The Listening Leader:
Becoming a Shaliach Tzibbur

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Ordination

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Date: 2020
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Acknowledgements

Just as a person cannot become a *shaliach tzibbur* without other people, the work in front of you is not solely mine. It has involved the participation and support of my community, friends, and mentors, whom I would like to thank here.

To my classmates and colleagues, for lending me emotional support and for being sounding boards for my thoughts and ideas, I give thanks to you. מודה אני לפניכם.

To my parents, for always taking late night phone calls, for acting as unofficial editors, and for raising me in a loving and spiritual Jewish home which brought me to this point, מודה אני לפניכם.

To all of the amazing *shlichei* and *shlichot tzibbur* I had the privilege to interview, Hazzanit Tara Abrams, Shani Ben Or, Cantor Rosalie Will, Cantor Ellen Dreskin, Cantor Lucy Fishbein, Rabbi Nicole Greninger, Rabbi Marisa James, Cantor Alane Katzew, Sarit Katzew, Rabbi Noa Kushner, Cantor Fredda Mendelson, Rabbi Jessica Meyer, Rabbi Jonah Pesner, Cantor Benjie Schiller, and Cantor Howard Stahl, for sharing your valuable time, profound insight, and for opening up your hearts of prayer, מודה אני לפניכם.

And to Rabbi Jan Katzew, thank you for being my thesis advisor, teacher, colleague, and friend. You saw a spark in me before I knew it was even there and helped me nurture it into a true love of prayer that has shaped and will continue to shape my life. For always engaging with me in important conversations, for being deeply invested in my learning, for living and modeling the kind of *menschlecheit* that every teacher and rabbi should have,

מודה אני לפניך!

Abstract

Even in a rapidly changing Jewish world, since the beginning of Jewish prayer, there has been a *shaliach tzibbur* (שליח ציבור) in the room, leading people in prayer. As Jewish history progressed, this individual's role shifted from a stand-in for the Temple priesthood, to liturgical musician, to a teacher, guide, and facilitator. The evolution of this role continues, but I am pinpointing the role of the *shaliach tzibbur* in the progressive, primarily North American, Jewish milieu.

Drawing from ancient tradition, I have traced the roots and development of the position of *shaliach tzibbur*, its interactions with that of the *hazzan* (חזן) or cantor, and rabbinic understandings of what the *shaliach tzibbur* does and who they need to be. Following this, working from interviews with a number of Jewish professional prayer leaders in the field, I have distilled and presented the most important traits for a *shaliach tzibbur* to have. Having done this, I present what a modern-day *shaliach tzibbur* needs to do, know and be, with a particular emphasis on developing character.

The most important outcome of this research is a hierarchy of skills which mirrors that of the ancient rabbis: character is more important than knowledge which is more important than skill. The *shaliach tzibbur* must be the right person to lead a community in prayer. Their role is fulfilled both inside of and outside of the prayer space. By finding a sense of balance between strong leadership and humility, by developing empathy, and by building relationships, someone who leads prayer can become an exceptional *shaliach tzibbur*, inspiring their community to the highest heights.

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Introduction

The work in front of you now is deeply personal, not just because of the time put into it, but because, through my rabbinic training, prayer has taken up more space in my heart than any other subject. I came into my rabbinic education with some prior knowledge, having been raised by Jewish professionals in a synagogue-focused home. We said *ha-Motzi* (המוציא) before every meal, went to services every *Shabbat* (שבת), and sang the *Shema* (שמע) before I went to sleep. The music of prayer nurtured me, but the words were just sounds. I could repeat those sounds but did not know what they meant, even into young adulthood. Thus, when I began my studies at Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem, I could stand in front of a lectern and chant or read from the *siddur* (סידור) with relative confidence, but the nuances of Hebrew which give liturgy its texture and colour were not yet accessible to me.

A classmate and I once led a service at the Murstein Chapel in Jerusalem where the goal was to sing communally through the entirety of our prayer. We based the idea on a story of the Baal Shem Tov, which I told during the service. In the story, the great Polish rabbi approaches the doors of a synagogue but refuses to go inside. When his students ask for a reason, the Baal Shem Tov states that there are so many words in the synagogue that there was no space for him. After the service, one of our teachers gave me a pointed critique: "There was so much communal singing that there was no room for me." I was shattered. It seemed like a cruel thing to do – turning my own story around to criticize my prayer leadership. It was only in retrospect that I realized that this was one of my first lessons in *shlichut* (שליחות), being a *shaliach tzibbur* (שליח ציבור) or a prayer leader. I had failed to meet the needs of this individual by creating a service that relied on a single kind of prayer. It is

one of the highest goals and steepest challenges of leading prayer to touch each and every person in the *kahal* (קהל), the community which you lead.

When I arrived in Cincinnati and began to pray in the Scheuer Chapel, my knowledge of liturgy and prayer leading was infused with a genuine passion for prayer. Watching other rabbis-in-formation and faculty lead their own lovingly-crafted prayer experiences opened me up to the possibilities of what prayer can do. Poetry, music, art, movement . . . all of these were available to help participants connect to prayer in new and creative ways. And, even surrounded by innovation, I found a love of *keva* (קבע), the fixed aspect of the prayer. The ordained order of the service and the unchanging Hebrew of the siddur helped me feel grounded, while everything else in rabbinical school was new and confusing. I began to develop my own system of thought with regard to prayer and, with help from mentors, found techniques that worked for me that made a true and moving connection to prayer achievable.

From my love of praying, a love of the art of leading prayer emerged. I am fascinated by the figure of the *shaliach tzibbur*, literally the emissary or representative of the community. I remember my prayer leading role models and, now that I have experience, think about what they did or did not do in their *shlichut*, the status of being a *shaliach* and what one does. I think about the moving parts, the prayers and people. And I think about who that person is and can be. Who stands behind the lectern? Who is it singing, reading and chanting? I often know them personally, but who are they as a *shaliach tzibbur*?

In this work, I have explored the texts of Jewish tradition and spoken to experienced *shlichei tzibbur* (שליחי ציבור) in the field to understand the past, present, and future of *shlichei tzibbur*. I seek to explain who they were and what they did when the synagogue was in its nascent stages of development. I will explore the experiences of *shlichei tzibbur* in the 21st

century and share their understanding of the role. And combining the wisdom of past and present, I will flesh out my own definition of a *shaliach tzibbur* and provide guidance on how to become one, because a *sheliach* or *shelichat tzibbur* is someone one becomes

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Chapter 1 – The Historical Development of the Role of the *Shaliach Tzibbur*

So long as there has been Jewish worship practice, there has been someone standing at the front of the room, a focal leader who conducted worship of God, irrespective of its form. As the type and location of Jewish worship shifted, so too did the responsibilities of this leader. What remained consistent was that this man (for most of Jewish history) was an expert in worship practice and used that expertise to fulfill the religious obligations of those without the knowledge to do so.

The Shaliach Tzibbur as Described in the Rabbinic Period

In the period when the Temple stood, there was no concept of a shaliach tzibbur as a prayer leader, but intercession was well-known. In this time, nearly the entirety of Jewish worship was carried out not by individuals, but by the priests, who performed sacrifices on behalf of the community. These functionaries, who came into their roles through heredity alone, would follow the strict sacrificial procedures and rigid schedule in order to serve God in the commanded way. Through their performance of sacrificial ritual, the whole people of Israel fulfilled their obligation to the Divine. The priests at the Temple in Jerusalem and other sacrificial sites did not necessarily have a monopoly on worship practice and there were certainly priests who fell prey to corruption, but by and large, their work was a central focal point of communion between the Jewish people and God.

The mediation of the priests, however, was not the only way that the people of Israel delegated their ritual responsibilities. Solomon Zeitlin proposes another layer, that being the institution of *ma'amadot* (מעמדות) in the Second Temple period. According to Zeitlin, participation in the sacrifices began as the exclusive privilege of the wealthy, who had the

means to purchase additional animals for slaughter and had the leisure time to travel to Jerusalem at the required times. However, the Pharisees sought to include the entire people of Israel in Temple ritual. To accomplish this, they allowed animals to be purchased with money that had been accumulated by the Temple treasury from tithes and other obligatory donations. The Pharisees divided the inhabitants of the land into 24 divisions, the *ma'amadot*. Each *ma'amad* (מעמד) would send representatives to the Temple in order to take part in the daily sacrificial ritual on behalf of their community. The members of the *Ma'amadot* who remained home are said to have assembled their constituency and read relevant Torah passages aloud. Zeitlin argues that this assembly would become the synagogue.[1] For our purposes, the offices of the priesthood and the *ma'amadot* are the prototypes of what would become the *shaliach tzibbur*. There is a Mishnaic principle that person's agent is legally equivalent to the person. These roles demonstrate that principle which would carry over into the role of the *shaliach tzibbur*.

After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, these remnants of the priestly structure became the scaffolding for prayer services as implemented by the Tannaitic rabbis who operated from about 10 – 220 CE. The leader of these services would have been the newly-empowered *shaliach tzibbur* or shatz (ש״ץ), for short. Hyman Sky suggests that the beginning of this role coincided with the codification of the *Shmoneh Esrei* (שמונה עשרה) and the subsequent legislation that made its recitation mandatory for all Jews compelled by positive time-bound commandments, namely adult men.[2,3] Each of these Jews was

[1] Zeitlin, Solomon. "An Historical Study of the First Canonization of the Hebrew Liturgy (Continued)." *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 38, no. 3, 1948, pp. 289–316., 311-13
[2] Sky, Hyman I. *Development of the Office of Hazzan through the Talmudic Period*. Mellen Research University Press, 1992., 37

halakhically bound to recite these prayers three times a day, but the rabbis clearly understood that not everyone had the knowledge to do so. As a result, they permitted one person to offer prayer on behalf of the group. Mishnah Rosh Hashanah offers such a precedent. We read:

רבן גמליאל אומר, שליח צבור מוציא את הרבים ידי חובתן.

> Rabban Gamliel says: The *shaliach tzibbur* fulfills the obligation on behalf of the community.[4]

The early *shaliach tzibbur*, then, functioned similarly to the priests or *ma'amadot*. There were meaningful differences between the roles, but the *ma'amadot* were agents, emissaries, or *shlichim* of the community in a similar way. By performing the mitzvah in the presence of the community, they fulfill the requirement of each individual present. The *shlichut*, the status of being an emissary, in this case, means serving as a representative of the community to God. They pray, the people hope and choose to believe that God hears, and everyone fulfills the *mitzvah* (מצוה). This would have extended both to those who did not know enough to recite the prayers on their own and to those who had the knowledge.[5]

Certain rabbinic texts make it clear that the prayers of the individual *shaliach tzibbur* would be equivalent to the prayers of the entire community in the same way that the high priest would atone for the sins of the entire community.[6] Indeed, the Jerusalem Talmud describes the role of the *shaliach tzibbur* as being exactly equivalent to that of the priest, but with an even more important role: "To the one who passes before the Ark, do not say, 'Come and pray.' Rather say, 'Come and offer our sacrifices and provide for our needs, wage our

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[3] This legislation is found in Mishnah Brachot 4:3
[4] Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 4:9 – author's translation
[5] Babylonian Talmud Rosh Hashanah 34b
[6] Leviticus 16:33

wars, and appease God on our behalf.'"[7] The first aspect of this is that the parallels between prayer and the required sacrifices are made explicit. One also finds a similar implication that, by fulfilling the mitzvah of reciting the prayers, the *shaliach tzibbur* brings God's providence upon the community. This passage indicates that the *shaliach tzibbur* is more than just a successor to the priesthood. In our own day, a *shaliach tzibbur* nourishes, protects, and inspires their community in a way that the priestly service could not.

Midrash Tehillim offers a description of a more spiritual side of the role: "…the *shaliach tzibbur* goes down in front of the Ark, for the eyes of the congregation are raised to him and his eyes are raised towards *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* (הקב"ה) so that God will hear their prayer."[8] By this description, the *shaliach tzibbur* is not simply a stand-in for the priest. They are someone who is more closely in touch with God and who has, perhaps, a clearer intention in prayer. Through this and their expertise, they lay claim to the authority to stand between the kahal and the Divine. Here, the *shlichut* entails transmitting or amplifying the prayers of the community, so they will be more completely received by God.

As a conduit for prayer, the "worthiness" of the *shaliach tzibbur* was significant. Essentially, the effectiveness of their prayer was in direct proportion to their own good deeds. A *ma'aseh* (מעשה) in BT Ta'anit describes a situation in which Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, a mid 2nd century CE rabbi in Roman Judea and the figure traditionally identified as the main redactor of the Mishnah, declared a fast to bring about rain, but it never rained. Another figure, Ilfa, or maybe Rabbi Ilfa, prayed and the rain arrived. Yehuda HaNasi asks Ilfa a simple question: מאי עובדך, what are your deeds? Ilfa answered that he brings wine for

[7] Jerusalem Talmud Berakhot 34b – author's translation
[8] Midrash Tehillim 25:5

kiddush and Havdalah to the impoverished residents of his town.[9] The success of Ilfa's prayer was not predicated on having a nicer-sounding voice or even more knowledge of prayer. God granted Ilfa rain because of his ethics and how they were expressed in his conduct. The worthiness of a prayer leader stemmed from their lived values and the evidence of one's worthiness to lead prayer would be that those prayers had been answered.

Similar stories in this vein offer another potential source of worthiness. Yehuda HaNasi and Rav Nahman both declared fasts for rain which went unanswered. Yehuda was heartbroken, bewailing the generation that would be led by someone as unworthy as him. In the depths of his despair, the rain arrived. Rav Nahman, in the same situation, pleaded with God to throw him off a building and the rain came as well. Perhaps, in their acknowledgement of their own inadequacy, they became humble enough for God to acknowledge them. Depth of feeling and honesty are required in order for prayers to be answered. These stories of Jewish leaders of the past suggest that the ethical requirements to be a *shaliach tzibbur* mattered because the prayer of the *shaliach tzibbur* had a cosmic impact. Proper prayer, offered on behalf of a community, prayed in the proper way, and prayed by the proper person could influence God to bless the community with that which they needed to live and thrive. The *shaliach tzibbur* did not simply offer words from the bimah, but pleas to for God to alter the course of nature in their peoples' favour.

The *Hazzan* and the *Shatz*

From a contemporary perspective, one might assume that that cantor or *hazzan* (חזן) would lead prayer, but this is not so clear, particularly during the rabbinic period. As with the

[9] BT Ta'anit 24a

shaliach tzibbur, the *hazzan* receives no mention in biblical text, but the role may have existed before the *shatz* in a few different forms. The Mishnah describes a *hazzan* as a Temple functionary who assisted the priests with their ritual garb and oversaw the distribution of *lulabim* (לולבים) during the festival of Sukkot.[10] There also seems to have been another official called the *hazzan ha-k'nesset* (חזן הכנסת) who were responsible for the safety of the Torah scrolls used at the royal Torah reading at Sukkot[11] and the priestly Torah reading at Yom Kippur.[12]

In the context of local communal activities and the synagogues, the *hazzan ha-k'nesset* had a similar role but with additional responsibilities. They were involved in maintaining the Torah scrolls, but were also likely responsible for assigning Torah reading honours, as we read in Midrash Tanhuma that a hazzan called up Rabbi Akiva to read Torah.[13] They may have also been on "stand-by" to assist Torah readers and read Torah themselves.[14] Once the Temple was destroyed, however, the role of the hazzan lost most of its communal functions and some of its status, becoming a ceremonial officer and caretaker of the synagogue.[15] Mishnah Sota, in poetically describing the collapse of Jewish society, suggests that the scribes were reduced to the status of *hazzanim* and *hazzanim* were reduced to the status of *amei ha-aretz* (עמי הארץ), the common people.[16] Indeed, in places, they are

[10] Mishnah Sukkot 4:4
[11] Mishnah Sotah 7:8
[12] Mishnah Yomah 7:1
[13] Midrash Tanchuma, Yitro 15
[14] Tosefta Megillot 3:21
[15] Idelsohn, A. Z, and Bonia Shur. *Jewish Music in Its Historical Development*. Schocken Books, 1967., 107
[16] Mishnah Sotah 9:15

even placed below wood choppers and water drawers on a list of "necessary communal functionaries."[17]

By the Amoraic period, from around the 3rd to 6th centuries CE, the synagogue role of the *hazzan* was largely the same but is described in further detail by the rabbinic sources. The *hazzan* would be responsible for rolling the Torah scroll to the proper place, although they were cautioned to do so behind a curtain, "to avoid annoying the congregation."[18] In addition to their Toraitic duties, there are also references in the Jerusalem Talmud which suggest that the hazzan appointed the prayer leader for the congregation, although specific references to the hazzan are not extant in the equivalent Babylonian passages.[19] In the Babylonian context, the role of the *hazzan* seemed to take on a distinctly non-synagogue character, in that several types of *hazzanim*, *hazzanei Pumbedita* (חזני פונבדיתא), *hazzanei matta* (חזני מתא) and *hazzanei ha-ir* (חזני העיר), had been given administrative duties by the Exilarchate, the central Jewish authority.[20] Despite their essential communal function, the rabbis had little esteem for the office of the *hazzan*, decrying them as "careless caretakers of the Torah", violators of accepted synagogue practice, and arrogating power which they were not permitted to have.[21] This could have been the case in reality, but may also speak to rabbinic insecurity with relation to their own power. These various *hazzanim*, then, had at least some sway over the Jewish communities in which they functioned.

As time went on and the Babylonian and Palestinian Jewish communities developed, the term, *hazzan* was reappropriated and the role changed in character and rose in prestige.

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[17] Sky, 21
[18] Sky, 26
[19] JT Berakhot 40b
[20] Sky, 32-33
[21] Sky, 35

Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer, an 8th century midrashic work describes God as a hazzan, officiating the weddings of biblical figures, while Masechet Sofrim, one of the minor Talmudic tractates assigns leadership of *Musaf* (מוסף) and the *Kedushah* (קדושה) to the *hazzan*, on certain holidays. This is in sharp contrast with earlier sources which assign the *hazzan* no official prayer-leading duties. The assignment of prayer leadership to the *hazzan* would eventually lead to a confluence of the roles of the *hazzan* and the *shaliach tzibbur*. According to Hyman Sky, this merging took place as the Palestinian academies declined in power and Hebrew literacy was at an all-time low, even as the required prayer rubrics continued to expand and become more complicated. He writes:

> The decline of the academies not only affected the availability of functionaries ,but more importantly, mitigated against an educated laity who could deal with the expanded liturgy. Previously considered postulational lay-roles were no longer operative. "*Hazzan*" and "*sh'liah tzibbur*" became synonymous.

By the tenure of Yehudai Gaon over the Babylonian academies in the mid 8th century, the merger was complete, as Yehudai himself regarded the amalgamation of *hazzan* as *shaliach tzibbur* "as a time-honored fact." [22]

The ascendance of the office of *hazzan* from its place below the wood chopper to its parity with *shlichut tzibbur* came about alongside a great deal of musical innovation in Jewish prayer practice. *Piyyutim* (פיוטים), liturgical poems, emerged as a prominent art form by the 5th and 6th centuries CE, pioneered by figures like Yannai, a poet in Byzantine Palestine. The field of *piyyut* (פיוט) exploded after the Muslim conquests of the 7th century. *Piyyutim* with complicated melodies and rhythms began to emerge as central service

[22] Sky, 117

elements and educational *piyyutim* drawn from *halakhah* (חלכה), Jewish law, took the place of the delivery of sermons. The proper recitation of these works required more musical knowledge than most lay-*shlichei tzibbur* were able to muster.[23] For some of the rabbis, who often worked alongside *hazzanim*, it seemed their colleagues began including "Arabic melodies and poetry that had been re-worded to fit the synagogue service."[24] From this perspective, the rabbis were concerned for the sanctity of the service and the potential for secular music to lead people astray,[25] while the *hazzanim* were concerned with bringing beauty to the service and keeping up with the spirit of the times. It is also possible that the rabbis were resentful of a musical skill that they lacked. But as the *hazzan*'s role expanded more and more, rabbinic criticism would serve only as a way to vent frustration on the part of the rabbi.

This combination of *hazzan* and *shaliach tzibbur* would hold true through the medieval era and even into our own era, but for the purposes of tracing the development of the office of the *shaliach tzibbur*, in particular, it is essential to understand that it was functionally synonymous with that of the *hazzan* for much of Jewish history.

The Shaliach Tzibbur in Medieval Halakhah

The rabbinic texts of the first millennium offer us descriptions of the general goals and functions of the *shaliach tzibbur*, but by the medieval period, the *shatz* had become a well-covered legal subject. As such, the medieval halakhic codes include clear legal strictures

[23] Idelsohn, 106
[24] Landman, Leo. "The Office of the Medieval 'Hazzan.'" *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 62, no. 3, 1972, pp. 156–187., 160
[25] Sefer Hasidim 238

and procedures for anyone wishing to be a *shaliach tzibbur*. In particular, Maimonides' late 12th century code, Mishneh Torah and Joseph Karo's 16th century work, the Shulchan Aruch, provide insight into this halakhic realm in ways that largely remain relevant in our own day.

In his volume on prayer, Maimonides first lays out the purpose and process of communal prayer, in that prayer recited in a *tzibbur*, in community is always heard by God, even with sinners among them.[26] From here, we learn that praying in community is always preferable to praying alone. Maimonides goes on to explain what communal prayer looks like, in that one person recites the prayer in a loud voice and everyone else listens.[27] And further, we find a more detailed formulation of the role of the *shaliach tzibbur* than was laid out in Mishnah Rosh Hashanah:

> שליח צבור מוציא את הרבים ידי חובתן. כיצד? בשעה שהוא מתפלל והם שומעין ועונין אמן אחר כל ברכה וברכה הרי הן כמתפללין.
>
> The *shaliach tzibbur* fulfills the obligation on behalf of the community. How? When he prays and they listen and respond "amen" after each blessing, they are regarded as having prayed.[28]

This arrangement, as in the Mishnah, applies only to those without the knowledge to pray themselves. Anyone with the ability to say the prayers themselves would have had to do so, apart from on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in a Jubilee year. From this, it becomes clear that the notion that the *shaliach tzibbur* prays on behalf of the community, as expressed in the rabbinic period, remains in full effect into the medieval era.

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[26] Mishneh Torah, Prayer and the Priestly Blessing, 8:1
[27] Mishneh Torah, Prayer and the Priestly Blessing 4:8
[28] Mishnah Torah, Prayer and the Priestly Blessing, 8:9 – author's translation

In a system in which proper performance of one's halakhic duties is a matter of cosmic importance, anyone in the community who could not pray on their own was placing their soul in the hands of the *shaliach tizbbur*. It would be crucial, then, to have the right person in the role. As such, Maimonides and Karo offer guidelines on what qualities are desirable in a *shaliach tzibbur* and what disqualifies someone. The first qualifications are that they should be exemplary בחכמתו ובמעשיו, in their wisdom and in their deeds, both ethical and ritual. These, along with their appropriateness as a leader in a particular community, manage to cover nearly every guideline offered.

By the middle ages, the prayer service had expanded significantly and, thus, simply knowing the prayers and how to pray through a service would have been fairly demanding, requiring significant learning on the part of an aspiring *shaliach tzibbur*. They would need to know each of the prayers, the proper order, the choreography, and what to do if he makes any number of the myriad possible mistakes one could make in the liturgy. This, in turn, requires enough knowledge to know when one has made a mistake. This is so essential that if one has to choose between a man with a good voice, who does not know the prayers, and a 13 year old boy who does, the youth takes precedence.[29] This suggests, as in earlier times, that how one sounded chanting the prayer was of lower priority than knowledge and therefore proper intention in praying. Likewise, while prayer was largely fixed, one was allowed to add to blessings and "improvise", so to speak. This, too, would require knowledge of prayer and prayer language in order to shape the prayer to meet the needs of the community. Maimonides warns against lengthening prayers too much, in the presence of the community, but a *shaliach tzibbur* could add a blessing for the safety of a sick person about whom they

[29] Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 53:5

were concerned.[30] Thus, along with knowing the service, a *shaliach tizbbur* needed to have the language to meet the specific prayer needs of their community.

As for one's deeds and character, the Shulchan Aruch suggests that the *shaliach tzibbur* must be someone who is fit or worthy (הגון). Among other qualifications, fitness entails being free of sin, having a good reputation, and humility. Moses Isserles, in one of his glosses on the Shulchan Aruch, notes that someone who has killed another unintentionally and repented is permitted to be a s*haliach tzibbur* while one who has committed murder is forbidden.[31] Likewise, when a person from the congregation is asked to lead prayer, he is supposed to decline twice and accept on the third time, as a show of humility.[32] From this, it becomes clear that the moral character of the *shaliach tzibbur* is relevant to their prayer leading.

The last major qualifications involve the *shaliach tzibbur*'s appropriateness for leadership within their community. While this is vague, it encompasses a number of different traits which all add up to someone "seeming" like someone people can trust and follow. Maimonides notes that the ideal *shaliach tzibbur* is someone with a good singing voice and comfort and confidence in their chanting. This reflects the expanded musical role of the *shaliach tzibbur* as it merged with that of the *hazzan*. Musical ability, however, was subordinate to the individual's knowledge and character. Indeed, a community was not permitted to appoint someone solely on the basis of their singing, even if most of the congregation liked them.[33]

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[30] Mishneh Torah, Prayer and the Priestly Blessing 6:3
[31] Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 53:4
[32] Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 53:16
[33] Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 53:21

A qualification that remains consistent from the rabbinic period is that the *shaliach tzibbur* is supposed to have a full beard. This most likely reason for this would be to ensure that the congregation knows that *shaliach tzibbur* is of the proper age and maturity to lead prayer. Likewise, beards symbolized wisdom, a modicum of which is required to reach the age at which one can grow a beard. This is not to say that someone whose only asset was their beard would have been appointed over someone without a beard. Indeed, certain situations could call for the appointment of the un-bearded. For example, if there was no one who knew the prayers other than a 13-year-old boy, it would be better for him to lead than to not pray at all. It is important to note that this is the age of *bar mitzvah* (בר מצוה), the earliest that it would be appropriate to ask someone to lead prayer on behalf of the community. Likewise, a 20-year-old man without a beard or a 20-year-old eunuch could be appointed, as it was agreed that they had reached the age where one should be able to grow a beard. This focus on facial hair may seem strange or insignificant, but it was clearly important for the congregation to be sure that the proper person was praying on their behalf, and having the "right" appearance seems to have been a concern of the halakhic codes.

Finding a candidate for *shaliach tzibbur* with the requisite knowledge, good character, and who was a good "fit" for the community may have been a big ask in a time when Jewish knowledge was in decline and the knowledge required for the job was on the rise. Jewish praxis understood that choices had to be made and priorities set. In a choice between ethics and scholarship, the prior took priority and scholarship was preferable to a pleasant singing voice. With the amount of trust one had to place in a *shatz*, congregations wanted someone who was honest and earnest in their prayer. That was the best way to ensure that their communal obligations would be fulfilled and that God would heed them.

A Conglomeration of Roles

As the medieval period progressed and the job of *shaliach tzibbur*/*hazzan* became a paid position in much of the Jewish world, the role accumulated new status and responsibilities. Indeed, many *hazzanim* were also rabbis, teachers, and ritual slaughterers due to the often pitifully low salary, which served to further blend all of these roles. Until the end of the middle ages, it was nearly impossible for a *hazzan* to ensure a fixed salary, but they were paid gratuities for certain services and received donations around the times of the festivals. [35]

While it was already the case that the *hazzan* was responsible for calling congregants to read a portion of the Torah, *hazzanim* began offering special blessings to these readers and to the sick in need of healing. These and other services they began to offer were often done for fees to supplement their meager income. The *hazzan*, along with praying on behalf of the community, also began to perform holiday rituals on behalf of the community, including public recitation of *Kiddush* (קידוש) and public Hanukkah candle-lightings. Likewise, the *hazzan*, familiar with less common modes of biblical chant, would have chanted Megillat Esther on Purim in both Sephardi and Ashkenazi communities. [36]

As the *hazzan* became more prominent, so too did their role as officiants or co-officiants in community life cycle events. At the beginning of a male Jewish life, *hazzanim* chanted the blessings at *b'rit milah* (ברית מילה) ceremonies. As couples sought to begin their Jewish family at a wedding, the *hazzan* would chant the blessings and read the *ketubah* (כתובה) aloud. In some Spanish communities, there were even rabbinic injunctions passed to

[35] Landman, 176
[36] Landman, Leo. "The Office of the Medieval 'Hazzan' (Continued)." *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 62, no. 4, 1972, pp. 246–276., 247-251

make a *hazzan*'s attendance mandatory at all weddings. And, by the 16th century, *hazzanim* would not only lead the funeral service, but would also eulogize the deceased.[37] After the funeral, the *hazzan* would spend time with the family in mourning. Because of the potential awkwardness of those who had no idea what to say to the mourners, the Geonim implemented a practice where the *hazzan* would "break the ice and open all conversations." More and more, the role of the *hazzan* became to communicate with God at the most important times in peoples' lives.[38]

The cantor's role also expanded beyond the walls of the synagogue, in more mundane ways, as they became the designated messenger of public announcements. At Shabbat services, the *hazzan* would provide information relevant to the community and announce legal resolutions passed by community leaders. In the public square, the *hazzan* would be required to declare excommunications so as to exert legal pressure on individuals refusing to comply with the rabbinic court. They would do the same for rabbinic bans, a somewhat precarious job, as in the case of a *hazzan* in Tzfat who was shoved off the *bimah* (בימה), the raised platform, and cast out of a synagogue in protest of a ban.[39]

The list of responsibilities of the *hazzan* only increased as communal needs arose. Many *hazzanim* served as witnesses for legal documents and some, as educated individuals, became the scribes of their towns. Some taught students and some "were like the travelling

[37] Ironically, the rabbis were scathingly critical of hazzanim for doing just this in the Greco-Roman period where it was seen as an adoption of the non-Jewish Greek practice of eulogium
[38] Landman, 256-259
[39] Landman, 255

troubadors who came and entertained by singing."[40] With the position of entertainer added to their docket, the *hazzan* had figuratively (and potentially actually) a great deal to juggle.

The role of *hazzan* expanded through the middle ages only to contract once again by the 18th century, taking on the role of a liturgical artist, rather than a communal functionary. This new freedom from bureaucratic functions and attainment of a steady salary allowed the *hazzan* to shine as a vocalist and to lift their congregations to new heights with the beauty of music. This came about because this was what the congregations asked of their *hazzanim*. The Jewish population of Eastern Europe, having ballooned over the preceding three centuries and culturally isolated from secular society, demanded their own kind of music. Because Jewish life was centred in the synagogue and the synagogue was now centered around the *hazzan*, the people placed this burden upon the already overworked *hazzan*. In larger communities, however, the *hazzan* would be relieved of their other duties to focus solely on the art of sacred music. With influence from Eastern European folk music Middle Eastern musical modes, these *hazzanim* created the Ashkenazi style of *hazzanut* (חזנות) still heard in many synagogues to this day.[41] The trend of the *hazzan* as an artist then spread to Western Europe, which allowed for the emergence of the great European cantor/composers such as Solomon Sulzer in Vienna and Louis Lewandowski in Berlin, who would introduce choral and instrumentally-accompanied music into the synagogue. This focus on musical beauty paved the way for the modern cantorate. It also opened up the role of *shaliach tzibbur*, newly disentangled from the office of *hazzan*.

[40] Landman, 263
[41] Idelsohn, 182

The Modern Shaliach Tzibbur

In our modern era, the lines blur once more, as anyone in a position of prayer leadership can be a *shaliach tzibbur*. Rabbis, cantors, and lay leaders can all fill this role. Indeed, the pool of possible *shlichei tzibbur* has expanded to include women with the ordination of Rabbi Regina Jonas in Germany in 1935, a feat that only took place once her rabbinic thesis proved the ordination of women halakhically appropriate. Although Rabbi Jonas' life was cut short in the Shoah and her story lost for many years, she was the first in a line of female ordinees by progressive Jewish institutions.[42] Rabbi Jonas would only be posthumously joined by her colleagues in the 1970's, when Rabbi Sally Priesand was ordained in 1972 and Cantor Barabara Ostfeld was ordained in 1975, both at the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion.

And so, we enter the modern and post-modern world with even more potential *shlichei* and *shlichot tzibbur* in the Jewish community. Their qualifications and duties will differ from congregation to congregation, but they remain the person at the front of the room, leading prayer for their communities.

[42] Sheridan, Sybil. "History of Women in the Rabbinate: A Case of Communal Amnesia" *Journal of the European Society of Women in Theological Research*, vol. 8, 2000, pp. 143–157., 143

Chapter 2 – In Their Own Words: Today's Shaliach Tzibbur

My delving into the history of the *shaliach tzibbur* actually came about in the service of another goal. As a current and future prayer leader in many settings (congregational, camp, rabbinical school), I am interested in learning about the current experiences of *shlichei tzibbur* in the liberal Jewish milieu. What inspired them to ascend the *bimah*? What matters most to them about prayer? How do they decide what best serves their community of worshippers? What do they consider important for a *shaliach tzibbur* to know, do, and be?

Methodology

To find answers, I reached out to my Jewish connections who offered advice on who would be best to talk to. Over the course of my research, I had the opportunity to interview 15 remarkable *shlichei tzibbur* whose pathways to their role were diverse and whose approaches to leading prayer can serve as models for the various ways of conducting meaningful worship.

The interviews ranged in length from 30 minutes to an hour. It became clear that many people who lead prayer love to talk about prayer which goes to show that the role of *shaliach tzibbur* is one that requires a great deal of reflection. Each interviewee was provided with some of the questions in advance. If something novel or intriguing came up, I would go 'off-script' and follow the conversation where it went. The set list of questions was the following:

- What does the term *shaliach*/*shlichat tzibbur* mean to you? How do you understand the two parts of the term, *shaliach* and *tzibbur*?

- How did you become a *shaliach*/*shlichat tzibbur*? When did you know that you were a *shaliach tzibbur*?
- In different communities that you have served, have the expectations for a *shaliach*/*shlichat tzibbur* differed? How have the specific needs of your community shaped how you lead prayer?
- How do you view the balance between performative and participatory aspects of prayer leading?
- What qualities are desirable for an exemplary *shaliach*/*shlichat tzibbur*?

The questions seemed to open up the conversation well and led to some wonderfully insightful conversations about what it means to lead prayer and to pray. What follows is key excerpts and a summary of what came out of those interviews.

Leadership and Humility

An essential quality of *shlichut tzibbur* is something that any leader needs, which is calm and confident control of a space in which people gather. The authority of the Temple priests of old and today's rabbis and cantors stems, partly, from other's perception that the leader knows what they are doing. They are the *shaliach*, messenger of the community, through whom prayer ascends. The *shaliach tzibbur* must keep a firm hand on the wheel because they have the map to the destination to which they believe the congregation should head. They deal with the details of moving prayer in the right direction and create an environment conducive to prayer, so that the community can best set free their spiritual yearnings.

On the other hand, a leader that is too self-involved and rigid in their leadership will overlook the prayer needs of the community. The *tzibbur* is just as important a part of leading worship as the leader, if not more important. Thus, an exemplary *shaliach tzibbur* will have the humility to create space for their community to pray.

Strong leadership and genuine humility are like the good and evil impulses. They oppose and are in tension with each other. At the same time, they must be in balance. Their balance is essential for effective prayer leadership. A community needs to feel supported and competently led, but not overpowered by a leader's charisma. A Talmudic saying suggests that a person should be soft and flexible like a reed, not strong like a cedar. In *shlichut tzibbur*, however, both of these qualities are necessary.

Rabbi Marisa James, Director of Social Justice Programming at Congregation Beit Simchat Torah in New York City shared a story with me illustrating this balance. At a Sukkot morning service which she was leading, Rabbi James' voice gave out at the end of the *Amidah* (עמידה). By the end of *Sim Shalom* (שים שלום), her voice was back, but one of the interns offered to lead *Hallel* (הלל) in her place. Rabbi James recounts wanting to say no because she was capable of doing it herself and wanted to. But she invited the intern to join her at the pulpit. Here is the reason for that in her words:

> Part of the reason that I said 'Yes, come up and join me for *Hallel*' was because, if I had that anxiety that my voice was going to conk out again, then I knew that everyone else in the community was even more anxious that my voice is going to conk out. Having a second person there who is known to the community and who

> is known to be totally competent, in that moment, makes the community better able to participate.[1]

Rabbi James shared her authority to remove an impediment in the way of the community's prayer. This is the essence of balancing the skills of the *shaliach* and the needs of the *tzibbur*. Here are the voices of other *shlichei tzibbur* with whom I spoke.

Shani Ben Or, a native of Jerusalem, is on track to become the first Israeli Reform ordained cantor and has served at United Jewish Congregation in Hong Kong and as a student cantor in New York.

> I think what people want all over the world from their *shaliach tzibbur* is somebody who is in control and has clarity, somebody who knows what they're doing, who you can rely on, and somebody that gives you space to express your spirituality.[2]

Rabbi Jonah Pesner is the director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, a role in which he regularly leads interfaith prayer moments.

> I think part of being a good *shaliach tzibbur* in those moments is knowing what it is to be held and be led by the leader who's building that prayerful community.[3]

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[1] James, Marisa. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 20 November 2019.
[2] Ben Or, Shani. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 26 August 2019.
[3] Pesner, Jonah. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 26 August 2019.

Rabbi Noa Kushner is the founder of The Kitchen, an intentional start-up Jewish community in San Francisco.

> I'm a servant. I'm a vessel. I'm a channel. But that means I have to use everything in my power that God has given me to try to connect people. So if I play myself down to the point where people feel like they're not being led. If they're worried about what's happening, then I've done a disservice. At the same time, if I make it all about me, then I've done a disservice. I'm a distraction. So I do my best to split the difference.[4]

Rabbi Nicki Greninger is the Director of Lifelong Learning at Temple Isaiah in Lafayette, California. She is in charge of the community's educational programming and wrote her own rabbinic thesis on t'filah education.

> [Leading prayer is] the balance of humility and competence. I think that a *shaliach tzibbur* that is too timid is not effective as a prayer leader. People feel unsettled by a prayer leader who is uncomfortable or nervous or doesn't have enough confidence. But the flipside is true for a *shaliach tzibbur* who has too much confidence, who needs a little more humility. That can be off-putting and doesn't lead to a good prayer experience.[5]

Cantor Lucy Fishbein serves as cantor at Congregation B'nai Jeshurun in Short Hills, New Jersey.

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[4] Kushner, Noa. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 29 August 2019.
[5] Greninger, Nicole. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 30 August 2019.

> As a clergy person you're striving towards a non-anxious presence because if your anxiety is manifesting in your leadership, it's distracting to your congregants.[6]

Cantor Benjie Schiller serves as cantor at Bet Am Shalom Synagogue in White Plains, New York and as Professor of Cantorial Arts at HUC-JIR in New York.

> I am the designated facilitator of the experience. Leadership of prayer to me means more facilitation than anything. It means holding the space. It means helping lead the journey but not overwhelming it with my presence as a leader or my decisions as a leader or my voice or my physical space or anything like that. It's really a collective experience, but you need somebody at the helm to direct it.[7]

None of the *shlichei tzibbur* interviewed identified themselves as the sole focus of a prayer experience. In one way or another, each identified themselves as someone who helps their people connect to prayer and this can only be done through the balance between leadership and humility. Having no presence at all, a leader leaves their community lost, without guidance. A leader with too much presence will take away opportunities for building individual relationships to prayer. As in many cases, the middle path leads to the strongest results.

[6] Fishbein, Lucy. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 29 August 2019.
[7] Schiller, Benjie. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 29 August 2019.

Connection to the Community

*Shlichei tzibbu*r must be willing to make space for the needs of their community, but before that, they must be aware of what those needs are. This necessitates a relationship between leader and congregation that extends beyond pulpit and pews. How can someone lead, listen to, and absorb the prayers of a community that they do not know?

In the same way that one learns best from a teacher with whom they have a strong relationship, meaningful prayer emerges when the worshipper experiences being understood by and trusting in the *shaliach tzibbur*. This means that the *shaliach tzibbur*'s conduct in their daily life and in their interactions with others has an impact on their ability to effectively lead a community in prayer. In the same vein, the *shaliach tzibbur* must make the effort to get to know their people and their spiritual needs in a given spiritual moment and overall. As my interviewees said:

Cantor Rosalie Will is the Director of Worship at the Union of Reform Judaism. She leads some of the largest prayer experiences in the United States in any given year, such as at the URJ Biennial.

> I try to approach this with the sense that, each time I'm in front of or with a community, my *shlichut* who is going to be dependent on who the community is and what they need. And if I don't know what the group needs, then my approach is to be very explicit and transparent about what my job is and what we're about to do together.[8]

[8] Will, Rosalie. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 3 October 2019.

Cantor Howard Stahl is the Senior Clergy Advisor at Congregation B'nai Jeshurun in Short Hills, New Jersey, where he also served as cantor for two decades.

> It's a tough world today. People come to shul for a variety of reasons. Sometimes they come for the *rugelach*, sometimes they come for meeting. Other people come to say *Kaddish* and sometimes they come to find a tranquil, peaceful moment in a world that sometimes seems very much off kilter. So as a *shaliach tzibbur*, rabbi or cantor or whoever needs to understand all these things and feed their souls and give them what sustains them and give them a sense of balance and grounding and safety, but authentically.[9]
>
> The biggest thing is just loving your community and your people enough to want to give them a gift and knowing that it's not always gonna happen for all of them. It's not always going to be the right thing for each person because it can't be the right thing for every single person all the time. But I think people feel that if you really want it to be a space for them, to get what they need out of being in their holy community, I think people feel that. Even if not every moment is doing what it needs to for them.[10]
>
> *~Rabbi Marisa James*

[9] Stahl, Howard. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 19 August 2019.
[10] James, Marisa. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 20 November 2019.

It's crucial to have a relationship off the *bimah*. The *bimah* doesn't work if you don't nourish relationships and other opportunities with congregants. It's all about trust and they can't connect to something bigger if they can't connect to you. I really want somebody to just be a *mensch*. It's really hard to find.

It's wonderful when you have these extraordinarily talented people in their craft, but I've also been very moved in *t'filah* from people that I know. I felt held because I knew who they were and there was an integrity to their *t'filah* because of who they are.[11]

~Shani Ben Or

When I think about *m'sader kedushin*, someone who's doing a wedding, that literally means the arranger of holiness and I think of the *shaliach* in the same way: your sense for the *kahal* and your sense to connect the *kahal* to heaven.[12]

~Rabbi Noa Kushner

[Prayer] can be done by a lay person, it can be done by a cantor, but it just has to bring people into the space to name what is happening in this moment. It's a political moment. It's a community moment. Let's make that breathe and live through liturgy. And the liturgy could be rooted in some ancient texts. It could be

[11] Ben Or, Shani. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 26 August 2019.
[12] Kushner, Noa. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 29 August 2019.

an ancient melody, but it has to be real enough for people where their eyes close, they breathe, they sing the amen.[13]

~Rabbi Jonah Pesner

It's not just keeping my ear to the ground about what's going on in the community, but also experiencing life with the community, being a member of the community. My decisions are all based on my relationship with the community, my sense of the community.[14]

~Cantor Benjie Schiller

As our wise teachers above state, excellent prayer leading emerges from a relationship with a community. They must be a part of their community, living among and within it. If there are simchas or tragedies, a *shaliach tzibbur* needs to know what happened and respond to fulfill communal needs that arise from them. A person can lead prayer in any community, but it will not resonate as strongly as when the *shatz* is a part of it all.

[13] Pesner, Jonah. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 26 August 2019.

[14] Schiller, Benjie. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 29 August 2019.

Empathy

Empathy in the context of prayer leadership means feeling what people in the room are feeling and having the desire and ability to respond to those feelings. This is distinct from knowing and connecting with your community. A community is made up of people and the same person might have completely different prayer needs depending on the day, events in their life, the global situation, the weather, their health, and so on.

Empathy is a heart to heart interaction. It means looking out at a community and seeing each person as an individual and "reading" them. It requires what is commonly called emotional intelligence. Being an empathetic *shaliach tzibbur* also means listening to the heartbeat of the community in a given moment. Who is singing loudly and who's holding back? Who's stopped paying attention and turned to their phone or their knitting and who's on the edge of their seat? Who needs a moment of peace to quiet their busy heart and who needs a moment of joy to lift their downtrodden spirit? These are the words of *shlichei tzibbur* who know the feelings of their people:

Hazzanit Tara Abrams has served as soloist and hazzanit at Temple Har Zion in Thornhill, Ontario for two decades.

> What I have learned is that what I do is perceived differently by different people. A lot of it depends upon their baggage: their background, their Jewish baggage, their needs, their ability to pray on their own which extends to their ability to participate or maybe to have a roadblock in the way.[15]

[15] Abrams, Tara. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 5 November 2019.

Cantor Ellen Dreskin is the Coordinator of the Cantorial Certification Program at the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music, HUC-JIR New York. She has taught about Jewish music and prayer at a number of Reform institutions, programs, and synagogues.

> I have a responsibility to open as many doors as I can within a very short period of time without giving anyone what call spiritual whiplash. There's a flow to it. But it really is a craft and it is a practice.[16]
>
> The moments of communal singing I think are really the key things for me. Because they helped me know that we're together. They help me know that something powerful is happening when people, even the ones who I know are self conscious about their voice or self conscious about their Hebrew, are singing. They've just let go of their insecurity because they're part of this thing that's happening. It's more powerful to be participating in that moment of community. We never know what other people around us need on a given *Shabbat*, but we know that we're all coming here seeking Holy community and whether that's to be joyful together or to mourn together or draw strength from each other. How do you create those moments of people understanding that the thing that I'm experiencing is not what the next person is experiencing? And the thing that I'm experiencing is really profound and real.[17]
>
> *~Rabbi Marisa James*

[16] Dreskin, Ellen. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 30 August 2019.
[17] James, Marisa. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 20 November 2019.

A lot of people come in scared because they have no experience praying because they're not Jewish because they don't believe in God and they think that they're going to be kicked out. You know, they, they're afraid to be free or they're afraid to be vulnerable. They've never tried to do anything like that. They're afraid of organized religion. Maybe they have deep feelings there. They don't want to access. There's a lot of reasons to be afraid.[18]

~Rabbi Noa Kushner

The primary goal in prayer leading is to enable the congregation to pray and do the work of prayer. The work of prayer can be seen in many ways. But one of my responsibilities as a leader of prayer is to set the ambiance, lay the groundwork, provide the space, the mood, in sound and in time for there to be a relationship for each person with their own self, with God, with the community in whatever ways that occasion calls for.[19]

~Cantor Benjie Schiller

There's listening with your ears and listening with your heart. How's the group breathing? Where's the group yearning to go? How can I identify what a group needs at this moment that might not be what I need, but I can help facilitate? So [it takes] a real sense of listening I might've had a plan, you can throw it all out. It might not really matter because the group that I thought was going to show up on

[18] Kushner, Noa. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 29 August 2019.
[19] Schiller, Benjie. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 29 August 2019.

> Friday night isn't the group that showed up. And that, I think, takes listening in a way that many of us aren't prepared to do. How can we still do our work and have it feel like it matters?[20]
>
> *~Cantor Rosalie Will*

With a 'listening heart' and an understanding of human feeling in general, a *shaliach tzibbur* can respond to their kahal in the moment and meet the emotional needs of the people in the room. Relationships are very often tied up with feeling and prayer is a chance to explore relationship with one's self, one's community, and God. Being in tune with those feelings and the individuals in the room can help a *shatz* create a safe space where everyone involved can better nurture those relationships.

Knowledge of Liturgy

Emotional intelligence helps a *shaliach tzibbur* take the pulse of their community and synchronize with them, but a service has an order over and above the community. *Kavanah* (כונה), prayerful intention, is balanced out by *keva*, the fixed liturgy of the Jewish worship service. Confidence and competence in Jewish prayer in all of its forms cannot be overlooked. A *shaliach tzibbur* can never know too much.

The liturgy is designed to bring a community on an emotional and spiritual journey, moving through moments of praise, gratitude, and sense of obligation. Throughout the year, liturgical insertions and different modes or melodies of prayer guide the community through the Jewish calendrical cycle. Knowledge of liturgy, its meaning, and choreography is the framework within which a *shaliach tzibbur* can highlight parts of the service that they believe

[20] Will, Rosalie. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 3 October 2019.

will best speak to their community. They can improvise a tune or draw out a particular Hebrew word to great effect. The more a *shaliach tzibbur* knows, the more creative they are able to be. This is what immensely skillful *shlichei tzibbur* told me:

Rabbi Jessica Kate Meyer is currently serving as rabbi/hazzan at The Kitchen in San Francisco. In the past, she served as a rabbi at Romemu in New York City.

> [Prayer] can't be totally predictable. You can't know exactly what's going to happen next or else it's not a live. So part of our tradition of *nusach* is that there's a container that's familiar, but the music of the prayer itself was improvised. And now we've gotten to a certain rhythm where *nusach* is something that is predictable and done the same everywhere. There has to be both the safety of the container that feels familiar and there also has to be an unexpected element so we don't know exactly what's going to happen next. Though the liturgy is often fixed, I do like to improvise there, but to bring in the melody that's lifting the text so it's not exactly the same every time, so there's something that hits your ear differently and then makes you look at the word and say, 'Oh my gosh, here's what I'm actually saying.'[21]
>
> Style never goes out of fashion. Style, never changes. Style is timeless. So as a *shaliach tzibbur*, I think we have to be more concerned with style than fashion. So what does that mean? Do you simply say we're only going to do what was done by my great grandfather or what was done in Eastern Europe? No. On the other

[21] Meyer, Jessica. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 20 November 2019.

hand, there has to be some foundation and for a *shaliach tzibbur* who's authentic, you have to be very well conscious of *nusach* and what is timeless.
Tradition should not shackle you. It should not mire you in the mud, but it should give you something strong to stand on or something like a trampoline. If you bounce on the trampoline, it'll launch you forward. The tradition has to be sustainable.[22]

~Cantor Howard Stahl

The melody that one puts behind liturgical words says something about the words, which is why you can have a gazillion melodies to one line from liturgy or one prayer and the music will highlight different words, will take pauses in different places to give the listener time to reflect, or be upbeat, or mellow, or sad. This is all commentary on the words. That's music as *midrash* and, of course, music as theology.[23]

~Cantor Benjie Schiller

The *shaliach tzibbur*'s role is to be thoughtful and intentional about how to create a prayer experience that is, you know, best for that community, for that moment in time, etc. You have to know the prayers or whatever it is that you're going to be leading. If you are uncomfortable with the thing that you're leading, that will come through in your leadership. That to me feels like a real baseline. I think the

[22] Stahl, Howard. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 19 August 2019.
[23] Schiller, Benjie. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 29 August 2019.

essence of a really effective *shaliach tzibbur* is somebody who knows the thing well enough that you can both lead and do it yourself.[24]

~Rabbi Nicki Greninger

While many prior sayings of these *shlichei tzibbur* have indicated that a person's character is a priority, one cannot neglect practical knowledge of prayer. Anyone with good intentions and a relationship to their community can stand in front of a *kehillah* (קהילה), but that will only get them so far. Deep knowledge of prayer allows the leader to engage with liturgy in ways that can enhance the prayer experience of the community. They can highlight certain aspects of certain prayers or offer an explanation or personal prayer to set an intention for the *kahal*. Aside from that, as Rabbi Greninger notes, the anxiety of a novice *shatz* can spread and become an obstacle to the individual pray-er. Familiarity with the *siddur* is, thus, essential.

Prayer and Performance

Many *shlichei tzibbur* (particularly cantors) come from a performance background. As expressive people in touch with their emotions, they are drawn to the arts. They often bring a proclivity for performance, musical or otherwise, into their *bimah* presence. But these same people often know best the distinctions between performance and leading prayer. A musician works to perform their piece perfectly for the audience's enjoyment, but a *shaliach tzibbur* plays a different role. They have to be aware of and responsive to their community.

[24] Greninger, Nicole. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 30 August 2019.

They must focus on the performance of prayers and liturgical music, but primarily to prevent errors from distracting participants.

Here, there needs to be a balance between moments of musical majesty and moments of communal singing. Participants in a prayer experience come for different reasons. Leaving aside the fact that some just come to schmooze at the *oneg* (עונג), there are both those who connect by raising their voice along with the *kahal* and those who want to be lifted up by listening to something beautiful. To wit:

> By the time I made it to [my first] Yom Kippur, I was fasting and I was leading all the services on my own with a rabbi and I didn't have a voice anymore. I was totally tired and I think I understood, by the time *n'ilah* came, that it's not about singing perfectly. If I had finished [my first] Yom Kippur with full voice, then I probably wasn't doing my job. I, probably, as a *shlichat tzibbur* wasn't there with the people in a very spiritually intense engagement. I probably wasn't fasting… All of a sudden understood the difference between the performing arts and being a *shlichat tzibbur*.
>
> The performance aspect is working on the mechanics of [a service] beforehand. All the communication, all the practicing and all the thinking and all that stuff at the end is so that when you're up there, there is a release. You let go. You actually are willing to change everything that you [prepared]...this is where it's very different than, and not performative at all. All that practicing is so you'll be able

sometimes to make crucial changes on the spot that you'll be able to engage with with your community.[25]

~Shani Ben Or

If they experienced [a service] as a show they were watching, instead of an experience they were participating in, we didn't do enough to invite them into the prayer experience. And so, for me, the difference between when I am performing something vs when I am leading a moment of prayer is that I'm not seeking the applause of the congregation. Do I want to sound good? Absolutely. Do I want to make sure its well-polished? Sure. If you are not vocally prepped, if you're not musically polished, that is a distraction from the experience because the cracks in the pavement are showing. For me, there is a performative aspect to any prayer leadership. My friend and colleague, Rabbi Daniel Reisser, once said, it is a delicate balance between polishing your prayer so it can be prayerful and polishing yourself right out of the prayer experience. There has to be an organic quality to it but it has to be well oiled enough that the logistics do not distract your congregation from being able to immerse themselves in prayer.[26]

~Cantor Lucy Fishbein

I think the [*shaliach tzibbur*] has to care about aesthetics and what moves people and what inspires people. Artistry and drama. All of that really does matter in

[25] Ben Or, Shani. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 26 August 2019.
[26] Fishbein, Lucy. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 29 August 2019.

prayer. Storytelling really matters in prayer. I think a great prayer does tell a story. I think there's a reason you have rehearsals. There's spontaneous prayer on one end of the spectrum, which really matters, but I think practice makes perfect. And every student practicing spontaneous prayer matters along with rehearsing other moments that are more constructed moments of prayerfulness to create aesthetic ritual drama.[27]

~Rabbi Jonah Pesner

I'm performing the role of rabbi. In our day-to-day, everything has an element of performing different roles. So there is something there, but it's not performance in the sense of artifice. There's a sense that my role is to lead, so I am performing that role the best I can. Not putting on a show, I'm just like performing… and in each context it's, it's different. I think when you're leading, you're putting out bigger energy than if you were just davening by yourself.[28]

~Rabbi Jessica Kate Meyer

As one can see from these selected quotes, there are different ways to define performance, but it is clear to the best *shlichei tzibbur* that leading prayer is not about putting on a show. There are technical and aesthetic aspects that, when prepared and executed well, can enhance a prayer experience, but a beautiful voice cannot be the sole focus.

[27] Pesner, Jonah. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 26 August 2019.
[28] Meyer, Jessica. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 20 November 2019.

Vision

The potential power of prayer is immense. A *shaliach tzibbur* has to tap into all that they know about prayer, about their community, and about themselves to manifest that power. They need to understand what prayer is for and to reach to attain what it can be and what it can do for people. The development of that prayer vision is best done in tandem with the community being led:

> I think [leading prayer] is very teachable, that there are very concrete tools and that everybody is gonna take those tools as a *shaliach tzibbur* and go build things with them. I think what makes a rabbi or a cantor, in worship, a match for a congregation is whether or not the congregation wants to be in what they're building. You can be building something beautiful and it's just not where a congregation is comfortable. It doesn't mean you're bad. Or you might need to say, I can use the same tools and build what you want me to build.
> *~Cantor Ellen Dreskin*[29]

> How can our prayer model who we are? The clergy cannot decide that in a vacuum. Clergy come and go, but also, it's not their prayer. It's the community's prayer, but we think we know what people want. Unless we're talking about it and

[29] Dreskin, Ellen. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 30 August 2019.

> really creating a vision together, I don't see how really successful worship can really be in the fullness of it.[30]
>
> *~Cantor Rosalie Will*

Cantor Alane Katzew is the Director of Pastoral Care at Cedar Village Senior Living Community in Mason, Ohio. In the past, she has served as Director of Music Programming at the URJ and as a congregational cantor and music director.

> The term *shaliach tzibbur* means representative of the public. You're sent to be the representative. I'm going to play with the word and contrast it to *hazzan*, which is *hazon*. Vision. The *shaliach tzibbur* is the one who carries forward the vision. Somebody else may make it, but they're the representative that has to bring it forward and being the voice that helps steer. If you've ever been in a place where there's no one voice that's taken the lead, it can get pretty messy.[31]

In tandem, a *shaliach tzibbur* and a congregation or group of pray-ers can build a prayer space that moves and challenges people. This is not something that the prayer leader should undertake on their own. They need to listen to the needs of their community, both those spoken and unspoken and create a house of prayer that everyone can dwell in, feeling safe enough to explore the vulnerable parts of themselves.

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[30] Will, Rosalie. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 3 October 2019.
[31] Katzew, Alane. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 23 August 2019.

Love of Prayer

Very few people would want to eat at a restaurant where the chef did not enjoy their own cooking. The same is true of prayer. Helping others to pray not only requires the ability to pray one's self, but a deep and earnest love of praying. There are many paths that can lead a person to fall in love with prayer. It can begin with a love of music or poetry, of the *siddur*, of time spent in community, or of a particular prayer environment like youth group or camp. For some, this leads to a life on the *bimah* as a Jewish professional or a lay leader, sharing that love of prayer and, God-willing, inspiring others to embrace prayer in turn. This is a quality that is hard to fake and one that is experienced more profoundly by a congregation than any other. Here are some love letters to prayer:

> There's something about the poetry of the liturgy and over time, the truths that I find in the words have always been attractive to me. The human lessons and yearnings and things like that. Really, since I've been in high school, I've been inspired by and connected to the relevance of worship in somebody's life...
> I think that the tool opens the words and the worshipper...Ultimately, some of that will open people to the people around them. Ideally, for me, some of it will open my heart to myself. Some of it will open me in curiosity to what's bigger, to God. Maybe the melodies that we use are like yoga poses. They strengthen different spiritual muscles. They have us twist in ways we haven't thought we could twist

before. Some of the poses are meant to strengthen different parts of us and I'd say that the music in *tefillah* might be there to open different parts of us.[32]

~Cantor Ellen Dreskin

There's a lot of moving parts. I think I'm better able to pray when everyone is singing along with me. I think those are the moments when I know that I'm able to pray because then I'm not focused on those other things, like wondering why they're not singing or if I've chosen the wrong melody or the wrong key or my voice is a little off. I'm freed up because they're carrying part of that load too.[33]

~Hazzanit Tara Abrams

One [way to be a great *shaliach tzibbur]* is to have a heart of prayer, to be immersed in prayer, to love prayer, to work on prayer, to have that as central in their lives, a relationship to prayer, to the sacred in however that manifests. That's one of the many reasons we have a daily service in all the campuses [of HUC-JIR]. It's not just to learn the techniques. It's actually also to pray everyday to receive, not just give, to experience, to grow the muscle of prayer and develop the instinctive sense of one's relationship to the liturgy, one's relationship to God, one's relationship to this form, this medium.[34]

~Cantor Benjie Schiller

[32] Dreskin, Ellen. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 30 August 2019.
[33] Abrams, Tara. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 5 November 2019.
[34] Schiller, Benjie. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 29 August 2019.

The most invigorating part of interviewing exceptional *schlichei tzibbur* is hearing the way that they talk about prayer, the love and care that overflow through their voices. These are cases where profound experience with and learning of prayer leads, almost inevitably, to love of prayer. Indeed, leading prayer depends heavily on relationship – with God, with community, with one's self – and a relationship with prayer is necessary. The *shaliach tzibbur* needs to immerse themselves in prayer, to be curious about prayer, to relish experimenting and failing and trying again. Most importantly, they must pray as they lead prayer, for how could one ask others to pray when they are not?

Chapter 3 - Preparing Tomorrow's Shlichei Tzibbur

In this chapter, I will make a case that seems counter-intuitive. Our society's understanding of leadership often suggests that success in leadership comes from comfort wielding authority, from expertise, from technical knowledge and the skills to implement it. In prayer leadership, skill and learning have their place, but the rabbis before us set out a different kind of hierarchy, and I agree with it: that the life, ethics, and humanity of a person are the single most important quality for an exemplary *shaliach tzibbur*, followed by their knowledge and literacy, and then by the third of the triad, their performance and skill. With this order in mind, let us explore how a person can work to become a leader of prayer.

Journeys of *Shlichei Tzibbur*

Prayer is more than words. It is s more than sitting in a room and singing or listening. It is a force and a feeling, an experience which is powerful and mysterious . . . when it works. It does not always work, though, and it certainly does not happen on its own. People coming

away from a truly prayerful service can feel any number of things: joyful, contented, awed, hopeful, and nourished, to name a few. Prayer can intellectually and spiritually challenge a person, help them find a sense of connection to community, or even elicit the important, deep, and sometimes painful feelings which need to be brought out. None of this could happen without *shlichei tzibbur*, and *shlichei tzibbur* are forged out of the prayer experiences and relationships that move and change them.

The spiritual leaders who shared their stories so generously with me became *shlichei tzibbur* in their own way, but their stories resonate with one another's and with my own. Nobody transformed into a prayer leader by clicking their heels together or by sitting alone in a room with a prayer book. They were inspired by rabbis, cantors, songleaders, teachers, youth group advisors, counselors, family, and lay leaders. Over a period of time, they experienced something in prayer that sparked an overwhelming love of the form. Only a few could point to a singular moment when they realized what they wanted to be. For most, growth as a prayer leader was a process, taking time and reflection, trial and error.

Cantor Benjie Schiller, for example, found her passion for prayer through her love of music. She grew up singing in religious school and youth group, and eventually learned to be a songleader at Kutz Camp, the URJ's incubator for teen leadership. In the course of her formal musical training, she realized that she was not studying music "to become a greater musician. It was really to touch people's lives and be part of a community." That began her cantorial training which brought her to where she is now, teaching the next generation of *shlichei tzibbur*.[35]

[35]Schiller, Benjie. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 29 August 2019.

Student Cantor Shani Ben Or grew up at Kol HaNeshama, a widely-known Jewish community in Jerusalem, where there was an unusually strong current of talented lay leadership. While studying at a music academy and travelling the world with a choir, she was concurrently "thrown onto the bimah as a teenager." After her Israeli army service, she was invited to serve as cantorial soloist in Hong Kong, another two-year tour. Her integration into her synagogue community gave her the knowledge to lead prayer without formal training, and her experience leading in an unfamiliar place gave her unique insight into leadership of a prayer community. After studying at HUC-JIR New York and Jerusalem, she will soon be ordained as the first Israeli Reform cantor.[36]

Rabbi Marisa James, a reconstructionist rabbi, grew up in Connecticut at a Conservative synagogue with an ultra-Orthodox ordained rabbi, who took religious school classes to visit his community in Brooklyn. At the same time, she attended Reform services at Yale University with her grandmother. Within the span of her own college experience, Rabbi James led services at Hillel, but pursued a degree in English literature, planning to teach. After stints at managing a bookstore and being a Wall Street broker, she found her way to Congregation Beit Simchat Torah in Manhattan. There, the music director suggested she pursue the cantorate. After a year of the cantorial program at Jewish Theological Seminary, James instead chose to become a rabbi through the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. She leads services at CBST and continues to co-lead High Holy Day services at her family's synagogue in Connecticut with their rabbi.[37]

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[36] Ben Or, Shani. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 26 August 2019.

[37] James, Marisa. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 20 November 2019.

Hazzanit Tara Abrams was raised at Temple Har Zion in Thornhill, Ontario, where her family had been members since the year it was formed. Having a love of music and Jewish music in particular nurtured by her time at Goldman Union Camping Institute (GUCI), a Reform Jewish summer camp in Zionsville, Indiana, she studied music at both the University of Toronto and the Royal Conservatory of Music. Once a year, Abrams has been asked to lead the Sisterhood service at Har Zion and, when the congregation's previous soloist left the position, the rabbi asked her to cover services and lifecycle events "here and there." When the rabbi retired, she began to take on weddings and, after the painful loss of a few members of the community in quick succession, she taught herself what she needed in order to officiate at funerals. In her words, "It was after that that I decided I can't do this to my congregants. I can't not [sic] be there at the time that they are the most vulnerable." She intensively studied Biblical Hebrew, cantillation, liturgy, and anything else she needed to know, until inevitably falling into a full-time role at Har Zion. It was not the plan, but it happened, and it felt like *basheirt* (באשערט).[38,39]

These spiritual biographies diverge wildly yet contain common threads of connection to mentors, community, music, liturgy, and worship experience. Each individual was nurtured by one or more Jewish venues which gave them the space and resources to learn to lead prayer. As I said earlier, they were able to cultivate their own talents, acquire significant bodies of knowledge, and become the kind of person worthy of leading a community in worship. Indeed, while our job descriptions often define what we do and know, the most important part of these journeys is the shaping of character and the relationships that helped

[38] A Yiddish word connoting a fateful match, and also any event that seems 'meant to be'.
[39] Abrams, Tara. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 5 November 2019.

that process along. How amazingly prescient that such a clearly different and contemporary world produces exactly the qualities that the rabbis decreed as essential for *shlichei tzibbur*. Each of these individuals, through participation in community and relationship, grew into themselves. Growing is part of what makes us human and prayer is a deeply human thing.

Know, Do, and Be

What does a *shaliach tzibbur* need to know? What does a *shaliach tzibbur* need to do? Who does a *shaliach tzibbur* need to be? These are the questions that this section will seek to answer and these questions would be unanswerable for me without the hours of engaging conversations that I was privileged to have with experienced, beloved, self-admitted *shlichei tzibbur*.

What does a shaliach tzibbur need to know?

Effective prayer experiences require the leader to know a great deal. On the most basic level, a *shaliach tzibbur* needs to know the order of the service on a given day or at a given time and the meanings of the prayers involved. They need to be aware of the calendar and the liturgical additions or subtractions it requires. They must understand the minhag of the community they lead. This type of knowledge is concrete in that it gives a leader access to the basic building blocks of a service. With those, they can lead an acceptable service.

But they also need to know more: human nature, the needs and wants of the individuals who comprise their community, how to read a room and respond to what they pick up on. There is no way to turn this kind of knowledge into a checklist. It is acquired through experience in leading prayer and through relationships with living, breathing human beings.

As well, the events of the world have an impact on what goes on in a prayer space. When important events, be they joyous or heartbreaking, are transpiring, those who lead prayer need to bring those into the service environment so that the worshippers can interact authentically with the prayers. All Jews are human and, as much as we might want to, it is impossible to leave the burdens and blessings of the world at the synagogue door. The sanctuary walls are not opaque barriers to outside events, nor is the *shaliach tzibbur* an automaton. They are of the world. They are moved and shaken by the ebb and flow of life as much as those they lead. Indeed, *shlichei tzibbur* are obligated to be well-informed and anticipate how others will respond to what happens in the world. There is a lot to know, but it starts with reading the newspaper every morning or watching the news.

What does a shaliach tzibbur need to do?

As for what *shlichei tzibbur* do, that begins before they ever sidle up to a lectern. They must first take their knowledge and build a service, but not every service is going to be right for any group or any time. There are no cookie-cutter scenarios. Every Shabbat, holiday, weekday *minyan* (מנין) is different, with different demands and different or unexpected attendees. A truly great prayer experience requires intense planning, working, and re-working. (Sometimes the situation demands that one make use of prior service plans when asked to lead worship unexpectedly.) A *shaliach tzibbur* needs to pay close attention to transitions between prayers in order to create a sense of flow. They need to be aware of the arc of the service as it lifts the community to the heights of shared sacred experience, and then gently brings them back down to Earth, changed for having prayed.

They need to strike the right balance of music and reading, Hebrew and English, joyful noise and silence in clever combinations, because everyone prays differently. There should be at least one moment that speaks to each of the various kinds of pray-ers in the *tzibbur*, in the same way that one varies a lesson plan to meet the needs of visual, kinesthetic and other kinds of learners. Likewise, one needs to consider what people in the community know Jewishly, and how they feel about what they know. Certainly, first-time attendees at a service might be scared because they have no prayer experience, because they feel their Hebrew is not up to snuff, because they don't think they believe in God, or they feel like a 'bad Jew.' A prayer service can challenge people, but it should not make people feel stupid and it should not intensify their insecurities about their own Judaism. Music and readings should bring people in, not shut them out. Both during and outside of a service, there should be resources available to those who want to learn to pray better--transliterations, pamphlets, recordings, people they can sit next to for support.

The *shaliach tzibbur* needs to work with their team, if they have one, to figure out who's doing what and how to smoothly hand off parts of a service to one another. They need to print out a service outline or pencil notes in their prayer books or fill it with sticky notes. A missed transition can throw everyone off track, *shlichim* and *tzibbur* alike. At the same time, a quick and graceful recovery can save the day. This is the *takhles* (תכלס) work: preparing the service as much as possible, building a strong framework with wiggle room for creativity and happenstance. One can improvise, but organization and consistency are necessary to keep the leader and community feeling safe and secure.

One also has to think longer term, placing each service in the context of a worship community's past and future services, and ensuring that each service meets their larger

worship goals. What musical choices have been leaned on too much in recent prayer experiences? What new music should be introduced? What Hebrew prayers do the leadership want to teach, and what new and exciting prayer insights do they want to instill? Services are not lessons, but their content helps the community develop the prayer skills and the knowledge that they need to better participate in a service (or to follow along with a service) and perhaps become *shlichei tzibbur* themselves.

Before services start, *shlichei tzibbur* need to be in control of their prayer environment, creating a space for effective prayer and removing stumbling blocks. The prayer-space itself is almost a participant in a service and has an immeasurable impact on the experience as a whole. In an enormous sanctuary with a steep bimah and high stairs, the physical distance between the *shaliach tzibbur* and the kahal might hinder communication; then again, just such a space could also create a great sense of majesty and enhance sound as voices echo through and around the room. A smaller prayer space might allow the *shaliach tzibbur* to more easily invite the community to join them in singing, reading, and reciting, offering a more intimate, cozy, or *hamische* experience.

There are endless considerations because there are near-infinite variables. Arrangement of chairs or seating can change how the community interacts. Are they in rows facing forward? Are they in a circle facing each other? Is the *shaliach tzibbur* at the front of the room or in the middle? Is there a way to make a smaller group of people comfortable within a larger space by defining a smaller prayer area? Will anyone ever sit in the first row? (No, unless they arrive late and there is nowhere else to sit.) Seating can make them aware of who else is in the room in different ways.

On the subject of technical elements, even seemingly simple things that we take for granted can detract or enhance a prayer experience. Soft lighting can create pleasant ambiance but makes it harder to see the *siddur*. A powerful sound system might make proceedings too loud for some, but not using a microphone could exclude participants with hearing impairment. Air conditioning and heating are critical comfort factors that congregants will not fail to notice. They may not remember the *d'var Torah*, but they will certainly remember that they had to put on a sweater. The *shaliach tzibbur* should never underestimate what might affect how the service is experienced.

Apart from improvisation during a service, a *shaliach tzibbur* may need to manage the unexpected. A few examples are shrieking microphone feedback, a malfunctioning slideshow, a screaming baby. These need to be handled with grace and humour. When the *shaliach tzibbur* makes a good save, the service can continue and flow can be restored. Not acknowledging something challenging that everyone is experiencing can make a prayer leader seem out of touch or unapproachable. Conversely, too big of a reaction will cause a congregation to lose confidence in the leader. With a deft touch, handling a mishap can become a humanizing moment of connection.

Leading prayer is also about more than logistics. It is impossible here to articulate every possible thing that gets done in a service, but some important qualities of a good service are as follows.

Each piece of a service should feel like part of a whole, guiding participants through a journey, however brief. There should be spiritual movement of tone and emotion throughout, so that the service does not stagnate or get stale. Physical movement can also fulfill the same purpose. Spaces within the service should be deliberate. A long gap between prayers can

make people wonder what's going on or whether they've missed something. Too short of a gap means that people will not have time to turn the pages, a common problem. Hebrew and English need to each be read at the right pace, so no one gets lost or frustrated. The leader should give clear instructions and directions, but too many directives will disrupt the fluidity of the service.

Musical pieces should be in harmony with one another without repetitiveness or jarring changes in speed. *Shlichei tzibbur* should pick keys that are singable with most vocal ranges. If a team is leading, they should sing in the same key, if possible. The service should include a balance of familiar and new music. Do not sing too many different 'lai lai' songs in the same service! This can cause service dysfunction which occurs when a congregation launches into what they think the *shaliach tzibbur* is doing, disrupting the musical menu. Cantor Alane Katzew shared this story of one her mentors to demonstrate this:

> Lasar Weiner was a Yiddishist, a composer, and arranger. He was the director of music at Central Synagogue in New York City and he had just written the Bloch sacred service, which is thought by many to be the most beautiful of settings of the liturgy in that kind of professionalized way. And so he spoke to the community and said, 'We're going to do this from beginning to end.' And they did . . . and everyone hated it! Absolutely hated it. And of course he was told not to do it again, but Lazar Weiner was so convinced that this is what they needed to do, that he'd made a plan which took a year. Every month he would introduce a single piece from the service and by the end of the year, each piece had been introduced in a way that was much more holistic. And at the end of the year, he staged the whole thing beginning to end again. And this time it was to great

acclaim.[40]

With the proper time and technique, a *shaliach tzibbur* can introduce almost any music or text they think would be of value to the community. A community may be resistant to seismic shifts, but bringing in changes gradually, as small experiments, can help something new become a timeless classic.

Once you remove everything that gets in the way, that's the moment a *shaliach tzibbur* can make prayer happen, but, once the band strikes up, they're presented with a whole new set of moving parts. A praying community is made up of individuals, coming to the sanctuary with their own experiences, expectations, and obstacles to prayer. The *shaliach tzibbur* needs to see and know the faces of the people in the room and be in the moment with them. As Student Cantor Shani Ben Or suggests, "All that practicing is so you'll be able sometimes to make crucial changes on the spot so you'll be able to engage with your community."[41] A *shaliach tzibbur* has to be a keen observer and empath. Looking around the room, they need to pick up on who's with them. That will help them determine what is working and what is not working. It is also valuable to be "extraordinarily sensitive to energy" and spiritual connection. If the leader, theirself, is not connecting to the prayer, if they're bored or frustrated or tired, something needs to be adjusted.[42]

When leading a service on their own, a *shaliach tzibbur* has a fully stocked toolkit of changes they can make on the fly. They can keep a song going a little bit longer than planned

[40] Katzew, Alane. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 23 August 2019.
[41] Ben Or, Shani. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 26 August 2019.
[42] Ben Or, Shani. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 26 August 2019.

or transition into another melody of the same prayer. With regards to *nusach* (נוסח) or liturgical chant, a *shaliach tzibbur* can improvise a tune within a musical mode for a given prayer to bring in an unexpected element or highlight an important phrase. They could compose an impromptu *kavanah* or *iyyun* (עיון), a personal prayer or an intention for a prayer. They could even ask a question to start a conversation with the *kahal*. They can ask everyone to take a breath or take an extra moment of silence. These are all fairly subtle changes, but they even can add or remove prayers from the service, a delicate science to those who care about maintaining the integrity of service rubrics. Making any of these changes requires both a profound, internalized understanding of the service and responsiveness to the people in the room. To me, the ability to think on the fly in a service setting seems to be one of the dividing lines between good and great *shlichei tzibbur*.

Who does a shaliach tzibbur need to be?

The overriding insight from both my exploration of the history of *shlichut tzibbur* and interviews with *shlichei tzibbur* from across North America and Israel is that the role of *shaliach tzibbur* is not just a part that you play. It is not merely about what you know and do. It is someone you become, because character is the *ikar* (עיקר), the essence, of living as a *shaliach tzibbur*. A *shaliach tzibbur* is something that a person lives on and off the bimah, when they prepare and practice for services, when they spend time with their family, when they pick up a coffee at Starbucks. This is both for the sake of the *shaliach tzibbur* and the community. What I mean by that is that *shaliach tzibbur* needs to embody a life of prayer in order to guide moments of prayer and for the *kahal*, the *shaliach tzibbur* needs to be someone they easily trust in order to be guided.

Becoming

We now know how some *shlichei tzibbur* found their way to the role, and we know what a person needs to know and do to be an effective *shaliach tzibbur*. But how do we become one? Knowledge is fairly straightforward to attain from mentors, self-motivated study or a formal educational or certification program. Skill comes primarily from experience, feedback, and reflection. Becoming the person you need to be, to be a *shaliach tzibbur*, is more complicated. How do we shape who we are in intentional ways? I humbly offer the following roadmap:

- *Leadership* - the ability to hold a room and guide the people in it.
- *Humility* - the courage to hold back and make space.
- *Empathy* - sensitivity to feelings, both your own and others'.
- *Love of Prayer* - a heart immersed in prayer and a passion for sharing it.
- *Menschlecheit* - just be a good person!

Leadership

People love to talk, and a *shaliach tzibbur* needs to get people to stop talking to each other and start talking to God. They need to command attention, but a particular kind of attention. This is not attention to the one who's leading, but to the work of prayer. As in days old, the *shaliach tzibbur*, as exquisitely expressed by Rabbi Jan Katzew is the "focal, vocal"

person at the front of the room, directing everyone's soul upwards.[43] Good prayer leadership is strong enough that the *kahal* feels safe and gentle enough that they feel held and cared for.

How do you become that kind of a leader? First, by being in the presence of and open to the influence of experienced *shlichei tzibbur* and other leaders in your life. This does not necessarily even need to take place in the context of mentorship, although having mentors helps. By spending time with the kind of person you hope to be and understanding what fascinates you and others about them, you can cobble together a vision of yourself as a leader. You can absolutely pick up some leadership skills via osmosis.

It also takes an understanding that there is not just one type of leader or *shaliach tzibbur*. The development of one's own sense of leadership comes from experience and from one's own pursuit of meaningful prayer. It would be challenging to guide someone to places you've never been. This could involve shul-hopping to experience other styles and determining what works or does not work for you. Having a good sense of how you are best led can help you find the best way for you to lead. If it works for you, there's a good chance it could work for someone else. In the same way, you might not be the right leader for every community or individual. As Cantor Ellen Dreskin so compassionately suggests, "It doesn't mean you're bad."[44] It just means you might need to adjust your style of leadership to meet the needs of your community or find a partner with complementary skills. Find opportunities to lead, put yourself out there, and exercise the 'muscles' that leaders use.

[43] Katzew, Jan. Personal Communication.

[44] Dreskin, Ellen. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 30 August 2019.

Humility

As mentioned before, leadership and humility must be in balance within a *shaliach tzibbur*. A prayer leader must focus somewhat on themselves and their own prayer, but prioritize and make space for the needs of the community. Cantor Lucy Fishbein compares it to the Kabbalistic concept of *tzimtzum* (צמצום). According to Lurianic Kabbalah, before the creation of the world, God took up all available space in the universe. In order to create anything new, God first had to contract and make space. As she says it's about "the practice of *tzimtzum*, of recognizing that it's not all about what feels good to you, but that it's actually about the synergy between you and your *kahal*."[45] Cantor Fishbein's example is one of subsuming the leader's needs in that of the group, in which "the needs of the many are greater than the needs of the few, or the one."[46]

There are other kinds of humility: being able to share the bimah with someone else, to listen rather than speak, to encourage new leaders even though they may replace you, indeed, so that they will eventually replace you. It is also humility before God and the greatness of Jewish tradition. This kind of modesty in the face of holy work is best exemplified by *Hineni* (הנני), a prayer uttered by the s*haliach tzibbur* on the High Holy Days. In *Hineni*, the s*hatz* acknowledges their inadequacy to fully live up to the task of helping the people of Israel atone for their sins. It begins:

הנני העני ממעש, נרעש ונפחד מפחד יושב תהילות ישראל. באתי לעמוד ולחנן לפניך על עמך ישראל אשר שלחוני, אף על פי שאיני כדי והגון לכך.

[45] Fishbein, Lucy. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 29 August 2019.
[46] *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*. Dir. Nicholas Meyer. Paramount Pictures, 1982. Film.

> Here I am, poor in merit, trembling and fearful in Your Presence, enthroned in Israel's praise. I have come to stand before you and plead on behalf of Your people Israel who sent me, even though I am unfit and unworthy for the task.

If a *shatz*'s leadership is too strong, it overwhelms the community. The *shatz* will stubbornly stick to their rigidly-defined plans and leave no space for anyone else or their needs. But the *shatz* who earnestly prays and absorbs the words of *Hineni* will know who they truly are. They are imperfect and, therefore, perfectly human. They are unworthy, but give fully of themselves to serve the community regardless. They pray to God for the ability to be a worthy prayer leader and they give themselves over to the powerful potential of prayer.

There is no course that you can take on becoming humbler and study can only do so much. The most important experience in becoming humbler is that of failure. Becoming a prayer leader, like any skill, requires trial and error and, naturally, you will not always succeed. Services will go awry, people will complain, and you might walk out of the sanctuary feeling like the first few lines of *Hineni*. You will ask yourself all kinds of questions: "Am I truly worthy of leading prayer?" "Will I ever get it right?" "What's wrong with me?" It is you and it is not you. You will still be a *shatz* in formation and every wrong move will be a reminder that there is so much left to learn. After learning how to lead a service, watch any of the great *shlichei tzibbur* of our time and you will see some of the cracks: forgotten page numbers, off-key singing, losing one's spot, and faulty Hebrew. This is all part of the process because any *shaliach tzibbur* is eternally becoming. And you will be too.

Empathy

To lead humans, one has to feel human and connect to humans. The shatz must be expert in the field of emotions for prayer is deeply connected to our feelings. At its best, prayer opens up our most vulnerable places and helps us explore them. The *shatz* needs to be vulnerable and know how to respond to vulnerability in others. How does one learn how to feel the feelings of others? Of course, by feeling those feelings oneself, but that does not mean you have to have had all of the experiences that everyone else has had to get to the core of what is felt. This requires a constantly open heart to the feelings of others. It takes profound self-knowledge and reflection, for understanding others is impossible without understanding oneself.

Human experience leads to empathy, if that's what you are seeking. Almost everyone has a certain amount, but to truly understand others requires intentionality. It can be modeled by others and good parenting and teaching will help imbue a person with the desire to connect their heart to others'. In a prayer setting, it helps to have been led by a caring and responsive *shaliach tzibbur*.

To be an empathetic prayer leader for a particular community, you have to know the people in that community and what is going on in their lives. For example, if there has been a recent and painful death in the community, the Mourner's Kaddish is going to feel different and the *shatz* needs to reflect that in the way they lead. When there's a *simcha* (שמחה), the *shatz* needs to give expression to communal celebration and joy. Rabbi Marisa James says, "In a community where you're there on a very regular basis, I feel like there's a whole other level of attentiveness. It can be so valuable to know what people are bringing into that

room."[47] More than just understanding, this takes genuine love for a community with all of its blessings and blemishes. When you care about the people you lead in worship, you will be able to notice the small things that tell you what they need.

Alongside knowing and feeling the pain and joy of the community, it helps for a *shaliach tzibbur* to share their own pain and joy with the community. To truly be a part of those you lead, one must give that community the opportunity to be with the *shatz*, to comfort them and celebrate with them. By making some of their vulnerability apparent, the relationship is deepened in both directions.

Menschlecheit

This is it. The be-all and end-all. When I was young, every day before I left for school, my dad would say to me, "Zei a mensch." Be a mensch. That is, be a good person. Mensch (מענטש) is a Yiddish word that literally means 'man', in the sense of a human. But its meaning skews towards being a humane human. Menschlecheit, the state of being a mensch, is a quality for which people will forgive almost any failing or deficiency. As the rabbis instructed, many years ago, the worthiness of a *shaliach tzibbur* is proportional to the worthiness of their deeds. A *shatz* with the most beautiful voice and comprehensive knowledge of liturgy can lead a good service, but if the congregation knows that their conduct is cruel or even questionable, they will not be able to connect to him. They will not be able to connect to prayer.

[47] James, Marisa. Interview. Conducted by Michael Weiss, 20 November 2019.

All it takes to be a mensch is to do the right thing whenever the opportunity arises and when you do the wrong thing, apologize and make up for it. How does this specifically relate to what a *shaliach tzibbur* needs to be? Not every mensch is a *shaliach tzibbur* but great *shlichei tzibbur* exhibit menschlecheit. If you, as a prayer leader, struggle in every other way, but people truly know your decency, everything else will fall into place. If this sounds sentimental, it's because it is. Someone who loves you and knows you care will love your prayer and pray along with you. The rest is commentary. Go and learn it.

Conclusion

In our constantly shifting culture, it is becoming more and more important to have strong and sensitive *shlichei tzibbur* in Jewish communities. Individuals are more mobile than in the past, jumping from one community to another, uprooting and replanting. The world is a more volatile place with more intense natural disasters, public health crises, and international conflict. Uncertainty has become the norm. Prayer, however, can provide steady

ground to stand on. From synagogue to synagogue and week to week, it will not always look the same, but a prayer space is a place to which one can always return to refocus, to give context to the human experience, to connect with one's self, one's community, and one's God. The mission of prayer experience does not change, even as everything else does. It is there to meet the spiritual needs of the community. Being at a service with a *shaliach tzibbur* to guide the experience, to pay attention to the world and respond to it, to intimately know each person in the room, can be one of the few moments of security in our changing world. Forms change, but prayer, itself, is timeless.

But people always change. Character is at the very center of what makes for the best *shlichei tzibbur* in these times. Through every interview and every text, this has become clear. The opportunity to speak with people who love prayer, both formally and informally, has changed the way I look at and lead prayer in the places I am privileged to do so. I think harder about the flow and movement of a service. I spend time finding the right prayer for what happens in the world. But, more than that, I pay more attention to who I am and who I am as a prayer leader. How am I relating and responding to the people I lead? What should I do when someone cries in the middle of a service after a recent death? What do I do when tempers flare? The order of a service can be consistent on the page, but each person brings their needs and baggage. How well I react to profound and unexpected feeling in a service has become my measure for success as a prayer leader. This is learning that I will carry with me for my entire life for, as with many of my teachers, I have the opportunity to live a life of prayer, on and off the bimah.

So, for you, the prayer leaders of today and tomorrow, I hope that this exploration has some value. There is no cookie cutter template to becoming a *shaliach tzibbur*. For many,

they simply lead prayer and by doing, they learn and become. For others, the path may not be as straightforward. But the most important aspect is who you are and who you become. When you can say to yourself, "I am a *shaliach tzibbur*", that is the moment when you know there is more work to be done. A *shaliach tzibbur* who stops growing in what they know and who they are has abrogated responsibility, for *shatz* is not so much a noun as it is a verb, a process of becoming.

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