# INTEGRATING REPERTOIRES:
# STYLISTIC PARTNERSHIP IN JEWISH LITURGICAL MUSIC

An exploration of innovative ways to integrate music of contrasting styles, inspired by exemplary past and present partnerships between cantors and singer-songwriters

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Senior Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Cantorial Ordination and Master of Sacred Music Degree

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Due Date: January 23, 2020
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**Abstract**

Many contemporary cantors find great value in the integration of various repertoires of Jewish liturgical music – traditional *nusach* and *hazzanut* to art songs to contemporary folk, rock, and pop melodies – within the same worship experience. This integration can take place on numerous levels, such as the consecutive use of pieces from different canons, to the creation of a single musical moment that simultaneously presents sounds from different repertoires in the pursuit of a synergistic prayer experience. Partnerships between cantors and Jewish singer-songwriters such as Debbie Friedman (z"l) and Cantor Jacob Mendelson, Noah Aronson and Cantor Jodi Sufrin, and Cantor Rosalie Will's *Kesher Shir* cantor/songwriter cohorts have created new laboratories in which these varying styles can be integrated within the same composition or arrangement, creating integration on a more granular level.

This senior project primarily explores this integration through primary source interviews, examining past and present partnerships between cantors and singer-songwriters who craft liturgical repertoire together and collaborate on creative projects that combine these seemingly distinct styles in innovative ways. The thesis is organized into nine chapters – six chapters, each describing a cantor/songwriter pair that has collaborated together in some way; one chapter describing the establishment of Kesher Shir; plus an introduction and conclusion. The goal of the project is to record and demonstrate the value and creative outcomes of partnerships grounded in deep relationship, and to identify ways in which future collaborations could help facilitate the integration of different styles of Jewish repertoire in the future.

**Introduction**

In his book, *The Making of a Reform Jewish Cantor: Musical Authority, Cultural Investment* (2009), an in-depth study of the HUC-JIR then School of Sacred Music (SSM) curriculum, Judah M. Cohen cites the synagogue modes, keyboard and choir, and "traditional" humming as the three key elements that form a "cantorial sound."[1] In a 40-page chapter entitled "A Prism of Cantorial Sound," there is only one mention of guitar.[2] Even just by virtue of this simple detail, it seems to me as though much has changed at HUC-JIR (including the renaming of the SSM as the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music!) in the 11 years since the publication of Cohen's book. This thesis project is a continuation of his ethnographic work for this particular moment in the cantorate and in Jewish music more generally.

Guitar-led, contemporary melodies have since permeated the Reform movement more fully, and in some ways, the pendulum has swung so far that there is a misperception that congregants only want to hear and sing these newer, participatory melodies to the exclusion of art song solo and/or choral set pieces as well as traditional *nusach* and *hazzanut*. We are now sitting at the juncture of an historical moment in which multidimensionality and integrative work are called for in order to build a bridge between these various repertoires, making space for the new while retaining the traditions of old. I believe that cantors are uniquely positioned to be the arbiters of these traditions based on our current training in all three liturgical styles, entwining the various genres and

[1] Cohen, Judah M. *Making of a Reform Jewish Cantor: Musical Authority, Cultural Investment*. Indiana University Press, 2009.

[2] Ibid.

approaches in order to provide many access points to music in worship, and to worship in general.

This type of tapestry weaving has become a highly sought-after skill in contemporary cantors, and current students in the DFSSM are coached and encouraged to use a wide variety of repertoires in their practica and recitals, as well as during their weeks of assigned worship leading. That being said, this integration tends to be consecutive – a student might lead a contemporary, participatory "*Mi Chamocha*" by Dan Nichols, followed by Cantor Israel Alter's "*Tzur Yisrael*" in the style of Eastern European *hazzanut*, and then a post-*Amidah*, choral "*Oseh Shalom*" set piece by Ben Steinberg.

This thesis project explores the possibilities that might exist for integration of these distinct liturgical styles on a more granular level, within the context of a single composition or arrangement – for example, combining a folk melody on guitar with an improvised "*nusach*" recitative chanted over it, as in Cantor Richard Cohn and Dan Nichols' partnered "*Ahavat Olam*" (heard at the URJ Biennial in 2011), or in Cantor Jack Mendelson's work with Debbie Friedman (z"l) and Elana Arian, in which Mendelson explores ways of fusing the *nusach* and *hazzanut* he loves with contemporary congregational repertoire in order to find an American Jewish sound in prayer and to keep *hazzanut* relevant in Jewish worship in 2020 and beyond.

One starting place for integration is in recognizing the coexistence of both cantors and singer-songwriters, skilled music professionals who come from different backgrounds, types of training, and skill sets in our Jewish context today. Cantors represent *shalshelet hakabbalah*, the chain of tradition, maintaining our deep and rich

Jewish heritage through the continued use of Jewish liturgical modes while also integrating music that speaks to today's modern sensibilities. Songleaders and singer-songwriters represent what is current, relevant, and new, often traveling around the country to different camps and congregations to share the music they've just composed, to bring opportunities for *ru'ach* (spirit) and connection, and to lead communal singing everywhere they go. This thesis proposes that both cantors and singer-songwriters bring value to the Jewish world and wonders how deep and committed partnership between them can lead to creative outcomes for integrated worship music in the future.

This idea of partnership is key. There can be a partnership between cantors and singer-songwriters, between the different styles of Jewish liturgical music (the *nusach/hazzanut*, art song, and contemporary congregational repertoire mentioned above), and partnership within worship itself. The ritual of synagogue worship inherently involves dialogue between several "partners" – the *sh'lichei tzibbur* (prayer leaders) and the congregation, the entire community and God, the music and the spoken text. I am fascinated by the idea that while each individual is dynamic, there is the potential for even more dynamism when working alongside a partner. In this project, I highlight a selection of past and present partnerships and collaborations between cantors and singer-songwriters, especially those who came from different stylistic backgrounds and were able to form deep relationships, to investigate the value and creative results of engagement in this kind of liturgical experimentation and integration.

**Cantor Jack Mendelson & Debbie Friedman (z"l)**

*Cantor Jack Mendelson*

When Cantor Jack Mendelson was a kid, *hazzanut* – unmetered recitation of Jewish chant with idiomatic motifs and coloratura ornamentation – was simply in the air. Whether listening to the radio or the waiters singing in his father's deli, it seemed to him that everyone was familiar with it, fluent in appreciation for this Jewish musical art form. [3] It was so popular that Yossele Rosenblatt's recordings sold over a million copies, demonstrating interest even from outside the Jewish community.

As a young boy, Mendelson would walk to *shul* every Shabbat with his family to hear "big *hazzanim*" sing. His mother would say, "This *Shabbes,* we're going to see Moishe (Koussevitsky)... OK, this time, let's go see Dovid (Koussevitsky)."[4] They went to synagogue in order to *daven* (pray) – it was Shabbat, after all! – but for them, the main purpose was to listen to and be inspired by the *hazzan*.

Mendelson says, "When you go to *shul*, you walk fast; when you leave *shul*, you walk slowly."[5] This couldn't have been more true of his family, who would spend the leisurely walk home praising or critiquing everything the *hazzan* sang. Over *Shabbes* lunch, his mother and father would harmonize and reprise the melodies they had heard that morning. They would sing *z'mirot* (table songs written in the Jewish prayer modes) that had been composed by Mendelson's *zeide* (grandfather), a great Lubavitch rabbi. By

[3] Mendelson, Cantor Jack. Personal interview conducted by phone. 4 December 2019.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

the time Mendelson was five years old, he knew them all.[6] And once he had learned the *z'mirot*, Mendelson felt he had a leg up on learning *hazzanut*, since both sets of repertory were written in the same prayer modes.[7] He absorbed the style and the melodies simply by being surrounded by them all the time – at home, in the deli, and when attending Shabbat and Festival services.

At the age of five, Mendelson's family invited Berele Chagy, a great Eastern European *hazzan*, to be a guest in their *sukkah*. His mother, keen on showing off her talented son, made Mendelson sing one of his *zeide's z'mirot* for Chagy. Upon hearing Mendelson sing, Chagy patted him on the head and said, "He'll grow to be a *hazzan*."[8] A few years later, Mendelson sang in Koussevitsky's choir, and he felt it was an honor to hum for the great cantor.

Many years later, Mendelson was a successful *hazzan* himself, serving Temple Israel Center, a Conservative, egalitarian congregation in White Plains, NY. He taught *nusach* at both HUC-JIR (Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion) and JTS (The Jewish Theological Seminary), hoping to put *hazzanut* in the air for the cantorial students the way it had been for him as a child.[9] While his primary focus was on *hazzanut*, he saw "the revolution" – the cultural transition to congregational melodies led by guitar-playing songleaders – coming.

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[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.

*Debbie Friedman (z"l)*[10]

Fridman, born in 1951, grew up in Utica, NY. Her family attended Conservative-affiliated Temple Beth El. Similarly to Mendelson, Friedman's "...family observances [growing up] largely followed contemporary Conservative Jewish practices, including keeping a kosher home, holding 'traditional' festive meals on Friday nights, and walking to synagogue services on Saturday morning."[11]

When they moved to St. Paul, MN around 1958 (when Friedman was about 7 years old), financial concerns led her family to switch affiliation from Conservative to Reform Mount Zion, which made Reform Judaism a regular part of their spiritual lives.[12] She was moved by the congregation's creative outlook on worship and, more specifically, music in worship. Ethnomusicologist Judah Cohen writes: "She first learned guitar at Minnesota's Zionist Camp Herzl in the summer of 1967… Inspired by such folk-oriented groups as Peter, Paul, and Mary…, she recognized in them the power that could come from close, precise harmony and a unity of purpose, and she worked tirelessly to achieve a similar spiritual artistry."[13]

Eventually, in her teen years, she attended a special summer program at the newly established Kutz Camp Institute, which "looked to the creative [and performing] arts as a medium for mass religious involvement, while treating artists as interpreters of text with

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[10] Unfortunately, because of Friedman's untimely passing in 2011, I acquired biographical information on her upbringing by reading various academic articles rather than from a personal interview.

[11] Cohen, Judah M. "Sing Unto God: Debbie Friedman and the Changing Sound of Jewish Liturgical Music." *Contemporary Jewry*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2014, PDF p. 5.

[12] Ibid., PDF p. 6

[13] Cohen, Judah M. "Debbie Friedman: A Life Transcribed." *Musica Judaica*, vol. 20, 5774/2013-2014, p. 258.

an authority that could parallel that of rabbinic leaders."[14] It was there that she built relationships and engaged in deep conversations with "recognized liturgical musicians such as Lazar Weiner [and Paul Ben-Haim], [who] expanded her musical outlook [even] further."[15] When the Kutz songleader fell ill, a young Friedman stepped in to help lead some of the camp's communal singing moments. Over the course of the next few summers, Friedman continued to return to Kutz, gradually taking on more and more responsibility until she eventually served as one of the head songleaders.[16]

In 1971, liberal Judaism in America was undergoing a significant change that was also reflected at Friedman's Minnesota congregation, Mount Zion: "the shift in worship from 'Ashkenazic' Hebrew pronunciation, which had come to symbolize practices of prewar Judaism, to the 'Sephardic' form that connected more strongly with youth and Israeli culture."[17] This shift was somewhat at odds with *hazzanut* as well as with art song-style repertory, which had been largely composed and sung according to the Ashkenazi pronunciation. The switch meant that the linguistic pacing and rhythm of the text of the liturgy was now completely different, "...thus providing an opportunity for a new repertoire that could reflect the character and spirit of the times."[18] Enter Friedman, who perhaps found this shift to be an entrance point to her work as a songwriter: identifying and filling a new need in the Jewish community.[19]

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[14] Cohen, Judah M. "Sing Unto God," PDF p. 7.
[15] Cohen, Judah M. "Debbie Friedman: A Life Transcribed," p. 258.
[16] Cohen, Judah M. "Sing Unto God," PDF p. 7-9.
[17] Ibid, PDF p. 10.
[18] Ibid, PDF p. 10.
[19] Ibid, PDF p. 10.

This transition came at a time when many young Jews were seeking to find and/or create their own American sound in their Judaism: "Musicians of Jewish heritage began to find their 'own' sounds by reviving the Jewish wedding ('klezmer') music of their grandparents, and adapting the folk, rock, and bluegrass music around them to speak their language."[20] And so it was with Friedman. She sought to create a Jewish sound that spoke to her generation which had grown up during the folk revolution. She sought to bring the intimacy and spiritual immediacy of informal communal singing into the synagogue. And she longed for Reform Jews to be able to access the liturgy through their own vernacular, leading her to write her famous settings for *Mi Shebeirach* and *L'chi Lach* in both Hebrew and English, with both masculine and feminine genders included so that everyone, regardless of gender identity, would feel included in Jewish tradition and practice.

Meanwhile, cantors and liturgical composers in the field felt threatened and destabilized by Friedman's work, especially because she lacked cantorial and Western musical training.[21] Her popularity "seemed at cross-purposes with cantors' learned efforts to use *nusach*, and sensitively placed synagogue modes to awaken a sense of deep identity among their congregants."[22] Eventually, in order to mitigate some of these tensions, Friedman engaged in ongoing contact with the faculty of the then-named School of Sacred Music (SSM) at HUC-JIR. She became "a student of *nusach*, while [some]

[20] Cohen, Judah M. "Debbie Friedman: A Life Transcribed," p. 258.
[21] Ibid, p. 259-260.
[22] Ibid, p. 260.

cantors [began to] creatively [incorporate] Friedman's music into their own liturgical worldviews."[23]

By committing herself to be in real relationship with the students and faculty of the College-Institute, Friedman (and the cantors at the SSM and in the field) found a way to mutually understand one another. This commitment and dedication to other people and their perspectives did not stop with the SSM; it permeated all of Friedman's work: "Like Shlomo Carlebach, Friedman's greatest moments emphasized personal relationships as a songleader, a choral director, as well as a concert performer."[24] While many previously saw her simply as a "folk" artist, it is possible to look upon her vast canon of compositions and see evidence of many other styles of music, including creative uses of *nusach* in her writing.[25] Perhaps this was influenced by studies at HUC as well as by her ongoing friendship with Cantor Jack Mendelson.

*Mendelson's connection to and friendship with Friedman (z"l)*

In the years following the piece's composition, one of Mendelson's students sang Friedman's "*L'dor Vador*" to him over the phone. He thought the piece was catchy, and he realized that he could transition into it from the end of the *K'dushah* without a jarring modulation. Wanting to test it out, Mendelson brought the melody to his congregation, where they received it well and sang it with enthusiasm. Because it was successful in his community, he made it into a duet that could be sung with *b'nai mitzvah* students who

[23] Ibid, p. 260.
[24] Ibid, p. 261.
[25] Ibid, p. 258.

had nice voices, a worship moment to which his congregants looked forward.[26] This became Mendelson's first point of access to Friedman and her music.

According to Mendelson, Friedman "did not know *nusach*, but she did know Peter, Paul, and Mary. So she wrote a few pieces in the folk style, and before she knew it, everyone in the synagogue was singing... [She then began to compose in earnest] because she realized that she had this power to help people sing [in community]."[27] Mendelson was skeptical at first. He feared that her popularity would lead to a shift that would cause the death of *nusach* in worship until he had an epiphany: "Heck, I'm an American. Why shouldn't there be an American sound in davening?"[28]

Mendelson realized that if one looked back to Germany in the 19th century, Jewish music sounded like Mendelssohn and Schubert. Or take Italy in the 16th and 17th centuries, where Jewish pieces by composers such as Salamone Rossi sounded like renaissance music. Mendelson was intrigued to explore what an American style of davening might sound like. Upon exploration, he realized that he could authentically play with an American sound (in this case, folk song) and then fuse it back into the *nusach*. He took pieces like Friedman's *Birchot Havdalah* and *Modim* and connected them to *hazzanut*, testing out ways to use her and other composers' prayer settings (like Cantor Jeff Klepper and Rabbi Danny Freelander's "*Shalom Rav*") while maintaining the traditional prayer modes.

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[26] Mendelson, Cantor Jack. Personal interview conducted by phone. 4 December 2019.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

Moved to explore these ideas further, Mendelson introduced Friedman to a crowd of 400 cantors at a Cantors' Assembly (CA) convention. She was quite vulnerable then, both physically and emotionally; she was wheelchair-bound at the time and worried about what these cantors would think of her. Most of them had not yet had Mendelson's epiphany about fusing an American sound with *nusach*, and they worried her music and the ensuing cultural shift would lead to the death of davening as they knew it. CA Executive Director Sam Rosenbaum was among the Conservative cantors most vocally opposed to the rise of camp music from Ramah and from folks like Friedman, railing against the move away from *nusach*. Alas, when Friedman stood up and sang her *V'shamru*, the cantors in the room gasped, realizing that the piece was in perfect *nusach*. Everyone looked at Rosenbaum, watching as he put his hand on his face and began to cry. That was it. That *V'shamru* broke the barriers between Friedman's music and the Conservative cantorate... even if Friedman hadn't written the piece intentionally in the right *nusach*.[29]

Some time later, Mendelson was chairing a Cantors' Assembly (CA) convention for which he commissioned seven composers to write seven pieces for each day of the week. He decided to give Friedman the honor of composing something for Shabbat (Saturday), requesting that she use the text of *Mizmor Shir* from Psalm 92. On the receiving end of Mendelson's call, Friedman responded: "Jackie, I want to do it in *nusach*." So Mendelson said, "Hang up the phone and don't pick up [when I call back… I'll leave a message on your answering machine,] and I'll give you just the idea of it."[30]

[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.

Her resulting composition intentionally honored and maintained the correct mode for *Mizmor Shir* on Shabbat morning, while providing the congregation with a melody with which they could sing along.

Mendelson invited Friedman to do a concert at his synagogue. During the show, he put her on the spot, teaching her "*Sheyiboneh Beit HaMikdash*." Despite not knowing the piece, she figured out how to improvise a duet with Mendelson and accompany their singing on the guitar. In an antiphonal section of the song mentioning "*avoteinu*," our patriarchs, Friedman didn't hesitate to stubbornly add in "*imoteinu*," our matriarchs, a characteristically passionate "Debbie move" that both impressed Mendelson and made him chuckle.[31]

These experiences led to a deep friendship and collegial relationship between Mendelson and Friedman. They would meet occasionally in her apartment on the Upper West Side, where he would teach her "sound bytes" of *hazzanut*. Friedman wanted to know the modes, especially *freygish* (the idiomatically "Jewish-sounding" *Ahavah Rabbah* mode, characterized by a lowered 2nd scale degree and a raised 3rd scale degree). They would get together to work, but would end up just shooting the breeze, telling stories, and enjoying one another's company.

According to Mendelson, Friedman's biggest joy was making fun of *hazzanut* to him. And because he was dying for her to love it, he'd play her recordings of the great *hazzanim*. She was an uncanny mimic, poking fun by imitating their singing. Mendelson would poke fun right back, making up new words to her compositions.[32] But when push

[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.

came to shove, they had each other's backs. Mendelson suffered a bad bout of pneumonia with sepsis, luckily making a full recovery after his extended illness. When he returned to his office, he found a five-minute-long message from Friedman on his *shul*'s answering machine. He cried listening to her beautiful words. "She was a healer; she knew just what to say when people were struggling."[33] The love Mendelson felt from her was indescribable.

They really cared for one another, and it came through in their work together. Whether Friedman was learning *nusach* by ear or Mendelson was learning the value of communal singing with an authentic American sound in prayer, their openness to entertain genres outside their comfort zones stemmed from their deep relationship. Even if they disagreed, they could always come back to their friendship in order to find a point of mutual understanding. With Friedman's untimely passing in 2011, Mendelson lost a partner-in-crime. Unfortunately, we will never know what else might have come out of their partnership together; however, it is clear that Mendelson was forever changed by his work and his friendship with Friedman.

[33] Ibid.

**Cantor Jodi Sufrin & Noah Aronson**

*Cantor Jodi Sufrin*

Cantor Jodi Sufrin has served as the Senior Cantor of Temple Beth Elohim (TBE) in Wellesley, MA for over 30 years. Sufrin grew up in Canada, where she sang folk songs and played guitar in local coffee shops. She was the one student in her cantorial class at HUC-JIR who did not come into the seminary with a degree in music, and she studied during an era in which one would not freely tell their professors that they were leading Debbie Friedman's compositions in their pulpits.[34] Despite her informal music background, Sufrin loved all of the different genres of repertoire that she learned in the School of Sacred Music (SSM) – from the majestic to the intimate to the *nusach* and *hazzanut*.[35]

Once she was invested, she began working at TBE, where they had not previously had a cantor amongst their clergy leadership team. When she arrived, she felt challenged in a variety of ways. A Christian organist accompanied a Christian vocal quartet every week. They were all lovely people, but worship felt stagnant and disconnected. There was only one style of music present rather than the dynamism she discovered was possible at HUC. It was also apparent to Sufrin that the organist and professional choir lacked knowledge about Jewish prayer, the flow of the liturgy, and the correct modes for the day and time. This was evidenced by Sufrin's discovery that the congregation was singing Mi

[34] Sufrin, Cantor Jodi. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 9 September 2019.
[35] Ibid.

Chamocha with the High Holy Day motif on Shabbat evenings. She felt that she had her work cut out for her.[36]

An additional complication came along with the volunteer choir, who did not welcome her warmly. Because the congregation had never had a cantor before Sufrin, the choir felt as though she had taken away a lot of their solos, especially during High Holy Day worship. This was a real learning experience for Sufrin, who apologized to the choir and explained her goals as the cantor for worship in the congregation. Eventually, she and the choir ended up having a loving relationship with one another, but it took time, commitment, listening, and working out the challenges together.

She did similar work with the congregation itself during special Shabbatot on which she would teach about why she was changing the music while she was making those shifts.[37] Because she was transparent about her goals and the reasoning behind her choices, people eventually came along with her.

Senior Rabbi Joel Sisenwine joined the congregation some 20 years ago, and with him, it was the beginning of many more changes within worship. With Sisenwine's partnership, they became part of Synagogue 2000 (S2K), a vehicle that helped them to effect some change in their community. During this change process, they were careful to make sure that they engaged longtime congregants so that they were "brought along" on any changes the clergy decided to make.[38] They wanted to secure congregant buy-in,

[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.

especially from members who had strong feelings about the way worship had historically been at TBE.

As part of S2K, Sufrin and Sisenwine, among others at TBE, engaged in remarkable conversations in which every aspect of worship was examined and discussed. They spent a lot of time discussing goals for worship. Some of the goals that came out of this visioning process were to bring greater joy, to become more family-oriented, and to be intentional about seating, worship service times, and instrumentation.[39] Instead of singing every week, the professional choir began to sing as ringers, only during the High Holy Days. She wanted to create services that were rich in texture, and so she sought out sensitive instrumentalists who might be able to add a different type of *ruach*, spirit, to their worship. This was how she encountered Noah Aronson.

*Noah Aronson*

Noah Aronson is a touring Jewish musician and singer-songwriter based in New York City. He grew up nearby in New Jersey, where his father, Cantor Ted Aronson, served as the cantor of a Reform Congregation, Temple Sharey Tefilo-Israel. As a child, Aronson grew up going to the synagogue and hearing his dad's voice, his song choices in worship, the choir and musicians of the congregation. There was a lot of Michael Isaacson and Ben Steinberg, and not as much Debbie Friedman as one might have expected.[40]

[39] Ibid.

[40] Aronson, Noah. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 30 August 2019.

A practicing Reform Jew on the weekends and holidays, Aronson spent his weekdays davening in the Conservative style at his Solomon Schechter school. Because of this divide, Aronson knew Conservative *nusach* for weekday morning *t'filah* really well, and he was quite familiar with the Reform melodies and *nusach* for Friday nights, Saturday mornings, and the High Holy Days.[41]

These experiences allowed Aronson to steep in a wide variety of Jewish liturgical styles, experiences of prayer, and music. The modes for specific prayers on specific days became second nature to him; it just "poured in" because he was surrounded by it all the time.[42] When Aronson composed his setting of *Mah Rabu*, he was aware that on Saturday morning, one would chant in the *Ahavah Rabbah* mode during the *Yotzeir Or* prayer, so he decided to write the piece in *freygish*. When he uses this melody in worship during his residencies at Reform congregations, he often *davens* the first part of the *Yotzeir* text in *freygish* until he arrives at "*mah rabu*," and then he finishes the text, continuing in the correct mode.[43]

Aronson said, "Whenever we compose, we're composing from things we've heard before. We're inventing something new, but the ideas that come out are from every musical source we've ever heard."[44] While most modern composers in the Reform movement aren't necessarily thinking about the Jewish prayer modes when they write a

[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid.

new piece, the modes are ingrained in Aronson's consciousness from his time in school and at the synagogue.[45]

Aronson, however, does not always intentionally compose within the mode. For example, while his "*Mah Rabu*" is in the *freygish* traditionally used for that prayer on Shabbat morning, he and Elana Arian composed a new melody for the next prayer, "*Ahavah Rabbah*" in minor rather than in the traditional *Ahavah Rabbah* mode. Aronson doesn't think there needs to be a hard and fast rule about liturgy being written only in the correct modality, but he does believe that it is the job of the cantor to be able to weave that *nusach* back in, to "make 'proper' choices so that the container of worship remains somewhat consistent."[46]

*Their partnership at Temple Beth Elohim (Wellesley, MA)*

When Aronson first met Sufrin in 2004, he was an undergraduate student at Berklee College of Music in Boston, MA. Aronson was looking for a synagogue job to help pay the bills while he was in school. He had some family friends, congregants at TBE, who set up a meeting for him with the religious school director. This was Aronson's first connection to the community: leading music in the religious school. In 2005, the religious school director sent him to Hava Nashira, where he was "blown away" by a whole new world of songleading, communal singing, and Jewish composers.[47]

[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.

Moved by his experiences at Hava Nashira, Aronson asked, upon his return, if he could do more at the synagogue, perhaps lead some summer services, which were lay led at the time. This was the beginning of his relationship with Cantor Sufrin, who soon discovered that Aronson was very talented as a composer and knew quite a bit about cantorial/worship music. They spent a lot of time discussing what it is that makes music Jewish and how to craft a service that balances participation and receiving. She gradually allowed him to take on more responsibility.[48] He led services that summer, and in September, began regularly accompanying Friday night services.

In 2006, Aronson began writing new melodies for the synagogue, a project that Sufrin encouraged. His "Am I Awake?" was written for the religious school. Aronson had been asked to teach the *Bar'chu*, so he created this piece as a vehicle for making the prayer accessible to religious school students. While it was initially intended only to be used in the school, the melody made its way into Family Shabbat services and eventually, the regular Friday night Shabbat services at TBE.[49]

While Aronson started out only going to TBE on Fridays and Sundays, by the end of 2006, he was there every day of the week. By 2007, he was a full time employee. TBE created a position for Aronson when he graduated from Berklee so that he would continue his work with the choir and the religious school, tutoring b'nai mitzvah students, leading high school retreats, and writing new melodies in the community.[50] With each new responsibility, his partnership with Sufrin deepened.

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[48] Sufrin, Cantor Jodi. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 9 September 2019.
[49] Aronson, Noah. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 30 August 2019.
[50] Ibid.

The following year, Sufrin asked him to create a CD for the congregation of his new melodies, the 10 or so pieces that had permeated their worship on Friday nights for which there were no recordings. He learned how to record using equipment at the synagogue and created "The Songs We Sing." These pieces were written with Sufrin's encouragement. Aronson would bring her an idea, and she'd help him dive deeper into the liturgy, tweaking the melody to make it speak to the liturgy.[51]

There were, of course, also moments of learning and growth. Aronson once brought Sufrin a new "*Ahavat Olam*" he had composed with a bossa nova feel. Sufrin found it to be joyful, but not in line with the sacred or based in Jewish music, liturgy, or prayer in any way.[52] She gently explained that while many songleaders write a melody and afterwards set it to a liturgical text they know, it was possible to approach composition from the other direction. What is this text actually saying? What music needs to serve this text? These questions helped Aronson rethink his process and reshape his compositions. He understood from that moment that he had a responsibility to the text when he crafted new melodies.[53]

Many of these new pieces came out as duets because Aronson so often sang harmony with Sufrin. These became elevated worship moments because Aronson was intentionally writing with both of their voices in mind, knowing that they would sing the piece together. Sometimes the compositional process was even partnered. He'd sing her a line, and she'd craft the next one in response, back and forth.

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[51] Ibid.
[52] Sufrin, Cantor Jodi. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 9 September 2019.
[53] Aronson, Noah. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 30 August 2019.

When they worked on new pieces together, Sufrin also taught him that "just as much as we need [the] congregational voice, we also need [the] cantorial voice."[54] Not everything needed to be sing-songy or sung all together. It was important to find balance, to include "moments of *hazzanut* where everyone is just listening and this [cantor's] voice is elevating the moment" as well as moments in which the congregation is singing as one.[55] The music Aronson composed with Sufrin always had moments for the cantor as well as for the congregation.

Once Aronson began traveling back and forth from Boston to New York in 2008, he visited TBE only once a month rather than working there full time. Eventually, Sufrin asked Aronson to compose a complete service for TBE, much like the well-known, through-composed services of Bloch, Helfman, and Freed, but in Aronson's own participatory style. This was around the same time that *Mishkan T'filah*, the newest Reform movement *siddur* came into use. Sufrin wanted the service to contain elements of the left side of the page – the side of the 2-page spread that contained interpretive poetry and readings loosely based on the traditional liturgy – woven into the Hebrew. They decided to work on *Bar'chu* through *Shalom Rav*, and they identified the spots in which they might bring a more traditional *nusach*.[56]

Aronson felt that this assignment allowed him to start "developing his own approach to prayer in terms of through-composed continuity."[57] Even now, when Aronson leads a service that is not through-composed, he still creates the transitions, underscoring,

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[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Sufrin, Cantor Jodi. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 9 September 2019.
[57] Aronson, Noah. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 30 August 2019.

and weaving in his head. This became part of his regular prayer leadership, developed during those first years under Sufrin's guidance, intentionally composing moments and figuring out what worked when given free rein to craft transitions in worship.[58]

Sufrin was overjoyed by the outcome. She felt that Aronson was sensitive to the text and that he had a gift for writing. He composed with complex, sophisticated, and sometimes jazzy chords while making the melody instantaneously accessible and singable for the congregation. She felt that Aronson's new pieces gave the TBE community a compelling, beautiful, multi-layered kind of worship, and that he pushed them to a level that they never would have achieved without him.[59]

Presently, their collaboration is mostly centered around the High Holy Days. Sufrin felt that those attending High Holy Day worship at TBE should be able to participate in the way they did on Shabbat, and also receive the majesty that is inherent within the Days of Awe and their liturgy.[60] They decided to do something different, to begin each service with 10 to 15 minutes of *niggunim* led vocally and with guitar in order to build excitement and a feeling of community in the room.

As a way of building on the familiar and also honoring the uniqueness of the day, they decided to fuse the *niggun* of Aronson's *Bar'chu* into the Sulzer/Ephros High Holy Day setting of *Bar'chu*. This gave the congregation the opportunity to sing their beloved and familiar *niggun* and also to experience the once-a-year High Holy Day motif. They took the High Holy Day *Sh'ma* melody down almost an octave to ensure congregational

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[58] Ibid.
[59] Sufrin, Cantor Jodi. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 9 September 2019.
[60] Ibid.

participation during the recitation of this most familiar text. From *Sh'ma*, they'd transition into another *niggun* that built and built, thereby elevating the feeling of prayerful oneness amongst the community.

These new High Holy Day services were remarkably participatory and also presentational at times. Sufrin felt that Aronson strengthened that balance much more than she ever could have alone. She felt he brought a warmth and an excitement and somehow managed to capture the energy of 1,300 people and raise it.[61]

In 2013, Aronson and the clergy of TBE were asked to lead the Friday night service at the URJ Biennial in San Diego, CA. There they were – rabbis, cantor, and songleader – all standing and leading together. The idea was to demonstrate to the Reform movement how this type of partnership "serves the whole [and] doesn't diminish any one member."[62] While they certainly have built trust and worked on their partnership as a team, Aronson is not sure that they've found the perfect balance. When they sing something that he's composed "it is even more difficult because [he is] inserting his own voice even more," not just as singer, songleader, and accompanist, but also as a composer. [63] Despite these challenges, Aronson believes that it works because Sufrin is who she is; she leads from a place of *tzimtzum*, of creating space for others to flourish.[64]

Sufrin's mentorship didn't stop at music and worship. Aronson says that Sufrin "[helped] him contain [his ego] and [to] use it in service of the congregation."[65] Aronson

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[61] Ibid.
[62] Aronson, Noah. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 30 August 2019.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid.

feels that their work together and the foundations of his own success as a traveling singer-songwriter is all possible because of Sufrin's "serious mentorship with abundant compassion and no ego whatsoever."[66] There was so much permission for Aronson to explore, a necessity when engaged in creative work. If Sufrin had felt threatened, it likely would have led to fewer leadership opportunities for Aronson and perhaps even prevented him from going into this field. Sufrin saw that Aronson's involvement at TBE served the creative life of the congregation, and that observation made their collaboration possible, laying the groundwork upon which they built immense trust over the course of their 15 year partnership.[67]

*Ongoing effects of Sufrin's mentorship in Aronson's life and work*

Recently, Aronson wrapped up his "*Chai* Project," a collaboration with 18 different synagogues who each commissioned him to create new compositions for their communities. Aronson believes the reason he's been "able to develop a certain amount of trust in the cantorial/rabbinical world" is because of his years working with Sufrin understanding and engaging in congregational life, in liturgy, and in the role of Jewish music in this particular context.[68] The communities with whom he worked on the *Chai* Project understood that Aronson was not trying to be a rockstar; he wanted "to integrate into what [they were] doing, [to] make a dynamic shift in what [was] being sung [there]."

[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.

[69] The project reflected his desire to be part of the continuum and conversation of Jewish music history.

Reflecting on the roles of cantors and songleaders, Aronson feels that the move towards so much camp and communal music in worship has, in some ways, diminished the cantorial role, especially for cantors who did not grow up in the camp or youth group music environments. Today, there is a "cornucopia of communal music to the detriment of cantorial music, [and] we haven't yet found the perfect way to meld them together."[70] Aronson believes we are "in a really interesting melting pot transitional period right now," hopefully finding ways to navigate this sometimes unhealthy dynamic.[71]

Aronson's dream is "for people to have ownership over this music," to take contemporary pieces, break them open, add *nusach*, and put them back together.[72] He thinks we should not simply accept what is on the page as canon. All of our music is fodder for creation, and we should be drawing upon the depth and breadth of our musical heritage, putting the cantorial voice back into our worship in an intentional way.[73]

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[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid.

**Cantor David Goldstein & Alan Goodis**

*Cantor David Goldstein*

Cantor David Goldstein serves as the cantor of North Shore Congregation Israel (NSCI), a prominent Reform congregation in Glencoe, IL (the suburbs of Chicago). As a child, Cantor Goldstein grew up at Temple Beth Am in Buffalo, NY, a synagogue whose music was led by a cantorial soloist, in which it was clear that music in worship was very important. He remembers the consistent presence of the majestic organ and various choirs, of which he was a part, and the "formal" music that they sang in services.[74] He moved to New Orleans and became the paid bass soloist in the choir while still in High School. Goldstein studied music in college, during which time he was elevated to the position of Cantorial Soloist of Gates of Prayer in New Orleans. After some time working there and demonstrating his dedication to this craft, the rabbi encouraged him to continue his cantorial education at HUC-JIR.

By the time Goldstein was studying in the then School of Sacred Music and pursuing his investiture in 1987, the Jewish music scene was changing. Debbie Friedman, Cantor Jeff Klepper, and Rabbi Danny Freelander had been writing for years, and their music was making its way from the summer camps into the synagogues, led by former campers who were now adults and serving as critical lay leaders and cultural change agents in their congregations.[75]

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[74] Goldstein, Cantor David. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 9 September 2019.

[75] Goodman, Mark S. "The Folk and Folk/Rock Movement of the Sixties and Its Influence on the Contemporary Jewish Worship Service," Ch. 2 in *Perspectives on*

At the time, there was a deep separation between the cantors who came from formal music backgrounds and those who came from the camp songleader world. While in school, Goldstein confessed, he made it clear through his words and actions that he wanted to remove himself and be perceived as completely separate from the guitar-playing, informal music context. Eventually, a friend and colleague engaged Goldstein in a frank conversation that helped encourage him to stay open to this other world of Jewish music. For him, it was less about fighting against or going with the flow of change in the Jewish musical landscape and more about the fact that he suddenly understood how problematic it was that he was closing himself off from a whole genre of music.[76]

In the end, Goldstein realized that he was actually struggling with how this newer music was being sung and executed rather than with the music itself. He often wondered about the link to the text. For example, in Klepper and Freelander's setting of *Shalom Rav*, he heard it sung up-tempo with a rock beat. However, when he, like other cantors and songleaders, took the liberty of bringing it down and giving it the ballad-like, peaceful lilt that is now so commonly associated with this piece, it helped Goldstein realize that it's not the music itself, but the intention and creative arrangement one brings to it that can help make it fit in worship.[77]

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*Jewish Music: Secular and Sacred,* ed. Friedmann, Jonathan L. Lexington Books, 2009, pp. 41-56.

[76] Goldstein, Cantor David. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 9 September 2019.

[77] Ibid.

From then on, his goal has been to try and take both styles seriously and to marry them with each other. He has pursued guitar study seriously, now able to accompany himself on various stringed instruments with which he previously had no familiarity. He has made a point to learn some of the newer repertoire that is being written by contemporary songwriters and began composing some himself. At the same time, he has stuck to his guns in terms of his own worship music philosophy, knowing that "if we become divorced from tradition, we run the risk of losing our way… It is the glue that has held us together for thousands of years."[78]

And so, Goldstein continues to highlight the components of the *matbei'a t'filah* (liturgical prayer sequence) that provide us with links through time – for example, our connection to Torah each time we recite *Ahavat Olam*, *Ahavah Rabbah*, and *V'ahavta* as well as our connection to time through the chanting of the traditional *nusach* (system of modal liturgical chant motifs) for that particular time of year and/or day. Goldstein believes that "if we are serious about *kavanah* (intention in prayer), the music of worship cannot become fixed… but [it must still be] rooted [to our tradition]," demonstrating his desire to ground contemporary Jewish music in cantorial tradition.[79]

Knowing how important the synthesis of these elements is in worship today, he is "always coming up with ways to link [new contemporary] pieces and *nusach.*"[80] Goldstein acknowledges that [cantors] "need to be thinking about how to stay 'at or ahead of the curve' because change is happening whether we like it or not."[81] He wonders

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[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid.

how we can "navigate change while remaining connected [to and] rooted in tradition, both in how we craft services [and] also [in our] compositions."[82] On some level, this ongoing exploration of his own cantorate, the changing landscape of worship in Reform congregations, and the desire to fuse the modern with the traditional caused Goldstein to reach out to Alan Goodis, a local songleader and well-known contemporary Jewish musician and composer.

*Alan Goodis*

Alan Goodis grew up in Toronto, Ontario, where his mother was a Jewish educator at a local Reform, and later, a local Conservative congregation. Her work brought a very young, 4 year-old Goodis to the URJ Goldman Union Camp Institute (GUCI) during her time serving as a visiting faculty member and educator at the summer camp in Zionsville, IN. The camp made a deep impression on Goodis, and once he was old enough, he continued on to become a camper and later, a staff member, counselor, and songleader at GUCI.

Interestingly, it was not love at first sight for Goodis when encountering the music and singing culture at camp. As a teenager, he felt that the folky communal singing was totally uncool; he wanted to listen to rock music and play the secular music he was hearing on the radio on his electric guitar instead. Dan Nichols, who served GUCI as a songleader during that time, noticed Goodis' lack of engagement and simultaneous love of music, so he decided to try and meet Goodis where he was at, building a relationship

[82] Ibid.

with him by allowing Goodis to guide the things they spoke about, sang, or played. Goodis confessed that when Nichols approached him with the request to simply hang out and jam together, he thought to himself, "If this guy makes me play his *B'tzelem Elohim*, I'm out of here."[83]

Fast forward to the present, and Goodis is one of the most popular touring Jewish artists and composers in the US. He is often tapped to work with teen and college-age cohorts, serving as the main faculty person for NFTY Nashir, a weekend-long songleading training workshop for high schoolers and as the Music Director of NFTY Convention, in addition to touring the country, serving on the faculty of Hava Nashira, and visiting URJ camps each summer and different synagogues throughout the year. His personal experience growing up as a bit of a skeptic in regards to Jewish music gives him unique tools with which to engage otherwise unengaged young people. He understands their perspective on a deeply personal level, and is therefore able to reach them when others struggle or fail to do so.

When Goodis first moved to Chicago 10 years ago, he was making regular contact with local synagogues in order to get work. He did not know anyone at NSCI at the time. Some time later, Cantor Goldstein reached out via email wanting to meet for coffee, seemingly just to build relationship and to hear Goodis' story. Goodis shared his journey at camp, the way he immersed in music in a communal way there, the mentorship he received from Dan Nichols and Rabbi Ron Klotz there. Goldstein was like the other side of the same coin. He came from a formal music background and the conservatory path,

[83] Goodis, Alan. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 24 September 2019.

and had received mentorship from his cantorial soloist as a kid. Goodis found that they "seemed to have a lot in common even though they had little in common in terms of musical approach."[84] They left at the end of the meeting, and that was it; Goodis didn't know if there would be a next step.

*"Selah": Their collaborative teen program*

About a year later, Goldstein reached back out, told Goodis, "I'm ready," and asked him for help. Goldstein's motivation was pragmatic: He "wanted students who wouldn't otherwise be involved in synagogue life to be involved through their love of music."[85] He wanted to be able to connect not only with the kids who had been studying Suzuki violin size age 3, but also with the ones who played rock guitar, and he needed Goodis' help in order to do so.[86] As Goodis recalls, Goldstein's goal was that he "wanted to be together," meeting once or twice a month with kids to "see what happens."[87] And thus "*Selah*" was born.

Goodis was used to congregations being worried about numbers, measuring success in levels of attendance rather than in relational outcomes, but at NSCI, the goal was really just to incubate and spend time together. There didn't need to be a quantifiable outcome; Goldstein just wanted to build relationships with kids with whom he was previously not connected. At this early stage in the group's formation, Goldstein was

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[84] Ibid.

[85] Goldstein, Cantor David. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 9 September 2019.

[86] Ibid.

[87] Goodis, Alan. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 24 September 2019.

somewhat new to the guitar and very new to songleading. The program became almost like a music *chug* at camp: "Let's learn Debbie Friedman's *Ahavat Olam* on guitar." Even when only one kid showed up, Goodis and Goldstein would ask that kid to teach them something. Goldstein sat in the circle with the kids and learned guitar alongside them, essentially identifying himself as a fellow student rather than the leader, which Goodis felt was "a big deal as the cantor of this huge *shul*."[88] Goldstein believed strongly that "the less [he and Goodis did], the better it [was]."[89] And so, using the concept of *tzimtzum* as a model, they attempted to build agency in the kids, allowing them to feel empowered ownership over the group, knowing that "when you make young people feel like their unique presence is needed, you always win."[90]

Eventually, at the end of that year, Goldstein had the kids play a few songs at a Shabbat service with him. It was nice, but afterwards, it felt to him like it had been a miss that Goodis was not present for it, since Goodis had been a crucial member of their weekly gatherings. So Goldstein decided he wanted Goodis' help when he came up with a plan for the kids to lead some segments of High Holy Day worship. The goal was "not for congregants to leave and say, 'That was so cute! [Those kids are amazing!]'"[91] Instead, Goldstein felt that the services needed to feel spiritually elevated and uplifting... and it just so happened that the *sh'lichei tzibbur* were teens. He wanted the age of the leaders to be tangential to the real, authentic prayer experience taking place in the room.

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[88] Ibid.

[89] Goldstein, Cantor David. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 9 September 2019.

[90] Goodis, Alan. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 24 September 2019.

[91] Ibid.

Only in the last two years or so have Goldstein and Goodis begun to teach the kids how to songlead. There had not previously been a strong culture of that at NSCI. The kids had been interested in playing their electric guitars at synagogue, but this was worship-leading – very different than just participating as an instrumentalist. This new outcropping of the program came out of desire expressed by the teens and was made possibly by Goldstein and Goodis staying open and responding to where the kids were and what they wanted to learn. And perhaps this was the key to it all – the idea that they should simply be in relationship with each other and with the teens, and that *Selah* would develop and evolve from that place of relationship. For Goodis, "the proof is in the pudding… If you make the goal about being together and really commit, meeting regularly, often, over and over again [something good will come from it]... It's just about showing up and being present."[92] Now, the teens "lead virtually every aspect of those services, even though [Goldstein and Goodis] are there [to support]."[93]

*"Selah": Their joint composition*

Cantor Goldstein approached Goodis with the desire to compose a new melody for worship together. When they were finally able to find time to sit and create, Goldstein provided Goodis with the final paragraph of text from *Modim Anachnu Lach*, a prayer of gratitude that appears in the *Amidah*, our standing prayer.

[92] Ibid.

[93] Goldstein, Cantor David. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 9 September 2019.

While writing together, Goldstein felt strongly that "whatever they [wrote needed] to fit into the tradition of [prayer],"[94] and that "if [they were] going to try to stay connected to tradition, [they] ought to be thinking about *nusach hat'filah*."[95] Therefore, they wrote the "*chatimah* in minor [so that] if [they were using this piece] on Friday night and they were chanting the *Amidah* aloud, the *chatimah* would be in *Magein Avot* (a Jewish mode in natural minor)," as is customary for that section of the service during *Shabbat Ma'ariv*.[96] Outside of modal connections to tradition, Goldstein also wanted to mimic the way the word "*selah*" was historically a cue to the Levitical musicians to "strike up the band" in the days of the Temple.[97]

They wanted to be "responsive to some of the trends in worship right now, [while also] stopping and asking, 'Is this good? Is this worth it?'"[98] "*Selah*" has since become an anthem for their congregation, and Goodis has taught it in communities around the country, including at the *Hava Nashira* Jewish music conference as well as at the URJ Biennial gathering.

*Ongoing partnership & influences*

When Goodis composes, he often seeks out friends and teachers who can often pull in an outside idea or an interesting perspective on the text he is studying. He'll go to a clergyperson and ask them, "What does this mean? What is this trying to say? When

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[94] Goodis, Alan. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 24 September 2019.

[95] Goldstein, Cantor David. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 9 September 2019.

[96] Ibid.

[97] Ibid.

[98] Goodis, Alan. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 24 September 2019.

was this written? Where are we in this narrative?" He then does the internal work of figuring out how that text relates to his life, what he is trying to say, and how the music conveys some sort of message connected to the text. Since his relationship with Cantor Goldstein began, he now approaches Goldstein with some of these questions and "thinks more about how what he's doing [or what he's writing] connects with tradition."[99]

Goldstein used to be involved pretty heavily in Synagogue 2000, but now that that program has ended, this partnership with Goodis gives him "a portal into what gets shared in other places [around the country and] access to repertoire that [Goldstein] might not [yet] be thinking about."[100] Because Goodis travels [often] and brings a different base and genre of repertoire than he does, Goldstein feels that he and Goodis teach one another. There is a mutual understanding that they value the creative process and that they are "both open to experimentation, knowing that if it doesn't work, it's OK."[101] With that in mind, Goodis "helps [Goldstein] know how far to stretch things [in worship]. He pushes boundaries and [tries] things [that] he's explored with the faculty at Hava Nashira [in the NSCI community]."[102]

Goodis has since become part of NSCI's liturgical team, helping to create the menu for worship on the Friday nights when he is in town as well as during the High Holy Days. According to Goldstein, Goodis is "a member of that team that helps spur the creative process, and they are all richer for him being a part of it."[103]

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[99] Ibid.

[100] Goldstein, Cantor David. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 9 September 2019.

[101] Ibid.

[102] Ibid.

[103] Ibid.

**Cantor Rosalie Will**

Cantor Rosalie Will is the Director of Music and Worship for the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ). Growing up in St. Louis, MO, she spent her formative years at Congregation Shaare Emeth and at URJ Goldman Union Camp Institute (GUCI), where she fell in love with communal singing and became a songleader. Preceding her time as a cantorial student in the SSM at HUC-JIR, Will songled at the URJ Kutz Camp and worked for NFTY Programs in Israel. Following her ordination from HUC, she served as the cantor at Temple Emanuel in Kensington, MD from 2001 to 2017, when she began her work with the URJ in an expanded capacity.

According to Will's website, "She is an expert in elevating the congregational voice while maintaining communal rituals and customs, training young songleaders and cantors in areas of leadership and collaboration, and finding intersectionality among diverse communities of background and accessibility in prayer spaces."[104] She consults with congregations across the country in defining their worship vision, and works with clergy and engaged lay leaders towards the fruition of those goals. As the Faculty Coordinator for the *Hava Nashira* Jewish music conference and the new *Machon Shira* program for training young camp songleaders, Will mentors songleaders and *sh'lichei tzibbur*, teaching worship and songleading pedagogy and repertoire in a skillful, accessible, and compassionate way.

[104] "About Rosalie: Cantor Rosalie Will." *Rosalie Will*, www.rosaliewill.com/about-rosalie.

*Her work with the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ)*

As the Director of Music and Worship for the URJ, her work is to "figure out how she can be helpful [in identifying] what they should be thinking about that they aren't already."[105] As part of the URJ's Audacious Hospitality initiative, it is Will's role to figure out who might be the right person to songlead for the new LGBT+ cohort of leaders. She is also reimagining Tot Shabbat, creating programs that allow a "deep dive into spirituality for families with young children," moving and engaging the parents as well as the children.[106]

One of Will's goals is to create an "organized pipeline" of songleading opportunities from camp to high school to college to congregational work and beyond so that young Jews remain engaged and become skilled in the work of leading communal song, adding to the pool of future Jewish professionals and perhaps even Reform cantors. [107] In order to achieve this, Will created the URJ Teen Songleading Fellowship as a follow-up to the NFTY *Nashir* weekend retreats, where teens can spend a year acquiring guidance and leadership opportunities from mentors in their home communities while receiving training from expert songleaders and worship leaders on an annual retreat and monthly Zoom video calls. She also developed a college worship leader training program through the URJ so that young adults who have come through NFTY *Nashir* and the new Teen Songleading Fellowship can continue to use those skills to bring elevated worship to the Hillels on their college campuses.

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[105] Will, Cantor Rosalie. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 22 November 2019.

[106] Ibid.

[107] Ibid.

Another goal of Will's is to rethink how the relationship between the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), American Conference of Cantors (ACC), and the URJ impacts worship in Reform congregations. In that vein, she is helping relaunch *Havah T'filah*, a program that allows clergy teams to come together to study worship technique around a common service structure (e.g., Shabbat or the High Holy Days). She is passionate about finding ways that clergy and lay people can create a worship vision together, and so, this time around, she hopes to expand who comes as part of each team, hopefully opening it up from just rabbis and cantors to include a lay person who can study alongside their clergy for a few days, hopefully in service of becoming a better liturgical team (and congregation!) together.

*Visions for the future of worship in the Reform movement*

Beyond her work on these programs, Will also serves as the coordinator of worship at the URJ Biennial, the largest gathering of Reform Jews in the world, where new worship trends are often established: "Rosalie's decades of experience as a worship leader, consultant, performer, visionary and leader in new worship trends, has set the course for the Reform Movement's growth in the area of dynamic prayer at URJ Biennial and beyond."[108] So what's the next step in exploring worship in the Reform movement?

Will believes we need to be spending more time in conversation about worship with people of other faiths.[109] We know from the Pew Study that the Jewish community is

[108] "About Rosalie: Cantor Rosalie Will." *Rosalie Will*, www.rosaliewill.com/about-rosalie.

[109] Will, Cantor Rosalie. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 22 November 2019.

not alone in facing the challenges of a changing society and the different ways people are engaging with religion in the 21st century, so we need to reach out. What are other communities doing with these challenges? She thinks we should be asking how these other faith communities reach people musically when they come from different backgrounds and have different tastes.

Will believes there are "different doorways and experiences, musically and sonically, that speak to people, [and] at the same time [can still] feel like they're 'ours.'"[110] We need to work on figuring out what the newest doorways will be since, currently, she feels that our music in prayer is becoming pretty stale. We don't know what's next, so we're stuck with what we do know – frontal, songleader-focused prayer experiences. This is working fine at the moment, but Will feels that this is likely not what the future of Reform worship will look like. She wants to "figure out how to lead [in the field of worship] instead of playing catch up."[111]

Will thinks there is so much good new music out there. We, as a movement, need to figure out how to distill it and make choices about how to use it that feel like they have integrity for us, our movement, and our tradition.[112] We need to be able to take an honest look at our worship practices, at our music and ask ourselves: "Is it serving God, or is it just in the hymnal/*siddur*?"[113] She wonders what it would be like to get 20 people – Muslim, Christian, and Jewish – in a room for two days to discuss worship, to talk about

[110] Ibid.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Ibid.
[113] Ibid.

what's possible, to share our struggles. Will feels that if we spend time in relationship with our own community as well as with others, something good will come from it.

*Kesher Shir*

In a similar vein, one of Will's most interesting projects of the past decade was a program called *Kesher Shir*: "Through PresenTense, an incubator for young Jewish social entrepreneurs, [Will] launched… Kesher Shir: a venture which brings together Jewish musicians [and clergy] from diverse backgrounds to study, collaborate, and create meaningful music which will enrich and enliven worship and strengthen communities.[114] The program's mission was to "[bring] together Jewish musicians from a variety of backgrounds and stages in their work, to study, compose, build relationships, and challenge the status quo, in order to foster lasting musical change in communal prayer. The venture's focus [was] collaboration between singer-songwriters and cantors, particularly around the creation of new musical forms for contemporary synagogue worship."[115]

While creating new liturgical music for the 21st century was the vehicle, her primary goal was primarily relationship building. This program came to be over 10 years ago, when there were relationships between cantors and singer-songwriters, but it was mostly the people who already came from the same world, like Cantor Ellen Dreskin and Dan Nichols. Will was interested in growing the relationship between Jewish

[114] "About Rosalie: Cantor Rosalie Will." *Rosalie Will*, www.rosaliewill.com/about-rosalie.

[115] "About Us." *Kesher Shir*, www.keshershir.org/index.php/about-us.

singer-songwriters and cantors who were perhaps less predisposed to spending time with the other cohort.[116] She thought of Nichols and Cantor Richard Cohn, both of whom she loved, and she wanted them to meet one another. Not only that, but she felt that these cantors and singer-songwriters were all so much more similar than they thought. If she could just get them in the same room, she thought they'd fall in love with each other.[117]

Cohn became a thought partner in creating the program and exploring the best mechanism with which to achieve this type of meeting. Together, they decided to do a weekend retreat in which cantors would be paired with singer-songwriters and given an assignment to create a new setting for a specific piece of liturgy. While the task was to write a melody, these compositions were not intended to be shared with the world; the real work was to get to know one another, to find a place of connection through the work of composing. Will wondered: "How do we create something together after hearing each other's stories? What can we create and do together by getting to know each other?"[118]

To be clear, the interactions between these cantors and singer-songwriters before the *Kesher Shir* program were "not hateful like the early Debbie [Friedman] years," but there was some hesitancy from certain cantors about "simplistic" or "unsophisticated" music.[119] Each group would say somewhat snarky things about the other. Will's hope for the program was that all of these leaders would learn a lot from spending time together.

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[116] Will, Cantor Rosalie. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 22 November 2019.

[117] Ibid.

[118] Ibid.

[119] Ibid.

And so, for the first *Kesher Shir* cohort, she chose participants she thought could learn from and challenge one another.[120]

The results were beautiful. New friendships emerged from the program. Some of the melodies created during these weekends did, inevitably, enter the Reform canon, like Will and Julie Silver's "*Modim*" and Cantor Benjie Schiller and Craig Taubman's "*Azamrah*." Other compositions were never shared, like Cantor Andrew Bernard and Rabbi Ken Chasen's piece. However, they each spent various weekends flying back and forth to one another's homes to continue working on their composition and building their relationship with one another long after the program had formally ended. While the larger Jewish community never heard the results of that particular partnership, Bernard and Chasen each felt that they had walked away with a new friend, colleague, and collaborator.

Because relationships between cantors and singer-songwriters have evolved for the better over these last 10 years, *Kesher Shir* is on pause at the moment. Will feels that relationship building is happening in the Reform movement today, so the program is less needed in that regard. Though it would be lovely to have this program as a continued mechanism for new liturgical compositions, the challenge is that it needs to be funded if Will is going to keep it going.[121] Despite its current pause, this program has made some wonderful, unanticipated ripples in the Jewish community. Will thinks that, in some ways, the collaboration between Cohn and Nichols led to Nichols' week-long visit at

[120] Ibid.
[121] Ibid.

HUC-JIR to learn with and teach the students on the New York campus a couple of years ago as well as their joint learning session offered at the 2019 URJ Biennial in Chicago.

The following chapters will describe the experiences of two *Kesher Shir* partnerships and the resulting compositions, relationships, and collaborations that came out of those retreats.

**Cantor Richard Cohn & Dan Nichols**

*Cantor Richard Cohn*

Cantor Richard Cohn is the Director of the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music (DFSSM) at HUC-JIR in New York. Cohn grew up in Pensacola, FL, where his family attended a small Reform congregation. His temple had "a professional quartet and organist, and the music was typical 'Southern Classical Reform.'"[122] He experienced his home synagogue and its worship as spiritual, finding comfort and connection in this familiar musical context to which he was consistently exposed.[123]

When Cohn was in high school, Debbie Friedman was just releasing some of her first recordings. Through her music, his youth group was getting exposed and connected to "informal Jewish music," and he was excited by the songs on these new LPs.[124] At about the same time, his rabbi, noting Cohn's interest in Jewish music and his involvement in the youth group, invited Cohn to "co-lead services for the community at the nearby Air Force base."[125] It was then that Cohn began to serve as a liturgical soloist, singing melodies found in the *Union Hymnal*.[126]

Moved by the spiritual connection he found through music as a young adult, Cohn went on to study vocal performance for both his Bachelor's and Master's degrees.[127]

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[122] Cohn, Cantor Richard. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 9 January 2020.

[123] Ibid.

[124] Ibid.

[125] Ibid.

[126] Ibid.

[127] "Richard Cohn." *Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion*, huc.edu/directory/richard-cohn.

Despite Cohn's early connections to music and worship, he "did not have much contact with cantors" until he moved, following graduate school, to Chicago, "where there was a deeply-rooted and energetic cantorial community."[128] In Chicago, Cohn studied trope with Max Janowski (composer of the famous setting of *Avinu Malkeinu* and longtime music director of KAM Isaiah Israel Congregation in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago). He also studied *nusach* with Hazzan Henry Rosenblum, who served North Suburban Synagogue Beth El in Highland Park, IL at the time (and who now serves as a faculty member in the DFSSM!).

Cohn was also involved with the classical music scene in Chicago, serving as a soloist with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.[129] In the Jewish world, he was also involved with singing formal works, often featured as the soloist in Ernest Bloch's *Avodath HaKodesh* ("Sacred Service"), and serving as conductor of *Kol Zimrah* (the Jewish Community Singers of Greater Chicago), at the North American Jewish Choral Festival, and with *HaZamir*: The International Jewish High School Choir.[130]

Despite his extensive background and work in the formal music world, Cohn remained appreciative of the informal Jewish music to which he had been exposed as a teen, lauding the accessibility and connectivity that newer, contemporary congregational repertoire provided:

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[128] Cohn, Cantor Richard. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 9 January 2020.

[129] "Richard Cohn." *Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion*, huc.edu/directory/richard-cohn.

[130] Ibid.

> "In the context of Reform Jewish practice, the primary impact of the evolution of communal singing in recent decades has been to draw participants into direct relationship with a greater variety of liturgical texts than had previously been the case. This has resulted in a higher degree of engagement with the through-line of the service, and increased aliveness in connection with the prayer book, the prayer leaders, and fellow worshippers."[131]

In 1992, Cohn received his cantorial investiture from HUC, thereafter serving as the cantor at North Shore Congregation Israel (NSCI) in Glencoe, IL – the same synagogue that Cantor David Goldstein now serves.[132] At NSCI, there were concert events that involved many visiting cantors and classical musicians. These programs included the participation of youth and adult choirs, teen soloists, and ensembles as a way of building community through engagement with the music.[133] Cohn also remembers inviting Debbie Friedman to visit the congregation for a weekend residency, in which they constructed worship and programming that highlighted her special form of leadership.[134] However, he notes that this program was not as integrative as the guest artist weekends he was eventually able to create as the Senior Cantor of Temple Emanu-El (TE) in Dallas, TX.[135]

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[131] Cohn, Cantor Richard. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 9 January 2020.

[132] "Richard Cohn." *Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion*, huc.edu/directory/richard-cohn.

[133] Cohn, Cantor Richard. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 9 January 2020.

[134] Ibid.

[135] Ibid.

The first artist-in-residence weekend Cohn crafted and hosted in Dallas was with singer-songwriter Danny Maseng. Cohn felt that Maseng's "existing choral arrangements… provided an ideal starting place for weaving together the longstanding choral culture of TE Dallas into a contemporary, participatory milieu."[136] Prior to Maseng's visit, the congregation had been "polarized between liturgical classicists and progressives, and [the clergy] sought to find common cause between those stylistic areas, beginning with [Maseng]."[137]

Over time, they hosted many residencies, "always looking for crossover opportunities" to build connections between the seemingly separate two camps.[138] During each residency, Cohn believed it was essential to get the artists connected with as many generational groups as possible in order to reap the full benefit for the congregation as a whole, with youth participation being a critical component in building connections throughout the community.[139] Cohn believes that the relationships he forged between himself, the artists, and the community, along with his commitment to a synthesis of music in varied styles, together helped bridge some of the gaps that had previously existed in the synagogue. Worship music at TE thus evolved organically as a result.[140]

This model of leadership speaks to Cohn's skills and priorities as a leader, which include: "the integration of contemporary musical repertoire and congregational worship transformation; the composing and arranging of musical settings for cantors, choirs,

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[136] Ibid.
[137] Ibid.
[138] Ibid.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Ibid.

instruments, and congregation; the designing of musical prayer sequences of contrasting styles into coherent liturgical units; and, the planning and implementation of worship created by collaborative clergy relationships."[141]

When it comes to leading prayer, Cohn makes two primary commitments as a *shaliach tzibbur*: "1) to hold in awareness the presence and well-being of everyone in the praying community, and 2) to connect truthfully and conscientiously to the vitality contained in liturgical texts and the energy field of the music through which we pray."[142] Cohn believes these commitments intersect, connected to one another by "breath, intention, open-heartedness, vibration, momentum, and continuity of experience."[143] Each time he leads worship, he hopes that he, the community, and the other *sh'lichei tzibbur* will share a prayer experience that honors and embodies the depth and beauty of the liturgy – its content and structural arc – so that the worship can be vibrant and also connected to tradition.[144]

In order to create such an experience, Cohn believes that sung music should exhibit and convey this liturgical flow, allowing for moments in which the congregation might engage their voices as well as for moments of cantorial leadership and interpretation.[145] Achieving success in this realm also requires "some shared sense of

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[141] "Cantor Richard Cohn Appointed Director of the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music." *Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion*, 14 Jan. 2015, huc.edu/news/2015/01/14/cantor-richard-cohn-appointed-director-debbie-friedman-school-sacred-music.

[142] Cohn, Cantor Richard. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 9 January 2020.

[143] Ibid.

[144] Ibid.

[145] Ibid.

complementary spiritual practice among the leaders" as well as a shared understanding of the "energetics of worship" and identification of "how music and text speak to each other in the context of communal experience."[146] These characteristics need to be accompanied by relationship and attentiveness between the leaders and between the leaders and the *kahal*, mindful transitions, and worship choices that define points of emphasis or destination in order to move the prayer forward.[147]

Because of his commitment to liturgical music and finding points of intersection and integration between Jewish music of different genres, Cohn was intrigued when he heard Cantor Rosalie Will's idea to create a program in which cantors and singer-songwriters could collaborate and build relationships.[148] The core of the *Kesher Shir* program was to allow these two groups to get to know one another in the context of shared time, collegial experience, and friendship: "relationship building was in the foreground; music-making was in the middle-ground… The priority was to find common cause."[149] Cohn was particularly interested because he "wanted to investigate how the accumulated experience of being a cantor and a creative musician would inform each other and give rise to new forms or imaginative possibilities… [to see what would come of] building bridges and learning from each other how [they each approach] music."[150]

Cohn hoped that this experience would "demonstrate that the sense of common purpose and shared appreciation for what each of them was bringing… would give them

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[146] Ibid.
[147] Ibid.
[148] Ibid.
[149] Ibid.
[150] Ibid.

all an opportunity to grow… [and would] strengthen ties between the two communities, transcend[ing] the perceived differences between the two [groups] and demonstrat[ing] that [they] are stronger together, and in fact, inseparable in certain respects in the contemporary Jewish [context]."[151] Though the program was organized in dyads (pairs each containing a cantor and a singer-songwriter), for Cohn, it was about the partnerships in the context of the larger group, of doing this work of composing and relationship building within a community of practice committed to Jewish spirituality through song.[152] It was at *Kesher Shir* that Cohn began his collaboration with Dan Nichols.

*Dan Nichols*

Dan Nichols is a touring Jewish songleader and singer-songwriter based in Raleigh, NC.[153] Nichols grew up in Indianapolis, IN, where he would often sit under the table after dinner parties, listening to his parents and their friends singing folk songs. His parents had always been spiritual seekers, particularly his mom, Bonnie, and they were looking for a language with which they could connect. Nichols can remember a time when books of every major religion were strewn about the house. His parents began to study with Rabbi John Stein in Indianapolis, and they were moved by what they began to learn about Judaism and its traditions and beliefs. By the time Nichols turned seven, he and his family had converted to Judaism.

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[151] Ibid.

[152] Ibid.

[153] I've known Dan for many years, so much of this historical background comes from my memory of the stories he's told me throughout our 12-year friendship and mentorship.

Soon after, Nichols attended URJ Goldman Union Camp Institute (GUCI) for the first time, where he began to learn what it really meant to be Jewish in terms of his own engagement and practice. That first summer at GUCI led to many more, with the camp "raising" Dan from camper to staff member to songleader to now visiting Jewish musician, returning summer after summer to the place he loves so much. Nichols had his *bar mitzvah* at GUCI. He met his wife, Elysha, there. And now, his daughter, Ava, is a camper there.

Nichols received his Bachelor's degree in vocal performance from the University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill, where he studied voice under Stafford Wing. Wing was a demanding teacher, and Nichols remembers many of the lessons he learned from him during those formative years, often recounting them when teaching groups in Jewish settings today. After college, he was exploring what he wanted to do with his life, simultaneously singing opera professionally, fronting a secular rock band, and leading music in synagogues in order to pay his bills.

In 1995, Nichols established the Jewish rock band, Eighteen, "realizing the potential of music to make a meaningful connection with Jewish youth."[154] Since the establishment of the band, [Nichols] and Eighteen have released many full-length studio albums. In his compositions, Nichols draws from "a wide range of sounds and styles, from energetic Jewish rock anthems to moving interpretations of traditional Jewish liturgy."[155] Due to his gifts of leading, teaching, and composing music, his generosity of spirit, his lack of ego, and his desire to build relationships, it is no wonder that Nichols is

[154] "About." *Dan Nichols & Eighteen*, www.dannicholsmusic.com/about.
[155] Ibid.

in high demand in the Reform movement, spending more than 180 days a year on the road, traveling to different synagogue and camp communities across the country.[156]

When Nichols visits congregations, he typically partners with the cantor in the creation of worship. As he approaches collaboration with a cantorial partner, Nichols holds an awareness of the fact that the cantor is there every week and that he will be there as a guest who is returning home on Sunday.[157] There are pros and cons to this arrangement. Being a guest gives Nichols the flexibility to push the envelope and try new things with a community he's visiting. Because the congregation knows Nichols is a guest, they are typically more willing to be open to new melodies and worship elements since they know that their comforting, familiar worship will return the following week. Alternatively, Nichols knows that the cantor is the one with longstanding relationships to the congregation. He is very aware that he is coming in as the new guy, without previously established trust.

Because of this, Nichols thinks it is a miscalculation when he comes into a community and the cantor steps back to let him lead alone as the special guest. He feels it is far more effective when they partner on the worship together, singing together on a number of pieces, providing moments of familiarity and custom along with special, new moments, specific to Nichols' skills and strengths.[158] In order to achieve this balance, the cantor helps Nichols identify "mac and cheese" settings for liturgy that are foundational to the services in that particular congregation. These are the settings that get even the

[156] Ibid.
[157] Nichols, Dan. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 24 October 2019.
[158] Ibid.

most unengaged congregants singing.[159] Once those pieces have been established, the cantor can help him identify the most effective moments where he might bring something new to the congregation, or something familiar that is new simply because he is leading it rather than the cantor they are accustomed to hearing and seeing.[160] Nichols views this shared leadership model dramaturgically; if he and the cantor sing together at the beginning and the end of the service and at some points in the middle, sharing the responsibility of leading prayer, the congregation will see that they are together, both physically and sonically.[161]

Beyond his congregational and camp residencies, Nichols is also often tapped to teach at Jewish conferences and workshops including *Hava Nashira*, NFTY Convention, the URJ Biennial, *Nashir*, Shulhouse Rock, and more. Because of his transformative work in the Reform movement, his sensitivity to liturgical text in his compositions, and his ongoing friendship with Cantor Rosalie Will, Nichols was included in the national cohort of *Kesher Shir*, where he met and collaborated with Cantor Richard Cohn as well as with Cantor Benjie Ellen Schiller, who will appear in the following chapter.

*"Ahavat Olam": Their Kesher Shir composition*

Once Cohn and Nichols were assigned as partners, Cohn remembers sitting with Nichols in a classroom at the kind of rectangular desks an elementary school student might use – Nichols on one side with his big guitar, and Cohn on the other. Cohn was

[159] Ibid.
[160] Ibid.
[161] Ibid.

nervous and wondering, "What would this be like? They hadn't spent much time together. How would [they] even start?"[162] Part of this nervousness also came from his experience of Dan as a genius of sorts, a spiritual light with tremendous skill and experience… Cohn was intimidated![163] On the other side of the desk, so to speak, Nichols was intimidated by Cohn's "scholastic background," which reminded him of his music professors from UNC-Chapel Hill. While he was able to identify that this was a form of projection and transference, Nichols found himself initially on guard, concerned that he wouldn't meet "Cohn's standards."[164]

They were getting to know each other, personally and musically, and, while there was certainly mutual appreciation for each other's knowledge and talents, they had no idea where they were going to go with this assignment. They needed to find their way to a text and then create a partnered methodology of how to engage with that text.[165] Nichols' experience of this moment was that Cohn's instinct was to talk through what they would do, but Nichols craved quiet, so he suggested that they play and explore what struck them, a methodology that was less intellectually focused.[166] According to Cohn, "[Nichols] start[ed] to feel his way to a rhythm and a harmonic form that would respond to the [English] words on that particular page in *Mishkan T'filah*," the Reform

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[162] Cohn, Cantor Richard. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 9 January 2020.

[163] Ibid.

[164] Nichols, Dan. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 24 October 2019.

[165] Cohn, Cantor Richard. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 9 January 2020.

[166] Nichols, Dan. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 24 October 2019.

movement's *siddur* for Shabbat and Festivals.[167] They then began to work on the response between the "lyric refrain" that Nichols had created and its interaction with a kind of *hazzanut* that Cohn was crafting for the Hebrew liturgical text, even though they weren't working within a traditional Ashkenazi mode.[168]

The chant section of the piece "naturally developed as [Cohn] started to improvise around the form that [Nichols] proposed," using the harmonic and melodic structures suggested by the chorus.[169] They sang these elements back and forth, over and over again, trying to hold these two parts in conversation with one another. They tried it many different ways, exploring how far outside the tonality one could go on the improvisation before it needed to come back "home."[170] They explored ways of moving rhythmically from the metered section to the freely chanted, *recitative*-like section so that it felt like one organic whole rather than separate parts.[171]

This desire for wholeness and integration relates to Nichols' biggest questions during their writing process: "Will [this piece] hold together if we each do our authentic thing in our authentic voices? Is there room in this [composition] for both of us to be [who we are]?"[172] In the end, Nichols is proud of what they created, and he remains curious about the bringing together of their particular vocal sounds and styles, which, at first blush, are quite different.[173]

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[167] Cohn, Cantor Richard. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 9 January 2020.

[168] Ibid.

[169] Ibid.

[170] Ibid.

[171] Ibid.

[172] Nichols, Dan. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 24 October 2019.

[173] Ibid.

Nichols does not know if this piece has been used in worship by other *sh'lichei tzibbur*, and he feels somewhat hesitant about its usability by someone other than him and Cohn; however, the composition "felt good" and rang true for them, honoring each of their voices within it.[174] Nichols feels that they were able to be deeply personal with one another and put a sound around that, not worrying about how this would work for another songleader or cantor, or in congregational worship since the goal was really just to be together in a laboratory.[175]

Beyond the music itself, Cohn's experience of working with Nichols was that he is a great listener who also asks a lot of good questions. Cohn felt that this was likely the key to finding their way as a successful dyad: getting to know each other and how they each responded and interacted textually, musically, and spiritually.[176] They tried to leave space for something "true" to emerge between them, rather than trying to force it, encountering each other with love and generosity so that they could open the space and relax into the process of creating music.[177]

They would laugh, share, get off track, and come back to focus on the piece. Nichols encouraged Cohn to "get out of his comfort zone, both in terms of how he was using a 'cantorial imagination' and his voice," helping Cohn bring a somewhat less formal approach to his singing.[178] For Cohn, the best part of this experience was "just being together and having a chance to see in each other's eyes a portion of the light that

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[174] Ibid.
[175] Ibid.
[176] Cohn, Cantor Richard. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 9 January 2020.
[177] Ibid.
[178] Ibid.

each of them has; allowing that light to inform [their] sense of presence with each other was really powerful."[179]

Following their time working together at *Kesher Shir*, Cohn and Nichols have collaborated several times – at TE Dallas, HUC-JIR, and the URJ Biennial. The programs at HUC and the URJ Biennial are described in further detail below.

*Nichols' "Guest T'filah Leader" week at HUC-JIR/New York*

In October 2017, Cohn brought Nichols to HUC-JIR/New York for a week-long visit to lead various *t'filah* experiences, attend classes, and build relationships with current students and faculty. Not everything Nichols engaged with at HUC was in a strictly worship space, but it was all in a spiritual space.[180] In this vein, Cohn wanted to explore with Nichols "how [they] could transmit… qualities of interpretive imagination and spontaneity to the environment of spiritual practice and prayer" at HUC, "cultivating singing as a spiritual practice in ways that strengthen community and allow soulfulness to flow."[181]

Cohn and Nichols collaborated on Tuesday's *mincha* service, Nichols led Thursday's *shacharit* with a student clergy team, and on Wednesday, Nichols led the community solo in a creative morning worship service that emulated something he had presented at *Hava Nashira* the previous year – a liturgical experience made up almost entirely by music, focused solely on the liturgical rubrics of *Birchot HaShachar* and

[179] Ibid.
[180] Ibid.
[181] Ibid.

*P'sukei D'zimra*.[182] For Cohn, Nichols' creative service demonstrated a "way of interpreting the whole experience of a *t'filah* through music in terms of continuity, energetics, flow, [and] illumination… [It was] not just a sequence of melodic choices, but a really integrated experience from beginning to end that was not beholden to any assumptions about the form of the service, and yet served that form to great effect."[183]

Cohn thought this was a really interesting paradox for the students and faculty to ponder: "Something that is not bounded by the [traditional] form can transcend it and… result in its own highly effective experience. Through music, choices of repertoire, transition, [and] continuity of experience, [one] can impart wholeness."[184] There was power in music building the form rather than the form building the music.

One of the most powerful moments that Nichols experienced during this week-long visit at HUC was a moment of connection and exploration with Cantor Jack Mendelson during a debrief of one of the services Nichols led. When the group began to discuss Nichols' use of Shefa Gold's "*Elohai N'shamah*" in that creative Wednesday morning worship experience, Mendelson raised his hand, wondering aloud what might happen if he improvised Pinchik's "*Elohai N'shamah*" over Nichols singing the Shefa Gold melody. Mendelson cued Nichols to begin playing, and there they were, exploring in real time "without a net" in front of a large group of cantors, cantorial students, and other Jewish leaders.[185]

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[182] Ibid.
[183] Ibid.
[184] Ibid.
[185] Nichols, Dan. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 24 October 2019.

Nichols was already nervous, acknowledging that he was teaching and debriefing in a room that contained people like Mendelson and Cohn, cantors and cantorial students who have mastery over topics of which Nichols is "ignorant."[186] He felt awe and appreciation for Mendelson's "focused kindness and engagement."[187] Mendelson's willingness to try something in the moment helped Nichols attempt to turn his discomfort into inquiry, allowing his inner voice to say, "I don't think I know what I'm doing. I'm not sure about this choice, this text. I don't have all the answers, but I'm curious what will happen if…"[188] Nichols acknowledges that he "would not have been ready for that exchange with [Mendelson] had [he] not built [the] relationship [he had] with [Cohn]."[189] Cohn's take on this interaction is that "because of [Nichols'] exceptional character and vulnerability, [there was] genuine meeting between people who may not have experienced that kind of relational quality before… [There was real dialogue and an] openness to one another that had traction and a sense of wholeness to it."[190]

Cohn hoped that students would take away from Nichols' visit a "deeper appreciation of the artistry, thoughtfulness, and expressive qualities of [Nichols'] work [as well as an experience of the] power of the work that [Nichols] does and the consciousness he brings to it."[191] For Cohn, "[Nichols'] integrity around transmitting his

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[186] Ibid.
[187] Ibid.
[188] Ibid.
[189] Ibid.
[190] Cohn, Cantor Richard. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 9 January 2020.
[191] Ibid.

own experience and being available and attentive to the experience of others [was] just as important [for the students to witness] as any specifics of repertory or technique."[192]

*"Shirei Zimra": Their joint URJ Biennial learning session*

In the learning session they created for the 2019 URJ Biennial in Chicago under the auspices of HUC-JIR, Nichols and Cohn spent time on several calls picking liturgical texts for which Nichols had written a composition and then comparing Nichols' settings of those texts to "cantorial, traditional, or folk-based settings" – complementary or contrasting pieces of other genres – of those same texts.[193] They provided attendees with a word-by-word translation of the text, and then led a conversation exploring the text as well as the two musical settings, identifying moments of overlap in emotional expression of the liturgy and perhaps even overlap in the tonal or rhythmic qualities of the pieces.

The idea, according to Cohn, was that everyone present "would gain insight through the relationship between Dan and [him], and their interaction around the inner workings of how music transmits spirit through text."[194] This exercise would hopefully "illuminate [Nichols'] music as well as the other pieces in their relationship to one another and also in how they could be understood separately [on their own]."[195] For example, Cohn compared Nichols' "*Shirei Zimra*" – hence the title of the session – to the way a cantor might sing the *nusach* for *Yishtabach*, the prayer from which *Shirei Zimra*

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[192] Ibid.

[193] Nichols, Dan. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 24 October 2019.

[194] Cohn, Cantor Richard. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 9 January 2020.

[195] Ibid.

gets its text. Cohn believes that the expressive methods a cantor might use to chant a passage of *nusach*, illuminating certain details along the way, can also be found embedded within Nichols' pieces (in his own style, of course), simply because of Nichols' sensitive and holistic compositional style and his attention to the text.[196]

By comparing and contrasting pieces in different genres, they hoped to open up their own understanding and the understanding of those present more deeply to all of these different musical genres. Ultimately, Cohn thinks the result was an "interesting and inspiring experience of how text and music interact with each other" in addition to being "one of the most delightful experiences [he] has ever had as a presenter."[197]

[196] Ibid.
[197] Ibid.

**Cantor Benjie Ellen Schiller & Dan Nichols**

*Cantor Benjie Ellen Schiller*

Cantor Benjie Ellen Schiller is a Professor of Cantorial Arts at the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music (DFSSM) at HUC-JIR/New York, where she teaches courses such as "The Cantor and The Congregational Voice," "Advanced Recitative," and the Shabbat Contemporary and Life Cycle Workshops. In partnership with Merri Lovinger Arian, she also advises and mentors students leading *t'filah*. Schiller views her holistic work at the College-Institute as "training cantorial and rabbinical students to bridge the gap between performance and spiritual leadership."[198] She particularly wants cantorial students at HUC to see and internalize that all of these styles of "*nusach*, art song, and congregational melodies [are] very connected. The greatest [pieces of] *hazzanut* have tunes within them, [and] contemporary folk songs can have moments of chant within them. [She believes that] one feeds the other and makes the other almost more special."[199]

Schiller embodies this integration of different repertoires within herself, having engaged deeply with both informal and formal Jewish music. As a young adult, she songled at the URJ Kutz Camp. And she received her Bachelor's degree in composition from Boston University, where she studied with noted composer/conductor Samuel Adler. When teaching cantorial students in the DFSSM, Schiller attempts to bestow this knowledge of and desire for integration in a variety of ways. She emphasizes that the

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[198] "Benjie Ellen Schiller, Cantor, MSM." *Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion*, huc.edu/directory/benjie-ellen-schiller.

[199] Schiller, Cantor Benjie Ellen. Personal interview. 16 December 2019.

students' "relationship with the text should be primary – not just knowing it, but [establishing] one's own personal relationship with the text."[200] This is crucial to Schiller because the text is the source from which cantors draw "communication, motivation, and inspiration" when they lead worship.[201] Of course cantors also connect to the "artistic gesture, expression, [and] impetus of the piece from the composer's standpoint," but Schiller suggests that cantors also need to be thinking about how this composer's intention works with this prayer in this moment."[202] Navigating these various interpretations successfully helps to convey mastery as well as an outpouring of relationship with the prayer itself.[203] And according to Schiller, not only must cantors hold all of these elements at once, but they also need to be simultaneously "cognizant of the *kehillah*," the congregation, since they are part of that conversation with the text as well.[204]

Schiller lives out this work in her additional role serving as the cantor of Bet Am Shalom Synagogue, a Reconstructionist congregation in White Plains, New York, where she serves alongside her husband, Rabbi Lester Bronstein. At Bet Am Shalom, she believes her role as *sh'lichat tzibbur* in the practical sense is to provide an "ambiance" of prayerful expression and to clearly indicate when congregants should join in so that people in her community are able to do their own work of prayer.[205] Schiller believes she should be as present as she can to her congregants' voices so she can sense when it is

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[200] Ibid.
[201] Ibid.
[202] Ibid.
[203] Ibid.
[204] Ibid.
[205] Ibid.

time to move things along, when to lead them, and when to get out of their way, allowing the congregational voice to really sing at its richest and fullest.[206] While leading prayer, Schiller feels she is "responsible [for] listening to the energy in the room and respond[ing]."[207] She likes to have a plan and then, "as much as she can be present to feeling the flow [and] connection with [the] text, [to] allow that to be a facilitator of *t'filah*."[208] She has felt over the years that "a lot of it is about getting out of the way [and] listening."[209]

In the worship she leads at Bet Am Shalom, Schiller thinks there is an "interrelationship between tunes, davening, and singing together, [which provide] different entry points into key words and music at moments of the service."[210] She is "proud of [this] interplay between styles… [and] the way the kahal sings on a given morning" at Bet Am Shalom.[211] One of her favorite moments of *t'filah* at the synagogue on Shabbat morning is the *niggun* that follows the *Amidah*. In their community's practice, a wordless melody allows for release at the end of their most intimate prayers and provides time for the congregation to "get lost… and have the prayer beyond the words, just through music."[212] Schiller's goal for this *niggun* moment is to touch upon "something evocative and true, yet, in some way, inviting for people to sing, even if [it is] new [for them]."[213]

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[206] Ibid.
[207] Ibid.
[208] Ibid.
[209] Ibid.
[210] Ibid.
[211] Ibid.
[212] Ibid.
[213] Ibid.

Her goal in general when leading worship is "to give the congregational voice the opportunity to be dramatic and full, and also still and small," exploring multiple points along the huge range of possible expression in prayer depending on the moment and the text.[214] She sometimes wants to wake people up and rouse them; other times, she wants to lull or comfort them.[215] Schiller desires the *t'filot* she leads to provide moments of "joy and yearning, meditation and praise, solemnity and focus" – to elicit a full range of emotion and engagement.

As a composer working at HUC, Schiller has taken note of the recent changing trends in Reform synagogue music. She sees that the popular congregational music, "which has so taken hold," is expanding in style.[216] Rather than being in its own silo or stylistic box, this music is "broadening and deepening," so that there is less of a division between congregational music and art song.[217] While this gap is lessening, she "[worries] about cantorial art song [from the past] continuing to function" in synagogue worship.[218] There also seems to be a trend toward more of "a chant, Middle Eastern or Israeli focus" in synagogue music, a la *Nava Tehila* – folksong with a modal and rhythmic quality.[219]

Because this rhythmic music lends itself beautifully to guitar and drum, Schiller worries that we sing less a cappella these days. She feels that "a cappella [moments are] where the sound of the collective can be fully realized."[220] By adding heavy

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[214] Ibid.
[215] Ibid.
[216] Ibid.
[217] Ibid.
[218] Ibid.
[219] Ibid.
[220] Ibid.

instrumentation, which she experiences as the popular trend of this era in Jewish music, "we lose some of the spontaneity" of prayer and we also perhaps fail to make space for our congregants to add their voices to the sound of their community's prayers.[221] If they are receiving a wall of sound from a band, it is difficult to hear one's own voice over the din, let alone the power of the collective voices joined together in song and in prayer. In that vein, Schiller believes the amount of instrumentation and fixed arrangement used in worship today might be "too much of a good thing."[222] There are times for it, and she thinks it can be a real treat to hear something exquisitely harmonized… but Schiller believes we can sometimes simply "let the words [speak]."[223]

She also "wishes there were a little more of the art."[224] In an attempt to provide this type of stylistic repertoire, Schiller tries to write music this way, composing liturgical pieces such as *Azamrah* and *Shehecheyanu* that are catchy, but that also contain some breadth, depth, and nuance.[225] Because of her skills and integrity as a cantor and a composer, Schiller was invited to participate in the national cohort of *Kesher Shir*, where she collaborated with singer-songwriters Craig Taubman, Julie Silver, and Dan Nichols.

*"R'tzei Vimnuchateinu": Their Kesher Shir composition*

Schiller found *Kesher Shir* to be an illuminating experience in that the program gave her a unique opportunity to write together with others who are also immersed in this

[221] Ibid.
[222] Ibid.
[223] Ibid.
[224] Ibid.
[225] Ibid.

work and who approach it from various pathways with the goal of mixing and melding tradition and modernity.[226] Schiller believes we so often work in silos, by perceived "type," and *Kesher Shir* was an opportunity to break down those barriers and collaborate with folks who came from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives.[227]

She was paired with Nichols at the first *Kesher Shir* gathering she attended, and she remembers "feeling that [she and Nichols] both [had] an intuitive sense of hearing a melody," and less of an "official [composing] method."[228] Nichols told her during their collaborative process that he was feeling some "imposter syndrome," feeling like he needed "more exposure to the Hebrew and the *nusach*."[229] Schiller, however, saw Nichols as an artist who was bringing such heart and thoughtfulness to his relationship with the liturgy – a different, though equally important kind of integrity when engaged in this kind of creative work.

For Nichols, the experience of working with Schiller at *Kesher Shir* was one of "wow moments upon wow moments."[230] He felt there were no expectations in advance of what they would create, but he did sense an "open, peaceful, centered commitment" that they would "be all-in together…, trust[ing] [in] each other completely [and believing] that something good enough [would] happen."[231]

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[226] Ibid.
[227] Ibid.
[228] Ibid.
[229] Ibid.
[230] Nichols, Dan. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 24 October 2019.
[231] Ibid.

Nichols found Schiller to be a "deep well" of knowledge and skill with an "intoxicating" energy.[232] "Out of that energy came this really dynamic songwriting experience" that Nichols doesn't think he's ever experienced with anyone else.[233] They had similar approaches to text and rhythm, and through their compositional instincts, were able to find "a meeting place between their backgrounds."[234]

Together, they were assigned to compose a setting for "*R'tzei Vimnuchateinu*," a prayer for which there are not many melodies in Reform practice. They discussed its liturgical framing and where it falls in a service along with flow, modality, and liturgical context, paying particular attention to the prayer as a whole and identifying segments of the text that were cohesive within the whole.[235][236] They explored the prayer "as sound and text, honoring the rhythm of the Hebrew [and] exploring the emotion behind the translation."[237] This engagement and interpretation of the emotion behind the text and its meaning resonated with Nichols, who found that he and Schiller both often create sound with their emotional states at the forefront.[238] Schiller echoed this when she said that they "both write totally from the heart, let[ting] the music [and] words of *t'filah* just speak."[239]

Nichols' memory is that they spent an hour and a half without their instruments, just talking. Suddenly, there was "a moment when [they] both looked at each other [and

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[232] Ibid.
[233] Ibid.
[234] Ibid.
[235] Ibid.
[236] Schiller, Cantor Benjie Ellen. Personal interview. 16 December 2019.
[237] Nichols, Dan. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 24 October 2019.
[238] Ibid.
[239] Schiller, Cantor Benjie Ellen. Personal interview. 16 December 2019.

said,] 'Now it's time to make a sound.'"[240] Because "Nichols speaks through guitar and [Schiller] through piano," they brought those instruments together, and from that moment on, they were "chasing it."[241][242] Out of that process, they improvised to see what would come out, and eventually, a "lyrical, beautiful, simple melody emerged. They kept letting it sing, and it eventually came."[243] They "wanted to be more expansive in their conception of how a prayer would be recited, [so] they felt it would be appropriate in a contemporary milieu to bring [a more traditional] sound in."[244] And so, they decided to sing the first line of the text as a *recitative* that returned again later in the piece. They used this *recitative*-like, free chanting as a way to "move the text forward and still maintain [the] congregational voice."[245] It was "composition with a liturgical lens [and also] utilitarian purpose."[246]

When they were done, it felt really good to both of them. They loved the piece, but it didn't feel finished.[247] Both Nichols and Schiller mentioned the desire to continue working on the piece and eventually to record it together, and also, perhaps, to continue collaborating on new compositions, though they haven't yet found the time.[248]

When reflecting on this partnered experience, Schiller identified that the "best part was opening [themselves] up to one another… [and] trusting the improvisatory

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[240] Nichols, Dan. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 24 October 2019.
[241] Ibid.
[242] Schiller, Cantor Benjie Ellen. Personal interview. 16 December 2019.
[243] Ibid.
[244] Ibid.
[245] Nichols, Dan. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 24 October 2019.
[246] Schiller, Cantor Benjie Ellen. Personal interview. 16 December 2019.
[247] Ibid.
[248] Nichols, Dan. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 24 October 2019.

spirit."[249] The "goal was only to encounter [Nichols] as a partner in creating something," to encounter the text together, "to be present to the experience, [and to] be ready to share something at the end."[250] The piece was not written to be necessarily utilitarian; the idea was "to be open and see what unfolded."[251] She enjoyed that the exercise of writing this piece with Nichols was "less about the product than the process."[252] It was "*Torah lishma*."[253]

[249] Schiller, Cantor Benjie Ellen. Personal interview. 16 December 2019.
[250] Ibid.
[251] Ibid.
[252] Ibid.
[253] Ibid.

**Cantor Jack Mendelson & Elana Arian**

*Elana Arian*

Elana Arian is a songleader and singer-songwriter based in Brooklyn, NY.[254] Arian grew up in Westchester, just outside New York City, where her family belonged to a *chavurah*, a type of small, collaborative, lay led Jewish community that had become popular in the Reform movement during the anti-establishmentarianism of the 1960s and 70s. In their *chavurah*, each of the families who belonged to the community would take turns hosting and leading Shabbat worship in their homes. Instead of attending synagogue as a child, Arian remembers celebrating Shabbat at "home" – hers and others' – on a regular basis.

URJ Kutz Camp was another "home" for Arian. Her parents, Rabbi Ramie Arian and Merri Lovinger Arian, who serves as a faculty member in the DFSSM, were both songleaders and faculty members at the camp. They would bring Arian and her brother along as "fac brats" every summer, starting when they were just babies. Those years at Kutz and in her *chavurah* gave Arian access and a deep connection to the world of songleading and "informal" Jewish music.

Simultaneously, Arian studied formal music, eventually pursuing her Bachelor's degree in music at Yale and conducting a symphony orchestra there. Alongside this formal music focus, Arian never quite gave up on her less formal musical roots, eventually joining a folk singing group at Yale called "Tangled Up in Blue" (TUIB).

[254] Much of the biographical information to follow was adapted from Arian's presentation during the Tisch/Star Winter Retreat at Beloved Brooklyn. 6 January 2020.

While participating in TUIB, Arian realized that her friends were composing their own music, and this previously unexplored form of creative expression intrigued her.

This led Arian to her next pathway: composing secular folk music and singing in folk clubs by night, and teaching music in a Jewish day school by day. Debbie Friedman (z"l) was a close friend of the family, so she would frequently come see Arian play at these dirty, smoky clubs. At the end of her set, Friedman would inevitably ask, "When are you going to write something we – the Jewish community – can use? When are you going to write something for us?" Arian would laugh; this was a regular joke between them at each gig because Arian was not even considering writing Jewish music at that time.

Several years after Friedman died, Arian had a baby and was going through a difficult period in her first marriage. One night, she found herself singing to soothe Maya, her daughter, and she suddenly realized that she was singing the words of "*Yih'yu L'ratzon*." While this liturgical text was familiar, she realized the melody she was gently humming wasn't a melody she knew from somewhere else; she had "accidentally" composed something Jewish herself. Arian suddenly realized that, although Friedman had seemingly framed her recurring questions as a tongue-in-cheek joke, Friedman had truly seen her. She knew Arian's potential to write music for the Jewish community long before Arian knew it herself. This was the beginning of Arian's journey composing and creating new music for the Jewish world.

In addition to working at the day school, Arian served as an accompanist at Central Synagogue for many years, adding violin, guitar, and mandolin to the worship

there on *Shabbatot* and the High Holy Days. Once she began composing, Central became a sort of laboratory where she could share and test the usability and success of her new pieces, particularly in the Saturday morning "*Mishkan*" services, where the intimate, informal style of worship allowed for additional flexibility and creativity in the music and ritual. Because of Arian's musical talents, effervescent personality, and collaborative spirit, she quickly gained popularity throughout the movement. She now travels most weekends for residencies in synagogues across the country, singing and playing at major Reform movement events like the URJ Biennial, and she served as a visiting artist at the URJ Kutz Camp – her "home" growing up – during its final summer.

During her congregational visits, Arian often brings integrated repertoire to these synagogue communities. Sometimes a cantor will ask her to bring a specific kind of piece in order "to help instigate change" in that community's worship.[255] Other times, she simply tries something "new" like Craig Taubman's "*Elohai N'shamah*" interspersed with improvised "*Nisim B'chol Yom*" blessings in the *Adonai Malach* mode (major scale with a lowered 7th scale degree), the way Hazzan Alberto Mizrahi recorded them on Taubman's album.[256] She attempts these experiments in communal singing and prayer because she can "get away with it" as a guest. It also informs her work as a *sh'lichat tzibbur* to see how the congregation connects to different types of melodies.[257] Similar to the Taubman/Mizrahi arrangement, Arian often brings "something new that is actually old," like the Alter "*Tzur Yisrael.*"[258] She finds that these pieces seem to work "for the

[255] Arian, Elana. Personal interview. 5 December 2019.
[256] Ibid.
[257] Ibid.
[258] Ibid.

older Jews who tend to show [up]" for small and intimate Saturday morning services.[259] She thinks the "old" or "traditional" sound of the modal melodies trigger memories for these folks from long ago; even if not exact, these pieces might sound like something in the style of *nusach* with which they grew up.[260]

Eventually, Arian joined the faculty of HUC-JIR's DFSSM, originally serving as a multi-instrumental accompanist during Thursday morning *shacharit* services and Wednesday student practica and recitals. After several semesters of work at HUC/New York, she was approached by Cantor Richard Cohn with an idea for a joint class on improvisation and integration that he wanted her to co-teach with Cantor Jack Mendelson.

*"Improvisation & Integration": Their joint course for cantorial students in the DFSSM*

Arian views the relationships between cantors and singer-songwriters as an "outgrowth of the reality today [in] the Reform movement."[261] Cantors, more and more of whom come from the camp/songleading worlds, are serving congregations, and composers continue to travel the country, connecting, singing, and building relationships with Jewish communities around the U.S. For Arian, "there is value in what everyone is doing."[262]

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[259] Ibid.
[260] Ibid.
[261] Ibid.
[262] Ibid.

That being said, Arian finds the idea of stylistic repertoire integration as a "pillar" of Reform worship to be a "newly articulated" concept in our movement.[263] Finding a way to integrate the old and the new, metered and unmetered repertory has been happening organically in many communities. Because Cantor Richard Cohn, Director of the DFSSM, believes strongly in the concept of integration, he has "tried to make a vision for what the next step of the DFSSM will look like, and therefore, [the] next steps in the cantorate and in Jewish music," of which, he believes, integration will be a central tenet. [264] At the moment, Arian's impression is that cantorial students "come through the [DFSSM] program with siloed information" – for example, big pieces of *hazzanut* that students are not sure how to use or integrate effectively with contemporary congregational repertoire in their Reform congregations once they leave school.[265]

Because of that dynamic, Cohn wants to make integration and fusion of old and new styles, of classical and contemporary "one of the things that students [deeply] engage in before they [enter] the field."[266] This was the foundational goal in his development of the course. Cohn had seen Mendelson do a class on fusion at an ACC Convention, and he knew that Arian was doing interesting compositional and integrational work as a prayer leader, songleader, accompanist, and singer-songwriter, so he asked them if they would teach the course together.[267] During the planning process, Cohn said to Mendelson and Arian the equivalent of: "I don't know what you two will do, but you should do it

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[263] Ibid.
[264] Ibid.
[265] Ibid.
[266] Ibid.
[267] Mendelson, Cantor Jack. Personal interview conducted by phone. 4 December 2019.

together. [Something good will come out of that, and students] will benefit from it."[268] In Arian's own experience, that was the power of the course: to engage deeply in this type of learning and creative work together, honoring her and Mendelson's respective backgrounds and perspectives, and see what would blossom from it.

Arian's personal goal for the course was that, by the end of the semester, students could envision something integrative they might do in worship that they couldn't or wouldn't have even thought of before.[269] She wanted the course to provide "a way to empower [the students] to take this wide range of [material they learn in the DFSSM] and apply it in a way that will give [worship] real life."[270] For Mendelson, the idea was that, instead of discussing it theoretically, they were trying to teach the concept so that the students had the opportunity to practice these skills over and over again in real time, hopefully gaining some proficiency in techniques of improvisation and fusion in a safe and constructive environment.[271]

Beyond the practice of integration itself, Arian wanted students to discover something "authentic to them."[272] She identified Mendelson as a cantor who has "moves, qualities to his sound that are unique to him."[273] Arian wanted to communicate to students that they could "get away with almost anything if it [were] really authentic to [them]."[274] And so, by practicing improvisation within a modal structure together in class each week,

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[268] Arian, Elana. Personal interview. 5 December 2019.
[269] Ibid.
[270] Ibid.
[271] Mendelson, Cantor Jack. Personal interview conducted by phone. 4 December 2019.
[272] Arian, Elana. Personal interview. 5 December 2019.
[273] Ibid.
[274] Ibid.

students began to develop their own authentic sound, their own personal "moves." Mendelson demonstrated this when he took Arian's composition of "*Ahavah Rabbah*" (co-written with Noah Aronson), and added his own fusion of *hazzanut* as a sort of additional "C" section within the piece. Arian felt like that particular integration worked because Mendelson was being authentic to his own voice and musical proclivities in the fusion, helping to make the piece his own.[275]

For Arian, "so much of the improvisatory stuff is about the willingness [and] commitment to being present."[276] She believes it is a "holy thing" to play with and explore the ways in which we engage with music and text. She finds it exciting to be present in the moment, responsive to what is happening around us in worship. And that is really the point: the integration of liturgical music of different styles "is another delivery system for helping people to be awake and alive in prayer."[277] Arian believes that using this "old," traditional repertoire in worship can help give Reform congregants "access to a new spiritual feeling."[278]

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[275] Mendelson, Cantor Jack. Personal interview conducted by phone. 4 December 2019.

[276] Arian, Elana. Personal interview. 5 December 2019.

[277] Ibid.

[278] Ibid.

## Conclusions

*Review of findings*

The biggest connective thread I found between these conversations with cantors and singer-songwriters was the importance of being in relationship. This was key to each pair and true of every person I interviewed. Each interviewee was able to remain open to ideas that were perhaps outside their comfort zones because they were committed to staying in relationship with another human being who had come to the table with different strengths and skill sets.

Illuminated by their interactions with their partner, each interviewee also identified the value in deepening one's own learning, regardless of the "camp" from which they came. Noah Aronson learned how to compose effectively for liturgy through his study with and mentorship from Cantor Jodi Sufrin.[279] Her gentle pushback and encouragement gave him structure and boundaries that were helpful in growing his own mental framework for composition in a Jewish context.[280] Cantor Jack Mendelson learned from Debbie Friedman (z"l) the importance of inclusion, of reflecting all people's voices and perspectives in music, thus giving them new connections to sacred text and to one another.[281] And Friedman learned from Mendelson the value of the traditional Jewish modes, eventually choosing to incorporate them into some of her compositions, thereby

[279] Aronson, Noah. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 30 August 2019.
[280] Ibid.
[281] Mendelson, Cantor Jack. Personal interview conducted by phone. 4 December 2019.

marrying tradition with modernity, mixing a "traditional" or "authentic" Jewish sound with the raising of the congregational voice.[282]

Another throughline was the desire to find some sort of "authentic" sound – authentic to Jewish heritage, authentic to the communities these leaders serve, and a sound authentic to them personally. Mendelson learned from Friedman that he could and should explore an "authentically" Jewish and American sound in his davening.[283] Cantor David Goldstein and Alan Goodis sought to help their "*Selah*" teens create and lead an "authentic" and real High Holy Day prayer experience for the North Shore Congregation Israel community, despite their age.[284] Cantor Richard Cohn and Dan Nichols tested different ways of maintaining each of their authentic voices while trying to compose one cohesive piece together.[285] And Elana Arian and Cantor Jack Mendelson desired for the DFSSM students in their "Improvisation and Integration" course to find their own "authentic" moves and voices while trying new techniques, building musical bridges between contemporary and traditional repertoire.[286] As Arian said, the people in Reform communities will "buy it," if what we a leader does in worship is authentic to them and therefore is expressed authentically by them.[287]

Ultimately, this thesis was a study of how different people of different styles came together in a variety of ways. However, each individual is also made up of different styles

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[282] Ibid.

[283] Mendelson, Cantor Jack. Personal interview conducted by phone. 4 December 2019.

[284] Goodis, Alan. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 24 September 2019.

[285] Nichols, Dan. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 24 October 2019.

[286] Arian, Elana. Personal interview. 5 December 2019.

[287] Ibid.

within themselves. Each person is not just one thing; they are made up of the sum of all of their experiences.

*Integrated cantors*

Already, there are cantors who come out of the DFSSM integrated in and of themselves. Take, for example, Cantor Benjie Ellen Schiller, who uses her songleading, compositional, and cantorial training to create music for liturgy that is simultaneously accessible, lifting up the congregational voice, and also nuanced, complex, and deep, bringing some of the art back into congregational worship.

Cantor Joshua Breitzer is another example of an integrated cantor. Even as a student in the DFSSM, Breitzer pushed the stylistic envelope, daring to integrate Friedman's "*Ahavat Olam*" with *Shalosh Regalim* (Three Festivals – *Sukkot, Pesach,* and *Shavu'ot*) *nusach* during his 4th-year oral comprehensive exam ("comps").[288] Breitzer "wanted to demonstrate that he comprehend[ed] how these different musical [moments] work and can serve each other."[289] The faculty was surprised and a bit taken aback by Breitzer's creative approach to his comps. Some of them loved it, excited to see a student taking an integrative approach to the material learned in school; others were not as pleased, wanting to maintain the separate stylistic integrity of each element of the comps and to hear the *nusach* chanted consecutively.

While it was seen as a bold choice during his cantorial school years, he now uses this exact "mash-up" every time he leads a *Shalom Regalim* service at the Reform

[288] Breitzer, Cantor Joshua. Personal interview. 27 November 2019.
[289] Ibid.

synagogue he serves, Congregation Beth Elohim (CBE) in Brooklyn, NY.[290] This is just one example of the integrative approach that Breitzer brings to all worship at CBE, where he and his clergy partners transformed their approach on Friday nights to be more reflective of a "traditional" and "authentic" Shabbat experience.[291] They begin and end their community's Friday night Shabbat practice around a table in the lobby, shifting the focus from sitting in the chapel to gathering with food and drink, welcoming Shabbat by lighting the candles and singing *niggunim*.[292] Beyond the atmosphere of "home" they create by anchoring the experience around a table, Breitzer also used the traditional *matbei'a* for Friday night to craft a unique Reform worship experience in which he combines guitar, contemporary melodies, and the *nusach* he learned at the DFSSM, employing the silent *Amidah* traditional to Friday night worship and then chanting *Magein Avot* and *Me'ein Sheva*.[293] Also in his work as an instructor and coach in the DFSSM, Breitzer desires to "[help] students build a bridge from the school to the real world," exploring ways in which it is possible for all the *nuscha'ot* and accompanied pieces learned there to coexist in a way that really works in our congregations.[294]

Another cantor who values creative fusions of *hazzanut* and contemporary congregational repertoire is Cantor Daniel Mutlu who serves as the Senior Cantor of Central Synagogue in New York, NY. In his work at Central, Mutlu has brought various integrative moments into regular rotation during the congregation's Friday night worship.

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[290] Ibid.
[291] Ibid.
[292] Ibid.
[293] Ibid.
[294] Ibid.

The most well-known of these are his exquisite improvisations of the final verse of "*L'cha Dodi*," which Mutlu plays with each week, crafting a majestic and soaring line based on the musical scale and motifs found in the melody and then transitioning back into the comforting, familiar melody of the congregational refrain.[295] Another *nusach* moment he is exploring is the chanting of "*V'ne'emar*" between congregational "*Mi Chamocha*" and "*Hashkiveinu*" melodies. Instead of singing the same one each week, he is exploring the *nusach* composed for that moment by various cantors, including Alter, Schall, and Katchko. Mutlu thinks congregants and visitors appreciate these tastes of tradition because they "remind them of their parents' *hazzan*" or provide "different flavors" that contemporary Reform congregants don't hear very often.[296]

During the High Holy Days, Mutlu helped create an arrangement for "*B'rosh Hashanah*," one of the liturgical units found in the famous *piyyut*, "*Un'taneh Tokef*," in which Central combined Alter's *hazzanut*, a choral refrain, and Leonard Cohen's "Who By Fire." While many other synagogues have also employed the Cohen tune for this moment during *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, Mutlu and his clergy partners thought it would work particularly well at Central "because there [was] already so much contrast between the congregational refrain and the *hazzanut*."[297] The Cohen tune added an additional layer, bring additional depth and complexity to this important liturgical moment.[298]

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[295] Mutlu, Cantor Daniel. Personal interview. 18 December 2019.
[296] Ibid.
[297] Ibid.
[298] Ibid.

In his role as an instructor and coach in the DFSSM, Mutlu similarly wants to help students use *nusach* in a functional way, as connective tissue to propel us to something familiar.[299] The *nusach* can't exist in a vacuum, as a standalone; it is always flowing and connected to the next prayer.[300] Cantors know that *nusach* and *hazzanut* can be "great, powerful music, but the congregation doesn't really know that."[301] And so, Mutlu believes it is the job of the cantor to "use *nusach* as a vehicle to present [or] unveil something familiar," thereby making the *nusach* familiar by association.[302] Mutlu thinks the ultimate goal is not *nusach* in and of itself, but in achieving "authenticity" in each style.[303]

This goal of achieving cross-style authenticity is visible in the way Mutlu leads worship, including at the Friday night Shabbat service he helped lead during the recent (2019) URJ Biennial in Chicago. His insertions of small phrases of *hazzanut* amongst the congregational repertoire, his interpretation of the liturgical text, and his virtuosic execution of all musical moments in that service left many attendees, including me, feeling awed and inspired. Several weeks after the conference, Transcontinental Music Publications, the publishing house of the American Conference of Cantors, released a URJ Biennial 2019 songbook containing all of the musical selections that were used during the conference's Friday night and Shabbat morning worship. When one looks at the list of repertoire that was sung on Friday night, it doesn't seem so different or unusual

[299] Ibid.
[300] Ibid.
[301] Ibid.
[302] Ibid.
[303] Ibid.

from a typical service that might be done in any Reform congregation on Shabbat. It struck me that the magic of that particular service was the integration, the bridge between old and new, traditional and contemporary, and Mutlu's expert weaving of these different styles in a way that allowed the congregation to really pray, at some points, raising their voices, and at others, listening and receiving the power of the liturgy, awash in glorious majesty.

*Cantor as composer*

Mutlu believes there is less and less music written by cantors today because of the ways in which the cantorate has changed in the last 20 years. Cantors are now "on par" in a lot of ways with their rabbinic colleagues, expected to be able to officiate at life cycle events, teach Torah study, and give *divrei Torah* during Shabbat worship. Because of all of these new tasks, Mutlu believes cantors don't have as much time to be creative as they used to.[304] They still can be, of course, but it is harder to find time and energy above and beyond completing the other tasks in their portfolios to be creative and to compose.[305] Mutlu sees songleaders and Jewish singer-songwriters "filling that void" as they composing scores of new music, but he believes it is "up to the cantors to really be able to integrate everything in an 'authentic,' prayerful way."[306]

In order to bring his own voice and interpretation to the liturgical settings being used in Reform congregations today, Mutlu does compose music for prayer. Many of the

[304] Ibid.
[305] Ibid.
[306] Ibid.

cantors I interviewed including Cantor Jack Mendelson, Cantor David Goldstein, Cantor Richard Cohn, and Cantor Benjie Ellen Schiller also prioritize the creation of new liturgical works, often inspired to compose for specific ritual occasions or needs.

*Next steps*

Composition is an additional way for cantors to bring the music and the interpretations they seek into the Jewish world. Their unique perspective and skill set helps them to craft music that is connected to and expresses the text thoughtfully, occasionally incorporating traditional Jewish modes or motifs, and integrating different styles from the Jewish music canon in ways that highlights the depth and breadth of our treasured heritage. As we move into the future of worship in the Reform movement, I believe that more cantors need to begin composing (or continue to compose) Jewish music that reflects their perspective, their knowledge base, and their understanding of and connection to the text and flow of the liturgy.

Additionally, Jewish leaders of all kinds – cantors as well as songleaders and singer-songwriters – need to commit to engaging with other people who come from different backgrounds and expertises. As I learned from the interviews conducted for this thesis, often something good, creative, and interesting will come from extended interaction with someone who comes from a different skill set if both parties commit to being in real relationship with one another. As I learned from Cantor David Goldstein and

Alan Goodis, there is value in approaching someone new, listening to their story, and asking for their help creating something at which they are strong.[307]

*Future areas of inquiry*

Individuals seeking to further the scope of this project should focus on exploring how arrangers, music directors, and accompanists contribute to stylistic musical integration in worship. For example, in the creation of the "*B'rosh Hashanah*" arrangement at Central Synagogue, Mutlu worked closely with Music Director and accompanist Dave Strickland and Assistant Music Director Misa Iwama to craft it in such a way that the key relationships and transitions made sense so that the piece would be more sonically appealing and successful in worship.[308]

These musical support team members have the sensitive task of playing in a contemporary musical idiom that works in today's society, while simultaneously incorporating traditional motifs. This was true of Lewandowski when he composed and arranged music for his cantor in the 19th century, and it is true of Dave Strickland when he arranges music for Central Synagogue today. The synagogue ensemble contextualizes the *nusach* and the voice of the cantor, and encourages the congregational voice at the points at which there should be that kind of dialogue. The most successful examples of cantor/music director partnerships in the 19th and 20th centuries could be researched and used as models for this type of collaboration and partnership in worship going forward.

[307] Goodis, Alan. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 24 September 2019.
[308] Mutlu, Cantor Daniel. Personal interview. 18 December 2019.

*Concluding thoughts*

Selfishly, this topic is important to me because it demonstrates who I am. I came to the DFSSM as an experienced songleader, well-versed in contemporary repertoire from the 1970s to today. Through my studies these past five years, I have acquired a wider breadth and a deeper familiarity with many cantorial styles from different places and time periods. More and more, I, myself, am becoming a physical embodiment of the integration between different liturgical styles. I am a big believer in the use of these repertoires together in *t'filah*, and I am committed to finding ways of continuing to create and innovate what this integration could look like in the future.

Far more importantly, I believe that without this type of integration, music and worship in Reform synagogues could become irrelevant. As we know from the Pew studies, there is a longstanding trend towards dwindling membership and attendance at worship services in the North American Jewish community. I believe that cantors are uniquely positioned to undertake this task, thinking creatively about music and worship with clergy partners and executing many styles of music with fluidity and advanced skill. I hope that the findings uncovered in this senior project will prove helpful to my colleagues and fellow passionate Jewish leaders, providing one path towards partnership – between the different styles of music, between cantors and singer-songwriters, and between cantors and congregations.

I don't know what worship will look like for us going into the future, but I am excited to remain open and connected to the possibilities, bringing my songleading and cantorial training into conversation with one another as I discover how to be an arbiter of

tradition as well as modernity. As Dan Nichols said in his interview, there is "excitement and opportunity in being a Reform Jew right now."[309]

Synagogue music will likely evolve over the next 20 years, and it will be the work of the cantor to evolve along with it, simultaneously maintaining our treasured traditions while innovating to remain relevant in modern society. We will only be able to do that if we stay open and turn any discomfort into inquiry, asking good questions to identify what we can learn from a given experience, and figuring out how we can translate new trends into successful Reform worship that maintains our sacred past in 2020 and beyond. Wonderfully, the title "*hazzan*," cantor, comes from the same Hebrew root as the word "*hazon*," vision. It will be incumbent upon cantors to have a vision for worship as we navigate this next era in Jewish music and worship, working together with intrepid rabbis, songleaders, singer-songwriters, accompanists, and music directors to make these visions a reality.[310]

[309] Nichols, Dan. Personal interview conducted on Zoom. 24 October 2019.
[310] Breitzer, Cantor Joshua. Personal interview. 27 November 2019.

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