturgy. They wrote the words or text, and she set their text to music. Her partnership with both rabbis was on an artistic level as well as a clergy partnership. To this day, Cantor Nelson remains extremely grateful to them for their love and devotion to her.

When Cantor Nelson moved on to a new congregation in 1991, she was greeted with an entirely new set of challenges. Cantor Nelson was no longer the "'baby' who had been nurtured and protected from the start."[52] In her new pulpit, Temple Beth Am in Kendall, FL, Cantor Nelson was now looked upon to take a greater leadership role. Though at times the reality of that seemed frightening, slowly she began to adjust to her new home. Other facets of the job also emerged that Cantor Nelson found invigorating. "I was met with new challenges in every area of Temple life; counseling, fundraising, teaching in a large Day School, and so much more. I stayed available and open to anything and everything. I was always willing to try something new."[53] Again, Cantor Nelson learned from the rabbis of her new pulpit. Her senior rabbi, Rabbi Terry Bookman, also collaborates with Cantor Nelson on composing music, and, together, they have recorded

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[51] *Ibid.*
[52] *Ibid.*
[53] *Ibid.*

two cds as well as songbooks and sheet music. They have developed a marvelous relationship, both on and off the pulpit.

Though Cantor Nelson enjoys a myriad of experiences, the most invaluable and priceless part of her career has been her composing of music. She says:

> The greatest fingerprints I want to leave are musical ones. Someday I hope to have an impact on Jewish worship in a major way. Wherever I travel, something of mine is being used – *Modim*, *Bar'chu*, *Hashkiveinu* . . . It means nothing to put my music in a drawer and save it for myself. If I can't hear it sung in a congregation and see life breathed into it so it touches people's souls, it means nothing. My greatest joy is watching cantors use my music – people telling me how much the music means to them. That's the legacy I leave behind: my music and my soul.[54]

B. Cantor David Lefkowitz

Though in many ways he denied it when he was young, for Cantor Lefkowitz, the profession of the cantorate was in his blood. His father, Cantor Jacob Lefkowitz was a well-known cantor and composer in Denver, where the Lefkowitz family resided during Cantor D. Lefkowitz' childhood and teen years. Music was an intrinsic part of the life of the Lefkowitz family. One of Cantor D. Lefkowitz's earliest memories is of sitting at the piano or by the phonograph. Music was constantly running through his head – that and baseball were his earliest infatuations.

In college, Cantor Lefkowitz majored in psychology and theology of religion. During those years, one of his professors, who was very influential in guiding the young Lefkowitz, sat him down and told him he should apply to cantorial school. JTS seemed to be the logical choice. Though his father's philosophy was Orthodox, Yeshiva University didn't seem like the best choice. HUC-JIR, though an excellent school, seemed too far removed from his father's beliefs.

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[54] *Ibid.*

Cantor Jacob Lefkowitz was American born, but raised in an Eastern European atmosphere. As a result, he never locked onto one style of *chazzanut*. The younger Cantor Lefkowitz's compositions and musical choices were greatly influenced by his father's eclecticism and his embrace of different styles of *chazzanut*. Cantor Jacob Barkan, who came to Pittsburgh around the same time as Jacob Lefkowitz and served a large Conservative synagogue in the community where Jacob Lefkowitz worked as an Orthodox *chazzan*, was also a huge influence for the young Cantor Lefkowitz who used to walk over on Friday nights to hear him. Cantor Barkan was among the founders of the Cantor's Assembly and one of the truly great voices of the Conservative cantorate.

As Cantor Lefkowitz entered JTS with an undergraduate degree in psychology, he had a vision of the cantorate that was largely guided by the concept of counseling. As his voice developed during his years at JTS, however, that vision of the cantorate shifted to a focus that was more on the vocal aspect. Almost simultaneously, composition began to play a large role in Cantor Lefkowitz's development as a cantor. He had begun to study composition before he entered JTS. While he was there, he studied, both in school and privately, with composer Miriam Gideon, and began to really concentrate on that aspect of his musical talents. By his senior year at JTS, Cantor Lefkowitz was coaching secular repertoire with his vocal coach, and he matriculated into Julliard upon graduation. During his last year at JTS, he was engaged by Ocean Parkway Jewish Center in Brooklyn – a major congregation which was a very traditional "*chazzonus*" environment which had been previously served by cantors Kapov-Kagen, Moshe Ganchoff, and Bela Hershkovitz.

Cantor Lefkowitz's position at Ocean Parkway was totally devoted to singing and music. Each and every service was a heavy delivery of *chazzanut*, and really helped him develop that aspect of his musicianship. He officiated at a lot of weddings (up to fifty per year), and was forever singing anthems – every program and activity had an anthem to set the mood for the participants. As cantor, he wasn't around for weekday *minyanim* (which were led by lay leaders), and didn't work with the *b'nai mitzvah*. He was there for high profile activities and occurances, but not around for the daily life of the congregation. Cantor Lefkowitz loved the *chazzanut* he was able to do, but felt that other aspects of his musicianship were unable to grow. The congregation didn't want choral music, they wanted to hear *chazzanut*, and Cantor Lefkowitz wanted to explore more of the fine choral music that he knew existed in Jewish music.

After four years at Ocean Parkway, Cantor Lefkowitz made the decision to move on to Temple Emanuel of North Jersey (in Paterson), where he worked weekly with the distinguished choral conductor, Abraham Kaplan. Together they developed sophisticated Shabbat and High Holiday repertoire for the Temple Emanuel Choral Society, which Max Helfman had founded in 1929 and had conducted for nearly twenty-five years. Cantor Lefkowitz began composing and arranging music for the choir, encouraged by Kaplan. For their annual choral concerts with symphony orchestra, Cantor Lefkowitz sang tenor solos from major classical oratorios and opera scenes that were performed, as well as important cantorial works for which he commissioned orchestrations.

Six years in this environment prepared Cantor Lefkowitz for the call in 1976 to succeed Cantor David J. Putterman, one of the most important forces in the development of contemporary American *chazzanut*, who was retiring after forty-three years as the

cantor of Park Avenue Synagogue. Cantor Lefkowitz began his tenure at Park Avenue by engaging Abraham Kaplan to be Director of Choral Activities, a position that Kaplan held for twenty-four years, conducting major choral concerts and concert services. In this sophisticated musical milieu, Cantor Lefkowitz began to research 18th and 19th century classics and uncovered treasures of unpublished manuscripts, unknown or forgotten, which he then adapted, modified and arranged for the contemporary synagogue. He also discovered young talented choral composers who were knowledgeable in *chazzanut*, and commissioned a huge amount of new synagogue music, much of which became part of regular Shabbat services at his synagogue.

As the 20th century was nearing its end, the cantorate and cantorial music had changed quite drastically. In stark contrast to his early years at Ocean Parkway, Cantor Lefkowitz has become involved in every aspect of congregational life. It wasn't just the congregations (and their expectations) that changed – Cantor Lefkowitz's whole cantorate, from the early 90s on, went through a paradigm shift.

> I'm much more attuned and challenged with the importance of reaching congregants in a way that can be affective musically. This involves active participation by the congregants – not only on Shabbat, but on the High Holy Days as well. It's the opposite of a figurehead serving the masses. Now, it's the clergy member inspiring the individual – reaching the individual worshipper of all ages.[55]

That shift in paradigm is reflected in everything that Cantor Lefkowitz does, from *b'nai mitzvah* tutoring to working with his co-cantor and two rabbis. "It's less and less about music, and more and more about reaching people as individuals as a Jewish leader," he said. How does that affect working with his co-clergy? "We don't have set

[55]Lefkowitz, David. Interview by author. October, 2004.

turfs anymore. We're much more effective working together as a team – different talents intertwined rather than working as separate professionals."[56]

For Cantor Lefkowitz, recent experiences of a more spiritual nature have helped him bring a new dimension to the traditional liturgy. Early in 2002, he joined the first group of cantors from the Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform movements, including several recent graduates of HUC-SSM, for a two-year program of group study, prayer, meditation, and retreats. This program, developed by the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, was intended specifically for cantors to increase their spiritual awareness – both personally and in their leadership. From this venture, Cantor Lefkowitz was invited to join a new joint *Chevraya* program that includes both rabbis and cantors, all of whom have completed the two-year respective curricula of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, and are now exploring the possibility of developing a new kind of Jewish spiritual leadership for the future.

Cantor Lefkowitz's responsibilities are now endless. His days include meeting with families to discuss the curriculum of the religious school, involvement in the men's club, singing with the nursery school's toddler program, participating in the seniors' lunch and learn, taking turns leading *mincha/ma-ariv* services with the other clergy, *b'nai mitzvah* training, involvement in the overall umbrella of involving the congregants, and getting to know them. In this work, no dichotomy between professional staff and lay leaders exists, but, rather, there is a true partnership with everyone working towards the same goals.

With that same paradigm in mind, Cantor Lefkowitz coaches cantorial students at HUC-JIR. About that, he says:

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[56] *Ibid.*

All movements are important, and they all serve a purpose. It's such an unfortunate thing that the movements are so divided. *Chazzanut* cuts across all denominational lines. Cantors have much more in common than they realize – more than perhaps even the rabbis have. As time goes on, the rabbis will realize they have things in common as well. HUC follows a vision that's geared towards the totality of Jewish life.[57]

B. Cantor Ted Aronson

Cantor Ted Aronson always thought he would have a career as an opera singer. After all, his sister is an opera singer who sings in the chorus of the Metropolitan Opera. His opera idols were Richard Tucker and Jan Pierce. His early life was filled with the rich music and voices of operatic music – cantorial school was supposed to be just a stepping stone to his opera career.

In Cantor Aronson's second year of college, however, something happened that he hadn't anticipated – he fell in love with the cantorate, and the visions of a career in opera disappeared. "I fell in love with the community aspect, with being able to use myself in a constructive way," Cantor Aronson said. "The first experience I had as a cantor was to perform an unveiling for a family. The rabbi was away, so I was on my own. I sat with them, and we talked, and I had never felt so good in the way I was using myself. At that moment, I fell in love with the opportunity the cantorate offered of being useful within a Jewish framework."[58]

Several things happened along Cantor Aronson's path to the cantorate. He was very young when he was invested by HUC-JIR, only twenty-three years old, and he wanted to find another way to use himself in synagogue life. So he returned to HUC-JIR and received a degree in Jewish education. He put that degree to good use, directing the

[57] *Ibid.*
[58] Aronson, Ted. Interview by author, October, 2004.

religious school in his congregation for the next eighteen years. Later in his career, he returned to graduate school to receive a Master's of Social Work in order to help inform his role as a pastoral counselor and group facilitator.

During Cantor Aronson's first year at HUC-JIR, he failed Hebrew, and wound up spending the next summer in Israel, studying in ulpan. While there, he met Shlomo Carlebach who had a profound influence on the young cantor to be. Carlebach introduced Cantor Aronson to the guitar and to Israeli music. In 1964 or 1965, Cantor Ray Smolover, then the director of the ACC, asked Cantor Aronson to lead *z'mirot* at the ACC conference, and he brought both the guitar and the Israeli music of which he'd grown so fond to the *z'mirot* sessions, neither of which were common to the cantorate at that time.

In 1967, Cantor Aronson came to Temple Sharey Tefilo-Israel, in South Orange, NJ, where he has remained ever since. For Cantor Aronson, this has been the ideal job. For the first eighteen years, as previously stated, he directed the religious school. But that wasn't the sum total of his involvement in the congregation – he also was involved in creating music: commissioning various composers, such as Gershon Kingsley, Bonia Shur, and Gary Friedman, to write services for the congregation.

When Cantor Aronson first came to Temple Sharey Tefilo-Israel, a professional choir always sang on Friday nights and Saturday mornings, accompanied by an organist. The repertoire was classical Reform – the music of Bloch, Helfman, Freed, and the like. Then, because of a scheduling error, the accompanist didn't show up one Shabbat morning. Cantor Aronson quickly rethought the music, and he and the choir led the services *a cappella*. The rabbi loved it. He told Cantor Aronson that the music had a

flavor of authenticity that it hadn't held before. That was the end of the accompanist on Saturday mornings.

Worship evolved in other ways as well. Today, the first service of the month is a family service, accompanied by Cantor Aronson on guitar. The second service of the month has a seven-piece band, and the music is exclusively the pieces composed by Craig Taubman ("Friday Night Live"). The third service of the month contains all classical Reform music, and is accompanied by a professional quartet and keyboard. The fourth service of the month is a creative service with an Israeli accompanist on accordian, a few volunteer guitarists, a volunteer choir, and drums. Every service has opportunities for the congregation to listen, sing, and *daven*, and contains moments where the music is accompanied by instruments, or is sung a cappella.

When asked to describe how his job has evolved over the years, Cantor Aronson said:

> The synagogue has changed a lot – in the way that they see me as both a professional and as a human being. Cantors, by nature, are creative people. My ability to be creative has been nurtured by the synagogue because they were willing to allow me to be creative. The change in my job was a combination of me, the rabbi and the congregation. The congregation allowed me the freedom to introduce new music and the guitar. When I started, I did absolutely nothing of a pastoral nature. Today, there is no part of synagogue life in which I am not involved – and not necessarily with the rabbi! We have a fully integrated clergy team, with two rabbis and myself. It took a while for the congregation to get comfortable with getting the cantor for funerals. As cantors, we want to be more than just singers – we want to use ourselves in every way that the community needs us.[59]

Much like Cantors Nelson and Lefkowitz, Cantor Aronson is involved in every aspect of his congregation's life. There is very little he doesn't do. The congregation has undergone a huge shift over the past few decades regarding clergy roles. When Cantor Aronson started with Temple Sharey Tefilo-Israel, his job was to be the "cantor." He sang, he taught *b'nai mitzvah*, and taught music in the religious school. He did not attend

[59] *Ibid.*

board meetings, never conducted services alone, and never did weddings or funerals alone.

As the congregation grew, so too did the needs of its members, but the rabbi held on to what he considered to be his "rabbinic role," and didn't want the cantor to do anything other than music. During this time, the Union for Reform Judaism (then the Union of American Hebrew Congregations) went through a shift in the way both rabbis and congregations saw and used their cantors. The result was a change in both Cantor Aronson's own rabbi and the congregation. His own creativity helped as well.

Cantor Aronson has started several programs that have been wonderfully successful within his congregation. He has produced three musicals for the synagogue – one on the Holocaust (based on the writings of Victor Frankel), one on the history of Israel (based on the book *The Exodus*), and the third called "Isaac's Window" (based on the anti-semitism that erupted in Billings Montana during Chanukah of 1993). He started a parenting center in the synagogue for parents with young children. His largest project at the moment is called "Change for Change."

"Change for Change" encourages children to group together to make a difference. Every child in the program gets a *tzedakah* box with a "Change for Change" logo on it. The group raises as much money as it can, and a benefactor doubles what they raise up to $10,000. Cantor Aronson meets with the kids, they study Jewish responsibility vis a vis *tzedakah*, and vote on where to send the money.

The project was so successful at home, Cantor Aronson brought the idea to Israel. Every February, he spends a month in Eilat. He has started three "Change for Change" projects in different schools – helping those who need help to help others. Cantor

Aronson's program at home provides the funding for those schools – he and the American children participating with him double, up to 10,000 shekels, the money that the children in Israel raise.

Cantor Aronson's cantorate is something that he has created, shaped, and formed so that it feeds and nurtures him, spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually. He has taken every aspect of his considerable talents and used them for the good of his congregation.

> We want to be more than just singers – we want to use ourselves in every way the community needs us. Cantors today should definitely be more invested in learning how to be pastors – the best thing I ever did was to get a degree in social work! Pastoral work puts us in a position to be able to work in parallel with the rabbis. The cantor has now attained full clergy status, and we need a definition of our role that reflects that.[60]

[60] *Ibid.*

Chapter 4

Current Challenges Faced by the Reform Cantorate

The ACC has an internet listserve which allows all current members of the ACC as well as cantorial students from HUC-JIR to join. I posted a list of questions to the cantors on the listserve, which included the question, "What is your greatest fear for the cantorate?" From that question, one major response emerged, and that's what I discuss in this chapter.

As described in the previous chapter, cantors serving congregations today live busy lives that are filled with the varied demands placed on them by congregational life of the 21st century. Lifecycles, counseling, teaching, programming, and worship are included – in short, most cantors today are involved every aspect of congregational life.

Worship transformation is one of the largest challenges facing the Reform cantorate. The goal of worship transformation is for worship to reach congregants on a deep level. It seeks to give congregants more ownership of their worship, and a greater sense of connection to the liturgy and rituals than before. The real challenge with worship reform lies in the music.

Synagogue 2000 was perceived by the cantorate to model services consisting entirely of congregational melodies in its beginning years, ignoring *chazzanut*, traditional *nusach*, and other musical styles traditionally associated with the cantorate. Rabbi Yoffie, in his Biennial Address in 1999, included in his remarks that "the music of prayer has become what it was never meant to be: a spectator sport."[61] For the cantorate, this emphasis on congregational singing raised the questions: Do we need to "dumb down" our music?

[61]Yoffie, Eric, "Presidential Sermon." Orlando, 1999.

What will happen to the *nusach*, to the *chazzanut* that is our musical legacy and an important part of our Jewish heritage?

Synagogue 2000's main problem during its first few years was a misunderstood message – by empowering the lay people, the clergy felt left out of the loop. The cantors, faced with a songleading model with which most were uncomfortable, needed to be brought in to the conversation. With Ms. Lovinger Arian's help, Synagogue 2000 now works with cantors. Synagogue 2000 and the congregations have come to understand that they that cannot do with the liturgy what the cantor can do. Synagogue 2000 is not about one single style, but, rather, it promotes music that is a tapestry of many colors – solo music, choral music, *nusach*, and participatory music all within the layout of a single service.

Additionally, in different regional areas, with Synagogue 2000's support and encouragement, cantors have developed various groups to meet three to four times a year, discussing issues of artistic synthesis, the role of a cantor as *shaliach tzibur*, the cantor's need to be creative within worship, and what cantors can do to sustain their interest and excitement when the level of music is not as high as they would wish.

Cantor Richard Botton, invested in 1959, has seen the shift of music in worship over a span of nearly fifty years, and has this to say:

> The worship style of the Reform Movement was much different in 1959 when I became invested. The music, for the most part, was more formal. Cantor and choir selections tended toward passive congregational participation (listening and being inspired). Composers very often composed selections that belonged more suitably in the concert hall, rather than in the worship setting . . . Then came the influence of NFTY! Rabbis raised on the folk experience began to exert pressure on cantors to use the accessible folk style almost exclusively. [URJ] Biennial conventions, influenced by them, fostered the "participation at all costs" ethic. Taste and compatibility with liturgical text were ignored. The cantor became nearly impotent with regard to the ability to instruct and uplift . . . There are new groups of cantors being graduated from

the SSM today who understand the delicate balance between participation and tasteful, spiritually uplifting music for worship.[62]

Cantor Botton has seen the pendulum swing from the extreme formality of Lewandowski and Sulzer to the extreme informality of Julie Silver, Debbie Friedman, and Cantor Jeff Klepper. He is waiting, encouraging, and watching for it to swing back towards the middle again.

Another fear of cantors, with regards to the music, is the fear that this participatory model gives congregations the wrong impression of what they need from a *shaliach tzibur*. Cantor Erik Contzius, who was invested by HUC-JIR in 1995, says:

> My greatest fear is that we will make ourselves obsolete. By continuing to foster the larger ideal that synagogues should sing every bit of liturgy and participate at all levels – as well as foster the notion that the more modern or accessible the music is the better – we create an environment in which the synagogues can say, "We do not need experts/professionals to help us be better Jews . . ." I don't fear people's education. I don't fear people taking jobs away from us as songleaders or soloists. I do fear that the Jewish community appreciates less and less the value of having a professional cantor in their midst, because with all our training, both in liturgy and music, we are a resource for the heart, soul, and mind – and we, as a cantorate, must deliver on that if we are to survive as a profession.[63]

Cantor Contzius' concern about congregations not recognizing the training and gifts of cantors is a concern shared by many in the profession. Cantor Kerith Spencer-Shapiro, invested in 2003, states that her "greatest fear for the cantorate is that the majority of congregations will not deem it necessary to hire a cantor . . . Many people do not understand that being a cantor is more than being a voice."[64] Cantor Dana Anessi, a 1980 investee hopes that "our great tradition of music is able to last through the worship 'revolution' that's going on today. We must keep ourselves relevant, always contributing

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[62]Botton, Richard. Private Correspondance with author, August, 2004.
[63]Contzius, Erik. Private Correspondance with author, August, 2004.
[64]Spencer-Shapiro, Kerith. Private Correspondance with author, August, 2004.

to the life of our congregations, but reminding them (and ourselves) of our great tradition."[65]

Cantor Nelson shares the concern of Cantor Contzius and others, and answers it by involving herself in every aspect of congregational life, from fundraising, to concerts, to board meetings. "The cantorate needs to grow intellectually and artistically," she says, "Cantors need to see themselves with the ability to do and be anything they want to be, but at the same time they need to accept that working within a synagogue setting they must understand their place, and make that place that they're in the most beautiful, melodic, and spiritual place they can."[66]

Balance is the key – balance and education. The cantors need to balance congregational participation with the musical traditions of a rich heritage, need to balance a full plate at work with home and family, need to balance artistic development and spirituality within worship with educating the congregation so that everyone can learn and move forwards together.

As Ms. Lovinger Arian states :

> The purpose of music in prayer is to deepen the prayer experience. We must take the emphasis off of the particular music that is being sung, and instead shift the focus on how well it serves the prayer experience. The truth is that in order to meet the diverse needs of our praying communities, we must find an artful synthesis of the many Jewish musical styles available to us . . . The answer need not lie in everyone's being able to sing everything, but rather in everyone's being engaged and honored in the prayer experience.[67]

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[65]Anessi, Dana, Email Questionnaire, August, 2004.

[66]Nelson, Rachelle, Personal Interview, August, 2004.

[67]Arian, Merri Lovinger, "Seeking Harmony: Music, Prayer, and Sacred Community" in Kadden, Barbara and Kadden, Bruce eds. *Teaching Tefilah*. (Denver, Colorado: A.R.E. Publishing, Inc., 2004), 165.

Many cantors understand this need for artful synthesis. Their challenge now lies in getting their congregations to understand it as well. That is where the education component comes in to play.

In order for cantors to help their congregations appreciate the synthesis of *nusach* and folk, congregational and recitative, choral and solo, they must first learn how to best teach their congregations about each of these styles. There are congregations whose *minhag* is still to listen to the service, not to sing along with it. There are congregations who have never heard *chazzanut* and do not understand its relevance in their worship practices. Still other congregations only use a guitar as accompaniment, and look at the choir and organ or piano as an impediment their participation in prayer. Each congregation's musical *minhag* is different, and each one requires the delicate touch of a master educator and spiritual leader to bring about change in that most intimate of places – prayer. This, indeed, is the ultimate challenge for the cantor.

Rabbi Yoffie well understands the importance of the cantor in congregational life. He told me:

> A cantor is someone who is an expert in Judaism and in sources and Hebrew and music. A cantor brings a measure of sophistication to worship that a soloist could not possibly bring. . . A soloist goes up on the bimah and sings. A cantor is somebody who moves, who advocates worship change and reform, educates a congregation, and puts forth a variety of options consistent with tradition.[68]

[68]Yoffie, Eric, Interview by the author. October, 2004

Conclusion

My initial question still stands – the question of defining what a cantor is. We need a 21st century definition that reflects the ever-expanding range of skills that this emerging cantor of the 21st century brings to his or her job. Non-Jews on the streets are not the only people who do not understand the function of a cantor – in many situations, we need look no further than our own synagogues to encounter that lack of knowledge and understanding.

The definition of clergy in general is changing, including that of the rabbi. Nevertheless, the rabbi remains essentially a teacher who uses Jewish text as the foundation for his or her teaching. Whether the rabbi serves a congregation, works for a Hillel or another organization (such as the URJ), or is a chaplain, the rabbi still teaches, albeit in different ways that are appropriate to the specific settings.

The definition of "cantor," as we saw in the introductory chapter, used to be *shaliach tzibur* – an emissary of the congregation, or one who leads the congregation in prayer. But, as Cantor Nelson points out, "As *chazzan* you're not just going to be a beautiful singer. As *chazzan* you are going to be singer, teacher, spiritual advisor, psychologist, politician, creator, and performer."[69]

I would argue that the definition of cantor as *shaliach tzibur* is too limiting, and leads directly to the very real fear of cantors that the cantorate is on its way to becoming obsolete – that congregations will replace them with soloists, not understanding the resources that an invested cantor can bring to their community – a combination of skills that cannot be replicated by a soloist, songleader, or even an assistant rabbi. If *shaliach tzibur* is the only definition of cantor that congregations understand, then it's no wonder

[69]Nelson, Rachelle. Interview by the author, August, 2004

they look to the much less expensive soloist as a viable alternative to the invested cantor. We need a new definition of "cantor" if we are to convince congregations that soloists are not replacements for fully trained, invested cantors.

The role of the cantorate has expanded immeasurably in the past fifty years. So, too, has Jewish music. As *nusach* America continues to evolve, it grows in sophistication as it attempts fully to include the Jewish music of the past with the trends of the present. No one seriously argues that we should forget the importance of the music of the past. And it follows that we will require, now more than ever, cantors who are trained in the broad depth of Jewish music. Only cantors can bring this rich tradition and history to the table.

Adding the cantorial role of pastor, educator, and group facilitator then, in no way minimizes what the cantor alone offers: the musical expertise that rabbis do not have. Like the cantors who came before us, the cantors of today are the only ones who understand the breadth of the Jewish musical tradition – the skill of highlighting liturgy and Jewish texts. The cantor's understanding of text through Jewish music is exactly what the congregations cannot afford to lose. And cantors cannot afford to lose sight of that all-important facet of their being. To lose that aspect of our heritage is to lose the very thing that makes Jewish music Jewish, and to lose the reason for the existence of the cantorate all-together. As Cantor Contzius fears, if we lose our hold of the roots, the core of our musical tradition, we will make ourselves obsolete.

I would propose that a cantor is a teacher who uses the rich tradition of Jewish music as the foundation of his or her teaching. That role as teacher informs every aspect of a cantor's calling, just the way a rabbi's role as teacher of Jewish text informs every aspect of a rabbi's calling. Even through prayer, the cantor uses *nusach*, congregational

melodies, and majestic choral pieces to teach the liturgy of our people. In many ways, the cantor uses music as a subtle form of teaching – so subtle, that perhaps both students and teacher don't always recognize when the teaching is happening.

The word "teacher," however, is limited by the definitions and strictures society has placed on it. It still does not fully encompass the role of either rabbi or cantor. Judaism is not just text or music, not just liturgy and Talmud and *nusach*, but a living, breathing culture that informs every aspect of Jewish life. Cantors and rabbis transmit that culture, primarily through words and music.

Words and music are not as intrinsically separate as they would seem on the surface. The spoken word contains music in itself, and the music of the Jewish tradition transmits the words of that tradition. One is inseparable from the other, and Jewish culture is best transmitted when they work together – just as Jewish congregations function best when rabbi, cantor, and lay leaders work together, each understanding and supporting the role that the others fill.

During the last twenty years, music has become the focal point of the cantorate – so much so that a cantor has almost exclusively been defined by the music he or she sings, and everything else he or she does is forgotten. "But you're *just* doing music," is a comment I've heard a few times in the halls of my student internships during religious school. *Just* doing music? If that's the perception of what a cantor does, it's no wonder why congregations hire assistant rabbis as their second clergy and cantors only as their third. No wonder why congregations hire soloists and songleaders who lack the training and understanding to transmit the beauty and richness of our heritage. As cantors, we have two huge tasks ahead of us, one on an individual level, and one on a collective level.

Individually, we must be responsive to the musical needs of our congregations, which may require us to expand our skills to encompass a wider range of musical styles. But we must also be careful not to let go of the traditions, for they are what give us our foundation and roots. But these solely musical realms cannot be where our skills begin and end. We also need to be ready to step into roles not traditionally associated with the cantorate: teacher, counselor, chaplain, fundraiser, administrator, and much, much more.

As a profession, we collectively need to find a way to educate the congregations about the emerging cantor of the 21st century, and the incredible resource this "new cantor" can be for our synagogues as Synagogue 2000 has presented it. In addition, we must gain the support and backing of the URJ, the CCAR, and HUC-JIR, so that they, too, recognize who and what we are, and send that message to the congregations. We must step up to the plate with the full knowledge of what we are – master educators and spiritual leaders who are the guardians and the interpreters of the music that is our inheritance, our legacy, and our future.

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Todah rabah to:

Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman and Ms. Merri Lovinger Arian, my thesis advisors. You have spent hours of your precious time reading, re-reading, critiquing, and pushing me to go further than I ever thought I would or could. You are both my mentors and my teachers, and I could not ask for better.

Cantor David Lefkowitz, Cantor Ted Aronson, and Cantor Rachelle Nelson. Thank you for your time and your willingness to share your life-journeys with me for the purpose of this thesis.

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My partner, Robin Nafshi, who took time away from the writing of her own thesis to edit mine. I love you!

All of the faculty at HUC-JIR with whom I've been fortunate enough to study these past four years. Your dedication to your students shines through everything you do, and I will take your teachings with me wherever I go.

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Rabbi Yoffie, Cantor Goldstein, Cantor Cohn, Ms. Lovinger-Arian, and Rabbi Hoffman – thank you all so much for the time you spent with me talking about how your various institutions affect the cantorate and their visions of and for the cantorate. Your time and honesty is much appreciated!

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