

NUSACH HA-TEFILLAH

The Preservation of Nusach Ha-tefillah in the 21st Century Conservative Synagogue



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FOREWORD

I must first profess my gratitude to all those who have helped me along my journey toward the Cantorate. As you will read in the coming pages, the journey really began more than two decades ago when I was a student at the Valley Beth Shalom Day School in Encino, California. It was at that time when I met my first teacher, Cantor Herschel Fox. It was Cantor Fox who instilled in me a love of Yiddishkeit, Hazzanut and the desire to spend my life bringing Jews closer to God and community through prayer and Jewish music. Several years after meeting Cantor Fox I became close with Aminadav Aloni z”l, the synagogue organist and renowned composer. Ami trained me in the art of accompanying Hazzanut, which requires as much finesse and skill as (if not more than) improvising a davening.

Throughout my childhood I was fortunate to have many other *g’dolei hador* (generational greats) as my teachers - Dr. Michael Isaacson, Chris Hardin, Dr. Noreen Green, Cindy Paley and many others. To all of them, and to all who I neglected to mention, I offer my deepest thanks for helping me find my way on this amazing path.

As I began my career on the pulpit, I began studying with the great cantors of our time. I had perhaps the longest relationship with Cantor Daniel Gildar, who remains a dear friend and confidant. Cantor Gildar instilled in me a passion for keeping alive the music of years gone by, which my congregations have challenged me to present in new and exciting ways for a new generation. I will write more on this subject in the coming chapters.

In 2010 I moved to New York upon being elected Cantor of Temple Gates of Prayer in Flushing. It was around the same time that I enrolled in the H.L. Miller Cantorial School of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, where I spent three years learning about the vast history of the Cantorial tradition and spent many hours learning to further refine my artistic senses and breadth of repertoire. I owe many thanks to my professors, including Cantors Joel Caplan, Faith Steinsnyder, Jack Mendelson, Richard Nadel, and especially Cantor Nancy Abramson (our “fearless leader”). Very special thanks to Hazzan Robert Kieval, my coach of several years, my teacher and my very dear friend, without whom I would not be anywhere as polished a *davener* as I am today.

It was at the Seminary that I reconnected with someone who, as a guest performer in Los Angeles, allowed me to dream big that I might one day join the ranks of active Hazzanim. This man has become a close friend and confidant, an exceptional coach, and now my advisor for this fantastic venture: Hazzan Alberto Mizrahi. I will offer some more words of introduction as well as the story of how our work together began in the next chapter, but suffice it to say that Hazzan Mizrahi is not only one of the most sought-after Hazzanim in the world, but one of the most generous and genuinely sweet people I know.

None of the work leading up to this project nor any of the literature presented in the coming pages would have been possible without the support of my family. My parents, Laurie and Doron Tisser, have supported me in music my entire life: first as a pianist, then by driving me to shul each week to enjoy the services and then to share in leading them as I grew. I cannot thank them enough for all they did and continue to do for me. My brother Jeremy, an active composer in the world of media, film and television music, has always been and continues to be an inspiration for me on my own musical journey. We have shared many experiences together and I look forward to working closely with him for many healthy years.

Last, but certainly not least, my thanks to my wife, Sarah. Sarah and I have learned together what it means to lead a community and, though at times it has been difficult, she has always stood by my side: through late nights teaching, moving to New York so I could attend the Seminary and providing me with everything I could imagine as I composed this work. Most important though, I thank her for her continued love and friendship, without which my life would surely be much less fulfilling. Last year, we were blessed with the most wonderful gift ever received - our daughter, Talia Yuval. Talia has been a constant source of inspiration to us both, and it is for her sake - the sake of the Jewish future - that I embarked on this project of looking for some answers to ensuring the survival and continued innovation of Jewish prayer for generations to come.

If I neglected to mention anyone by name, please accept my apologies but know I am deeply grateful for your help, friendship and inspiration.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In addition to presenting portions of conversations with Hazzan Mizrahi and other pieces of my research, I will present data culled from a survey I formulated. This survey was the basis for conversation with clergy of a variety of Conservative synagogues in this country - synagogues of all sizes and demographics - which seem to embody the values and deep commitment to the Conservative movement I fervently believe are necessary for our movement to continue strong for generations to come. I thank the rabbis and cantors of these congregations for sharing their information with me. It has proven invaluable in formulating the culmination of my studies.

I should also take a moment to thank, both as a body and as individuals, my colleagues in the H.L. Miller Cantorial School and the Rabbinical School of JTS. My fellow graduates and colleagues have both inspired me and challenged me to think about my own cantorate in new ways, and that is surely a piece of what ultimately drove me to embark on this project.

There is a tradition that we are to both greet one another and part company by sharing a word of Torah. We are taught in Micah 6:8 that we should “...walk humbly with your God.” Anyone who is in a profession which requires serving in a leadership role - whether a manager, executive, performer or public speaker - recognizes it takes a certain amount of ego and self-confidence to stand in front of a group and lead. This is no less true of rabbis and cantors who must lead congregations of all sizes, and must preach and sing in front of congregations and other audiences. However, it is human nature to let our egos get the best of us, which can sometimes get in the way of our ministry. My teacher and rabbi since childhood, Rabbi Harold Schulweis, teaches that each of us has within a godly spark; that we are created *b'tzelem Elohim* not because we look like God, but because we have the capacity to be Godly. He would teach that to “walk humbly with your God” means not *only* to live as an observant Jew, holding close to the tenets of *halacha*, which beautify our lives, but that Micah is teaching us that we must truly *be* with one another. That although we have followed a sacred calling as clergy, we must not forget that we must be from within the people; that there is no *shaliach* without a *tzibbur*.

The issue of preserving the traditional prayer modes in the twenty-first cen-

ture Conservative synagogue may be as complex as the generations-old secret to Jewish survival in lands not our own and in an ever-evolving culture.

I do, however, hope that the information shared in the following pages will serve as a guide and inspiration for those who come after me to continue bringing Jews closer to God, to Torah and to holy community through the ancient melodies and texts that make up our rich tradition.

A final note: Throughout this work I will occasionally include common Hebrew and Yiddish words and phrases. I will do my best to explain them as they arise.



INTRODUCTION

As I think back on the many times I have *davened* Shabbat morning services since my childhood, I begin by recalling some particularly poignant memories. I learned to daven in the early 1990's with Cantor Herschel Fox. The "Cantor's Choir" was offered as an extracurricular activity on Wednesday afternoons in the forty-five-minute slot between the end of Day School and the start of Hebrew School. We would meet in the main sanctuary, about fifteen or twenty of us from age seven thru teenagers, and would learn, by rote, the *nusach* for Shabbat morning services. What made this time special was the sheer joy and passion with which Cantor Fox taught the very same nusach, note for note, as he learned it as a child in Winnipeg from Cantor Benjamin Brownstone at the Talmud Torah Shul.

Once a child learned to chant thru the *bar'chu* in Shabbat *Shacharit*, he or she would be invited to join the group on the bimah each and every Shabbat. There were always between ten and twenty children on the bimah weekly during my early years in the group, and as we watched our friends grow up and learn more advanced material, we, too, strived to chant at that high level. I recall being ten or eleven years old when one of the "superstars" of the group, a young woman named Rachel (who eventually did serve as Cantor of a Conservative synagogue in Los Angeles) was learning to sing a simplified version of Schlossberg's "R'tsei". We were all in absolute awe when we heard it chanted from the bimah the first time. Never before had a child been taught such a recitative at Valley Beth Shalom. At that time, there were often more than eight- or nine-hundred congregants and guests each week at services, and at least two *b'nai mitzvah*, with often a baby naming or *aufruf* in addition. That particular week was no exception and one could have heard a pin drop when Rachel finished singing "Vetechezna" in perfect harmony with the Cantor; it was pure magic.

Eventually I, too, learned that version of the "R'tsei" and went on to sing it many weeks a year after Rachel graduated the program. I remember, week after week, chanting the service and following the Torah around the sanctuary while receiving wishes of *mazel tov* from congregants (hundreds of whom were Holocaust survivors), a great majority of whom are no longer alive.

Moving forward twenty years to June of 2012, Sarah and I brought our daughter, Talia, to receive her Hebrew name, following my family's tradition of

celebrating all our life cycle events on the VBS bimah. As I had been given the honor of chanting the *shacharit* service, one of the ladies who claims to be the “president of the Ben Tisser Fan Club” asked me to please sing the “R’tsei” as I did when I was a boy. Although I had sung this “R’tsei” for many years, after multiple coachings with my teachers in the H. L. Miller Cantorial School, I was finally satisfied with my delivery. Comments from the few remaining older congregants affirmed my feelings. Yet, to my great sorrow, the vast majority of the approximately 450 worshippers in attendance were perhaps moved by the music, but did not relate to the classic cantorial style, nor were they moved to join in the congregational melody. Nevertheless, a few moments later, as I sang a modern setting of “Sim Shalom”, it took only two repetitions of the chorus for the majority of those present to join in the prayer and raise their voices in song with me.

In great contrast was one of my Shabbatot as Cantor of Temple Gates of Prayer in Flushing, New York. The shul is a right-wing, semi-egalitarian Conservative synagogue (a la Shirah Chadasha in Jerusalem) with a history of very fine Cantors (including Moshe Bazian z”l, Jacob Mendelson, and Aaron Bensoussan, among others in its 112-year history). There is great value placed on traditional *hazzanut* there, and I very much enjoyed having the freedom to sing recitatives and melodies of the Eastern European Cantorial tradition. One particularly wintry Shabbat I decided to “sneak in” several contemporary pieces, which was a risky proposition, because a) that sort of music had not yet been heard in that sanctuary, and b) because I was presenting music which was intended for performance with instruments in a synagogue that does not allow them. A few families, with children in the Solomon Schechter Day School, were grateful to hear some of the repertoire their children had been exposed to in school. In stark contrast to my experience singing “R’tsei” at VBS, the congregation at Temple Gates was unsure how to react to the contemporary settings and was much more comfortable with the classical Eastern European repertoire. Thus began my quest to find the necessary balance between retaining our Eastern European musical heritage while blending in the wonderful traditions of modern American Jewish music.

In my thesis I will share my findings both through personal anecdotes and through conversations with Hazzanim about their own experiences. The vast majority of the work for this project was a collaboration with Hazzan Alberto Mizrahi of the Anshe Emet Synagogue in Chicago. I offer him my deepest thanks for his time, generosity and hospitality in helping me complete this pro-

ject, and for his mentorship during my years at the Seminary. I dedicate my work to our daughter, Talia Yuval, who represents the future of our people.



Why Hazzan Mizrahi?

I first met Hazzan Alberto Mizrahi in the mid-1990's when he was a guest artist at the annual Valley Beth Shalom cantorial concert (the only major annual cantorial performance in Los Angeles for nearly thirty years). I remember hearing the beauty and power in his delivery of great cantorial recitatives, accompanied by some of the world's finest Jewish musicians. I was a middle school student at the time, but that night was just one of many in my life that reaffirmed my childhood dream of becoming a Cantor. For weeks following that night I tried to make my voice twist and turn as his did, modulating between tones and trying to uncover the deep secret of his coloratura. Of course, being a pre-teen boy this was no easy task and left me with nothing more than a sore throat and little hope I could ever sing "like that".

As the years went on, Hazzan Mizrahi became a regular fixture at these concerts (as did Cantor Benzion Miller), with only one or two other guests each year. I recall being approximately fourteen years old the first time we spoke. I was invited to attend the dress rehearsal, and Alberto asked me to copy some music for him. I was so excited that I was holding his music that I completely forgot to copy it and spent about fifteen minutes trying to decipher all the long cantorial runs in the music before someone came looking for me to find out if I had copied the score for the pianist. I explained that I was so busy trying to figure out how the Cantor could sing so many notes at once that I forgot to copy the score. Alberto, generous as he is, allowed me to make a copy for myself and look at it on my own time.

Many years later, while at the Seminary, an email went out to the cantorial students that Hazzan Mizrahi would be coming and offering us free one-hour coaching sessions. I quickly booked a session, and when someone canceled I booked another.

We have since spent many hours coaching, talking, eating, sharing and singing, and I have come to realize that aside from being one of the most important

representatives of the Jewish people on the world stage, Hazzan Mizrahi is one of the most innovative cantors in the country. Therefore, I asked him to be my thesis advisor and made it my goal to understand and share with the world how he makes the musical choices he does so that both the ancient and modern Jewish musical traditions may live in harmony and continue to survive in one of the largest urban Conservative synagogues in the country.

The discussions of musical selections and processes discussed in this thesis will be culled from recordings of my private coaching sessions with Hazzan Mizrahi, from trips to Chicago in August, 2012 and April, 2013, dedicated to the work of this project, and observations made during a Shabbat visit to Anshe Emet in November, 2012.

Conversations and interviews with clergy and leaders of a variety of Conservative synagogues across the United States, should help us better understand the role of *musach ha-tefillah* (traditional prayer modes) in synagogue services today, as well as provide more data about the shift to different worship music over the past several decades. I should also hope that we might gather some insight into current and perhaps future trends in synagogue music preferences, which should better educate those of us in positions of communal leadership as to which steps should be taken in coordinating worship services in our own *kehillot* (communities).

The following biography was written in 2003 by Cantor Samuel Weiss and edited by the author for this work.

Hazzan Mizrahi was born in Athens, Greece, on February 6, 1948 to Holocaust survivors. He had little exposure to Jewish traditions in his native Greece. Shortly after his family immigrated to Cleveland in 1956, that city's community helped to fund his elementary and high school Jewish education. His musical education included studies at the Chicago Conservatory of Music (1965-1966), the Cincinnati Conservatory (1976-1978), and the Juilliard School's American Opera Center (1979-1981). Concurrently, he prepared for a cantorial career at the Jewish Theological Seminary's Cantors Institute in New York (1966-1970), and continued his studies with Moshe Ganchoff, a past master of the cantorial arts who was his mentor for twenty-five years. From 1970 to 1990 he served as the cantor of major congregations in Albany, Cincinnati, White Plains (NY), La Jolla (CA) and Cleveland. In addition, from 1980 to 1990 Mizrahi also made significant strides to-

wards an illustrious career in opera and classical singing. He was a finalist in the first Luciano Pavarotti Voice Competition in Philadelphia, and in 1988 he understudied Pavarotti for the Miami Opera. He sang numerous operatic roles for major American companies and appeared as the tenor soloist with several American symphony orchestras. He also sang operatic concerts in Budapest, Melbourne, Sydney, London and Jerusalem.

In 1990 Mizrahi moved to Chicago to become the cantor of its historic Anshe Emet Synagogue. Since then he has devoted most of his energies to a celebrated career in many facets of Jewish music, his superb tenor voice and experience as an opera singer earning him the sobriquet "The Pavarotti of Jewish Music." He developed an individual cantorial style which is based on the East-European Ashkenazic singing and repertoire of such Golden Age cantors as Yossele Rosenblatt and Mordechai Hershman, but is augmented by motives and vocal techniques from the Sephardic and Middle Eastern heritages. His recital repertoire spans nine languages, and includes classical and cantorial masterpieces as well as folk, theatre and popular songs.

His very busy concert and recording career takes him to important halls all over the world, and he is in great demand to sing major compositions. Among many such works, he has sung the following world premieres: Yehezkiel Braun's Hallel Oratorio (Haifa Symphony, 1991), Samuel Adler's Ever Since Babylon (1992), Andre Hajdu's Dreams of Spain (1992), Paul Schonfeld's Klezmer Rondos (New York Philharmonic, 1995) and Thomas Beveridge's Yizkor Requiem (Kennedy Center, 1996). He has appeared as a featured soloist in many important festivals of Jewish music, including London, Jerusalem, Amsterdam, Krakow, Toronto, Chicago and New York.

In 1999 two other classically trained masters of Sephardic folk and liturgical music, Aaron Bensoussan (Toronto) and Gerard Edery (NY)—both of Moroccan descent—joined with him to form "The Sons of Sepharad." The consort performs a blend of songs in the tradition that hails from the Golden Age of Spain, singing in Ladino, Hebrew, English, Arabic, Greek, French, Spanish and Italian—including new songs they have composed in the genre. In 2002 they released their first recording, compiled from live performances around the world. In 2000 he assembled nine accomplished Chicago-area musicians to create "Titiko," a cross-cultural fusion band that backs him up in traditional as well as jazz and New Age arrangements of music from around the Middle East and Israel. In addition to

exploring a greater range of the World music repertoire with the band, Mizrahi pays homage to his native Greece by singing a number of Hebrew arrangements of songs by popular Greek singer Nikos Gounaris.

Among Mizrahi's many recordings, the two volumes of *Chants Mystiques* (1998, 2002) are notable for tracing the development of Jewish music from its earliest extant written piece (12th century) through the 20th century. In 2000 he collaborated with songwriter Craig Taubman and others to create *One Shabbat Morning*, a contemporary-styled synagogue service that is infused with the sounds of the traditional Jewish prayer modes. He gives lectures on the development of Jewish music, has served on the boards of several organizations dedicated to the preservation of Jewish music, and has recorded extensively for the Milken Archive, a major project that will comprise the largest collection of American Jewish music ever assembled.

His command of various traditions in the cantorial arts, Hebrew and Yiddish song, Ladino folk and art song, and secular works from the song and operatic repertoire have established Alberto Mizrahi as one of today's most important Jewish voices.

Aside from his concert engagements, he devotes quite a bit of his time to coaching students at the H.L. Miller Cantorial School in the art of Hazzanut, passing on the generations-old traditions he has internalized and loves.

The Jewish tradition is unique in that it is continuously evolving. There are many religions in the world, but few are so fluid in their adaptation to modernity as Judaism. Like the very tradition itself, Hazzan Mizrahi's style is a reflection of his own growth and evolution as a person, a Jew, an artist and a cantor. In each note he sings he brings together classical vocal training, the "classic" Ashkenazi cantorial sound, his Sefaradic heritage and flavors of jazz and modern music. Therefore it seems especially fitting to look at the work of Hazzan Mizrahi as a possible paradigm for the modern cantor, just as we may look at Mordecai Hershman or Yossele Rosenblatt as models of what the cantor may have been expected to sound and act like in the early- to mid-twentieth century.



THE MUSIC OF A PEOPLE

It was said many centuries ago that a Jew can pass by a synagogue and know by the melodies heard from within what part of the day it is, and if it is a special day. Surely over the centuries we have adopted melodies and phrases from the local popular music of the day, but there has long been a core set of modes - nusach - which have remained unchanged and which carry the tremendous power to touch the depths of the Jewish neshama...



Music has been a part of Jewish worship since quite literally our first day as a People. Just look at Exodus chapter 15: “Moses, by God’s might, led the People of Israel through the parted Red Sea to freedom.” And what did they do when they reached the other shore? They sang praises to the Lord! If we look ahead to Judges chapter 5, Deborah and Barak sing a victory hymn upon defeating the Canaanite enemies. The entire Book of Psalms, attributed or dedicated to King David, is a collection of poem-songs sung by the Levites during Temple rites, many of them literally listing the instruments which were part of the Temple orchestra. (Note: there is even a theory that the opening lines of the Psalms such as “A Psalm of David” or “To the Conductor” or “A Song of Thanksgiving” were indications of a particular musical mode to be used when chanting each particular Psalm). Basically, Jewish worship without music, whether vocal or instrumental, would not be “Jewish”.

I realize that there will be great debate over my last sentence, so I must be clear on my position. As mentioned earlier, I grew up in a synagogue with a renowned music program which included a composer-in-residence/organist, large volunteer chorus and many special services which included all varieties of instrumental music. I have experienced services with music both as a musician and as a Cantor, and I find great joy in the addition of music to worship services. The great Danish author Hans Christian Anderson wrote that “Where words fail, music speaks”. I strongly believe this applies to the synagogue as well.

To be correct, I must begin by clearly stating that I will be discussing almost

exclusively Ashkenazi *nusach* from the Eastern European tradition, as it has been transmitted in America, in this work. There are many sub-traditions within this category, as well as many other traditions in Western Europe and all parts of the Sephardic world. As well, many of these traditions have developed and changed in the past century as Jews have migrated to other parts of the world. For example, the South American musical tradition in Conservative synagogues has developed into something quite different than what can be heard in many North American synagogues today, mainly due to our tradition of adapting and embracing the local culture of our host country.

The concept of changes in Jewish worship music is not a new one. While there are certain melodies which have remained more or less the same for hundreds of years, we must recognize that we are part of a very fluid tradition which has survived in part because of its ability to adapt to the needs of the people in any given time and place, yet retain the basic framework which links us to generations past.

There are certain melodies in our repertoire which have tugged at the heart-strings of *shul*-goers for generations; probably one of the most notable is the traditional setting of the *Kol Nidre* text recited on *Erev Yom Kippur*. It was, in fact, the melody of *Kol Nidre* which has saved the text from deletion from the worship cannon on several occasions.

There is a special category of music into which the *Kol Nidre* melody falls, know as “*Mi-Sinai* melodies”. That is to say the melodies in this category are so old and have become so deep a part of our tradition it is as if they come from Moses at Sinai. The majority of these melodies are chanted on the High Holy Days and include *Ochila La’eil*, the Great *Aleinu*, *V’hakohanim*, the opening phrases of *Chatzi Kaddish* and *Avot* for *Ne’ilah*, and even the motifs from *Tal (Pesach)* and *Geshem (Shemini Atzeret)*. The *Mi-Sinai* category was first described towards the end of the 12th Century in the *Sefer Hassidim* by R. Yehuda ben Sh’muel of Regensburg. R’ Yehuda describes these tunes as absolutely sacred and essential, thereby furthering the point that tradition must have a place in the synagogue, including traditional melodies.

The majority of our services, however, are simply “davened” - chanted - within the required harmonic/motivic framework for a particular service on a particular day. In the Ashkenazi tradition these systems are known as “nusachic modes”, which are known better by the Hebrew word “*maqamat*” in the Sefar-

adic tradition. These modes serve as a sort of musical calendar. They remind us what day it is, what time of day it is and what special occasion coincides with that day. At the same time, these modes set a mood and tone which creates a sense of focus or *kavannah* amongst worshippers.

Within the services exist liturgical poems called *piyyutim*, a great many of which are sung to a variety of melodies. These melodies certainly have changed and morphed over the centuries, most certainly based on the local popular music of a given Jewish population. To illustrate this, examine the first few phrases of the famous *piyyut* “*Ein Keloheinu*” below:

Ein Keloheinu Melodies

The image displays four musical staves, each representing a different melody for the prayer 'Ein Keloheinu'. Each staff includes a title box with the composer's name and dates, a musical staff with a treble clef and a 4/4 time signature, and the corresponding Hebrew lyrics below it.

- Julius Freudenthal (1805-1874, Germany):** The melody is in G major. The lyrics are: Ein ke-lo - hei - nu Ein ka do - nei - nu Ein k'-mal - kei - nu Ein k' mo - shi - ei - nu.
- R' Shlomo Carlebach (1925-1994, United States):** The melody is in G major. The lyrics are: Ein ke - lo - hei - nu Ein ka - do - nei - nu Ein k' - mal - kei - nu Ein k' mo - shi - ei - nu.
- Cantor Moshe Bazian (1925-2010, New York):** The melody is in B-flat major. The lyrics are: Ein ke-lo-hei - nu Ein ka-do-nei - nu Ein k' mal-kei-nu k' mal- kei-nu Ein k' - mo - shi - ei - nu.
- Spanish-Portuguese (c. 19th Century):** The melody is in G major. The lyrics are: Ein ke-lo - hei - nu Ein ka do - nei - nu Ein k'-mal - kei - nu Ein k'-mo - shi - ei - nu.

In recent decades, however, the Ashkenazi cantorial tradition has faced much criticism for its apparent desire to remain true to a certain time and place without adapting. By the same token, there are many cantors who criticize composers of modern liturgical music for disregarding both the cantorial tradition and any sense of *nusach*-mode of the service for which they are composing. To further complicate things, many composers set pieces of the liturgy to music which appear in multiple services without identifying for which service the piece is intended, adding to the plate of musical issues that of appropriateness of non-nusachic music to a particular service (in other words, using the same melody for both Friday night and Rosh Hashanah Eve services may be productive in terms of inviting congregational participation, but perhaps offensive to the idea that each of these services should have a unique mood and therefor a unique musical repertoire from which to choose appropriate settings).

TIME AND SPACE IN JEWISH PRAYER

Both the liturgy and the music with which we bring it to life represent time and space. We acknowledge that the words we use to pray were written in a particular time and place, reflecting pertinent ideas of the day and bringing forth relevant petitions or expressions of thanks. We also recognize that in order for us to have *kavannah* (loosely translated as “personal, directed intention based on an understanding of the liturgy and where it fits within the framework of our own lives”), we must continually reinterpret and reexamine the liturgy in search of ways to make it ever-relevant in our times.

Pirkei Avot, a section of the third-century Rabbinic code called the *Mishnah*, teaches the following:

Concentrate on three things and you will not fall into the grip of sin. know from where you came...where you are going...and before Whom you will have to give account and reckoning... (Avot 3:1)

We must, therefore, live simultaneously in the past, the present and the future both as Jews and as Jewish musicians. In his book *Jewish Music as Midrash: What Makes Music ‘Jewish’?* (Isaac Nathan Publishing, 2007), Dr. Michael Isaacson (renowned composer and scholar of Jewish music) discusses this very idea which he calls “the simultaneity of time” (pp. 105-126). In his work, he suggests that “when an orchestral musician plays in the present, she also is remembering the past and energizing the future...” It is not enough to simply play the notes on the page! In order to foster the audience’s desire to keep listening, the musician must be continually aware of the bars she has just played as well as the notes ahead so that the piece is in constant development. The rise of climax must give way to the slow, beautiful cadence. How the more so must the cantor bear this in mind!

Isaacson continues by proposing that “in the most considered Jewish music there is a simultaneous resonance of antiquity (or recollection of former times), a presence of compelling attractiveness to the music itself, and, in the best works an innovative suggestion of where that particular music or the overall genre can progress in the future.” The great Rabbi Leo Baeck taught in *The Pharisees* that “perhaps a human being does not die until he no longer sees anything but the past and the present moment.” What an amazingly powerful, yet troublesome charge!

In a 2006 lecture, the great Cantor Ben-Zion Miller spoke about his particular style of improvisatory *hazzanut*. An audience member asked him how he can sing the same words using the same harmonic and motivic structures week after week and not run out of ideas. His answer was surprisingly simple: “I never feel like the same [Ben-Zion Miller] from one week to the next. I bring with me to the *bimah* all that I experienced the previous week...If I slept particularly well and had a fantastic week, I may sing a more [grandiose] rendition; whereas if I didn’t get to bed until 2:00AM Friday night and am exhausted from a week of concertizing or otherwise tolling work, I may sing in a slightly more subdued style...”

The unique facet of the cantorial art which separates it from many other styles of performance is that each cantor brings to the pulpit not only the tradition as it was transmitted to him or her, but his or her own unique understanding of the prayers as interpreted through whichever combination of nusachic phraseology each cantor sees fit, limited only by one’s vocal capabilities and imagination.



CHANGES IN THE SYNAGOGUE

“[Conservative Judaism] is a way of life, of belief and practice that exemplifies the adherence to tradition and change, a healthy respect for our ancient observances...and the need to adapt these to contemporary life.”

-Rabbi Richard L. Eisenberg

September 22, 1996

“Tradition and Change as a Way of Life” (New York Times)

The title of the book first published in 1958 by Rabbi Mordecai Waxman, Tradition and Change, has become a motto for the Conservative movement. Especially after the *Shoah*, there was an influx of Eastern European Jews with a strong desire to remain connected to Jewish tradition in some form, and perhaps a stronger desire to simultaneously become fully integrated into the fabric of American life. This established strong communities in many places across the United States and Canada, and within the first two decades after the *Shoah* a very large number of new congregations were created. The founders of these congregations took pride in building beautiful edifices and engaging dynamic rabbis and talented cantors, as if to say, “we survived, and we are here to stay.”

While the “golden age” of the Cantorate in America was already coming to a close by the 1950s, a new generation of cantors and composers was enjoying fantastic success. Synagogue attendance was still at a peak, congregational and youth choruses were in high fashion and synagogue music (whether the unaccompanied cantor, choir-organ or other forms of accompaniment) was put on a pedestal of importance. As we will discover in the case studies, synagogue attendance thru the early 1990s in many communities was very high, as was the level of participation by the congregation in services.

There are many speculations as to why synagogue attendance and literacy began a drastic decline in the last two decades. Some say it is the quality of Hebrew School or Day School education, others say it is a change in society as such that Jews have become so “Americanized” that it is far more important that their children join a club sports team that meets Saturday than go to synagogue (save for a family *simcha*). Economics have certainly played a role in membership as

synagogue dues have gone up significantly over the past thirty years, but most synagogues do not require membership for one to attend Shabbat services and many will subsidize dues and/or High Holy Day tickets so all Jews may attend services and be part of the community. I cannot begin to guess what led to this change in the community, but I can say that I witnessed it first-hand during my childhood at Valley Beth Shalom.

My earliest synagogue memories are of High Holy Day services. Valley Beth Shalom had multiple services running simultaneously: the main sanctuary/ ballroom was packed with near 1,800 people; another two ballrooms were opened up to accommodate near 1,200 people; there were youth services with dozens of children and family services with several hundred in attendance. At 1:00PM the sanctuary and ballrooms would end services so that another group of near 3,000 worshippers could fill the halls for the “second service” - another evening service, or Torah reading and musaf for daytime services (Neilah was always combined and standing-room-only). Today, there is only one room open for the second service on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, and none of the rooms are filled to capacity. One new development has been the addition of a Sephardic service, for which a Rabbi and Hazzan are brought in from Israel to lead services for those members of the community who enjoy a traditional Sephardic service (sans musical accompaniment).

To give perhaps a more tangible example of the scope of the change I will describe the change in Shabbat attendance. I remember my first Shabbat leading services alongside Cantor Fox in 1990-91. As was the norm any week of the year, there were 2 b’nai mitzvah and at least one other simcha (*aufruf*, baby naming, anniversary, etc.). The sanctuary (seats approximately 600) was full and the first partition was opened to allow over 900 congregants and guests to fill the hall. (It is important to note that when services began at 8:45AM there were over 150 in attendance, and the full capacity was reached by 12:30PM when services ended.) The children’s chorus would follow the Torah processional following *shacharit* to receive congratulations from the congregants; I remember the faces of members long since gone who would greet us each week from their regular seats in the sanctuary, a great many of them founders of the synagogue (c. 1959) and *Shoah* survivors. In June 2009 I attended services at Valley Beth Shalom as my wife and I celebrated the naming of our first daughter. That week there were two b’nai mitzvah and an *aufruf* in addition to our *simcha*. At 8:45AM there were less than twenty in attendance and by the end of services at 12:30PM the per-

manent seats of the sanctuary were still not filled. Additionally, I did not recognize the vast majority of people in the sanctuary, most of them guests of the b'nai mitzvah families. The conclusion I drew is two-fold: a) the majority of people who attended services regularly when I was young were already aging twenty years ago and have either since passed away or are physically unable to come (ill, moved away, etc), and b) their children have not replaced them as regular attendees at services for some reason or another (moved away, uninterested, joined another synagogue, etc.). Interestingly, membership at the synagogue has not declined proportionately to the decline in attendance. At peak VBS was a congregation over 1,800 families; today it is closer to 1,400. The decline of 23% is not representative of the much larger decline in members attending services.

I will speak about the services themselves in the coming pages. I share the above information as an example of one community, which has been for many years among the largest Conservative congregations in North America with well-known rabbis, a renown music program and a highly regarded Day School among other departments. Similar changes have certainly taken place in smaller congregations, where the impact on the overall community is even greater; we will see some example in the case studies.



CHANGES IN POP CULTURE

One would be remiss not to include changes in greater society when calculating the changes within organizations. Over the past several decades we have seen many changes in all aspects of American life. Relevant to this discussion we should explore changes in popular music, the advent of the internet and the desire to “belong”, the value of “community”, and the development of what I will call a “transaction-based society”.

When I was young, in school or at camp, great value was placed on the “community sing”. All looked forward to music class, campfire *kumzitz*, or other large gatherings involving music. While already the music we heard on the radio was not music that greatly lent itself to communal singing, we were not so far removed from the folk rock music of our parents’ generation that we so enjoyed sharing. It was a great source of fun and joy to get together with a few friends and bring guitars to sing for an afternoon or evening. While communal singing had certainly been happening for many generations before us, it was clear that by the 1990s there was less of a value on fine solo performance than on group singing. This may or may not have started with the Jewish camping movement in the 1960s, but its effects were strongly being felt in synagogues by the time the generation who attended the camps in the 1960s and 1970s had children of their own and were the generation charged with the continuity of the synagogue community.

For the generation who came to America in the early- to mid-20th Century, a sense of belonging was paramount. The majority of these immigrants came from Eastern Europe, fleeing pogroms or relocating after the *Shoah*, and had a deep desire to establish communities where they could feel safe to celebrate life with and among other Jews. The majority of children of these immigrants either came to America very young or were born here. Perhaps their sense of needing a community is less strong than their parents’ because they were integrated into greater society from the very beginning. They did not need to join a synagogue in order to make friends and have a social life (though certainly for many their friends did come from Hebrew School or youth group). Many attended public school and became friends with the neighborhood children, many of whom may have been Jewish as well in larger communities. The synagogue became a place

to go on the High Holy Days, and the clergy a commodity only necessary when life cycle events happen.

If we consider the advent of the internet, issue is even further magnified. We can now be part of communities the world over through this fantastic virtual reality. We can join Facebook and have access to literally hundreds of thousands of communities in which we can interact with others who share defined common interests. The best part - it's free! There is no need today to spend thousands of dollars a year for membership in a synagogue, country club or other social community when one can now video chat, correspond or communicate in other ways from the comfort of one's La-Z-Boy. In fact, one can watch live-streaming services from some of the country's leading synagogues and churches on the internet for free as well. Why, then, should one join a synagogue?

This thought process is the result of what I describe as a "transaction-based society". The cost of living has gone up exponentially while income has gone up slightly at best. While this is not a discussion of economics by any means, it is important to consider this factor. The change in personal economics described above leads a great many people to consider the personal gain or return in any transaction. Synagogue membership for a family in a large community may cost as much as \$3,000-4,500 per year. On top of that, there may be extra security fees, building fund dues, upgrade fees for preferred High Holy Day seating, b'nai mitzvah fees, Hebrew School tuition, etc. With a child becoming a bar/bat mitzvah, two children in Hebrew school and basic dues, this could cost as much as \$19,000 for a year of membership. Even if this amount is subsidized by 50% by the Congregational Foundation or other endowments, it is not a small amount for a family to spend. Many families ask the question "What do I get in return for this expenditure?" After all, one can get free b'nai mitzvah training at Chabad or for a nominal fee from a private tutor, hire an unaffiliated clergy to officiate a private ceremony, and send a child to an unaffiliated Hebrew School for much less money and then has even more of a say in their family's Jewish journey perhaps. It is just this sort of thinking that has synagogues across the country reconsidering their offerings in order to make the organization more marketable to today's Jewish "consumer".



DEALING WITH CHANGE

One of the major questions facing synagogues in modern times is one of identity. Is the synagogue an institution whose main focus and offering are religious services, with a variety of programs and education offerings designed to supplement? Or, has the modern synagogue become more of a cultural and community center with services now being just one of the many things the institution offers? It seems that in many cases the second possibility is becoming the reality, which explains the changes we have observed in religious services over the past several decades.

Whereas thirty or forty years ago an active congregation would enjoy services lasting three or more hours which included a substantial sermon from the rabbi and several cantorial recitatives which demonstrated the great artistry of the hazzan, we are now seeing more that attendance is declining in many cases where this model remains. The clock is what determines the structure of the service today more than anything, it seems. It seems we have opted for a short inspirational piece from the rabbi and nice singable melodies from the cantor, possibly including only highlights of the liturgy, in order to make sure we finish by a certain time.

One source of these musical changes came out of the Jewish camping movement. Since the late 1960s American Jewry has created a vast library of “camp songs” and singable tunes set to the liturgy or verses from the bible. As was briefly discussed earlier, the trend in Jewish history has been to incorporate local sounds and stylings into our worship experience, and American popular and folk music has certainly been no exception. Such names as Debbie Friedman, Jeff Klepper, Michael Isaacson and Craig Taubman often are recalled when discussing the modern synagogue repertoire of the later 20th century.

On the one hand, we must thank them for making the words of the liturgy familiar to a generation of Jews who are generally less comfortable with Hebrew than their parents. Through incorporating these easily accessible melodies, hazzanim have provided a great entry point into the sometimes intimidating world of praying in Hebrew. On the other hand, we may have done so at the expense of our cantorial tradition, thus making us “a tradition that has forgotten what the tradition is” to a certain extent, to quote Hazzan Mizrahi.

One thing we have learned through the incorporation of such music is that congregations do, for a great part, have a desire to actively participate in the worship experience. We know that participation can come in many forms: singing along, congregational responses, or listening and contemplating a sermon or cantorial recitative, among others. However, we also know that for an audience (the congregation) to remain engaged for several hours at a time, there must be a certain amount of space for them to sing with the hazzan.

In the coming pages, I will share my findings from having interviewed several hazzanim after attending services at their synagogues. We will see what has been particularly successful and less-so at each synagogue and draw some conclusions based on these findings. For the purposes of this discussion, I have elected to focus on Shabbat morning services.



CASE STUDIES

In this section we will compare Shabbat morning services at six Conservative congregations across the United States. Each has a different style of *davening*, some use instrumental accompaniment, and all employ professional hazzanim.



Valley Beth Shalom (Encino, california)

- ❖ *Team: 5 Rabbis, Hazzan, Hazzan Sheini, Music Director, Ritual Director*
- ❖ *Approximately 1,500 member units*
- ❖ *Hazzan Herschel Fox has served since 1981*
- ❖ *Attended service June 2012*



Valley Beth Shalom is a large synagogue in suburban Los Angeles. They have a nationally renown music program, created by Cantor Sam Fordis and music director/composer-in-residence Aminadav Aloni in the late 1960s. Their congregational choir remains a major force in the Los Angeles Jewish music scene, and the synagogue is the home of the founders of the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony and the Jewish Music Commission of Los Angeles.

Services in the main sanctuary begin at 8:45AM with a full *birchot ha-shachar* and *p'sukei d'zimra*, often led by one of the *b'nai mitzvah* candidates. *Shacharit* is led by the Cantor's Hazzanut Class, a group made up of children from the synagogue's Day School and Hebrew School who meet once a week to learn the service just as the Cantor learned it as a child in Winnipeg. Musical accompaniment begins with *shacharit* on a grand piano (organ was used thru 2006) and continues thru the end of services.

The Torah Service, including an extended interactive Torah discussion, occupies at least one hour, sometimes up to ninety minutes, of the service. *Musaf* is led as a *heiche kedusha* by the Cantor, including mostly congregational melodies.

Over the years, Cantor Fox has introduced various melodies to different sections of the services as he has sensed a need for change. He has taken great care,

however, to make sure the melodies he chooses both have a traditional feel to them and fit appropriately in between sections of proper *nusachic davening*.

For many years, Mr. Aloni accompanied on the organ. He was influenced by having been born in Palestine and grown up in the young State of Israel, hearing the music of a nation “grow up”. He was also a superb trained classical and jazz pianist. With Cantor Fox, very little was rehearsed and there was little (if any) sheet music for services, so Mr. Aloni used his sense to accompany the services in such a way that one was aware some sort of music was being played, but at the same time one could not tell when the music started and stopped. It was a magical form of accompaniment that took such great humility and judiciousness on the part of the organist, and was perfectly suited to the synagogue at that time.

In recent years Chris Hardin has become the synagogue accompanist, currently using an acoustic grand piano. Chris’ background is in rock and jazz music, and this certainly shows through in his playing. While Mr. Aloni grew up in a secular family, the sounds of Jewish music were not unfamiliar to him, having grown up in Israel. Chris came to Judaism later in life, and while he is perfectly comfortable accompanying the cantor in any style, it is his background in popular music that is the hallmark of his style of accompaniment - much more percussive (partially due to using a piano versus an organ), and much less subtle.

As the synagogue has changed over the years, the cantor has primarily relied on an evolving style of accompaniment to keep the *davening* sounding fresh. With interspersed unfamiliar melodies on occasion and a changing musical sound, the congregation still enjoys services with a European cantor in a musical format appropriate to their ears.

Almost ten years ago the congregation engaged Cantor Phil Baron as its *hazzan sheini*. Phil, a former Disney composer and voice-over artist, was charged with (among other things) creating new music opportunities for the congregation. Among his greatest successes is the new “Rimonim” service - a monthly Friday night experience for members of all ages involving a musical ensemble and professional singers. The music is almost entirely original and reflects a completely new sound for the synagogue. On Saturday mornings, Cantor Baron leads services several times a month and retains use of correct *nusach*, though his sound is both modern and American (in contrast to Cantor Fox’s European *shtimme*). He uses much more contemporary repertoire in his services than does Cantor Fox, but the congregation responds nicely to the change.

There have been many discussions over the years at VBS about the length of services, often times well over three-and-a-half hours. Various models have been tried - cutting out short sections of the service, speeding up *musaf*, only processing once with the Torah - but whatever the variation, proper *nusach* remains at the forefront.



B'nai Torah Congregation (Boca Raton, FL)

- ❖ *Team: 2 Rabbis, Cantor, Hazzan Sheini, Lay Ritual Director*
- ❖ *Approximately 1,300 member units*
- ❖ *Cantor Udi Spielman has served since 2007*
- ❖ *Attended service February 2013*

B'nai Torah Congregation (BTC) is one of the leading Conservative congregations in North America, with a truly impressive music program and seasonal weekly attendance at services greater than most any synagogue in America.

BTC is known nationally for the crowds it draws to services during the winter season (November thru April): upwards of 1,000 worshippers without a bar/bat mitzvah celebration in the main sanctuary, as well as a family Shabbat experience which attracts upwards of 150. Many weeks there are one or two b'nai mitzvah celebrations which add to these large numbers. In contrast the main sanctuary hosts 300-400 worshippers during the summer months, when the family service does not run at all.

The highlights of the main sanctuary service are the sermon (or often a guest speaker) and *musaf* service, in addition to any *simchas*. *P'sukei D'zimra* begins at 9:00AM and is in abbreviated form, led by lay people. *Shacharit* is generally lay-led, often by the b'nai mitzvah candidate(s). The cantor and his choir begin the Torah service in grand form, which sets the musical tone for the rest of the morning.

The style of the cantor is one of a more popular and Israeli flavor. Cantor Udi Spielman uses a mix of traditional *nusach*, common congregational tunes and contemporary repertoire (much of it by Meir Finkelstein) to create a mood of great excitement and participation. His coloratura reflects both a familiarity with the Eastern European cantorial tradition (his grandfather was a cantor), and the sounds of the many ethnic groups who live together in Israel. It is truly a beautiful blend of old and new.

The mostly-volunteer choir is currently directed by Hazzan Sheini Steven Hevenstone. It rehearses weekly and appears on the bimah on the weeks when Cantor Spielman leads services, accompanying him in the Torah service and *musaf*. The choir sings both composed settings and holds chords under the cantor's

improvisations. Unlike many synagogues which have choir lofts hidden behind or above the bimah, BTC has the choir standing on the bimah immediately next to the cantor, the conductor able to watch for cues from him at any moment. The congregation takes great pride in its choir and, I believe, enjoys seeing the singers in their roles as community leaders on the bimah each week.

This sense of coming together as a community which is displayed on the bimah each week is an excellent reflection of life at BTC. While a very large congregation, there is a real sense of community when walking through the halls. Each person is welcomed as they enter the sanctuary for services, and the staff makes a true effort to say hello to everyone visiting the synagogue during the week. I believe the key to BTC's success is that its core values of excellence, community and warmth are reflected both on and off the bimah, and I know that Rabbi David Steinhardt and Rabbi David Englander have worked hard with their team of clergy and staff to ensure that such is the case.

In a recent speech to the congregation, Rabbi Steinhardt outlined two important features of the community that allow it to continue to remain so vibrant, even in the face of change: 1) programming has moved from an “event-based” model to an “engagement-based” approach, and 2) the older generation delights in the vision of younger people becoming involved. In too many congregations we hear story after story of resistance to change by a majority of the older generation, but BTC has done a fantastic job of engaging its members, allowing all to feel an important part of the community – and worship services are a fine example of this work.



Sinai Temple (Los Angeles, CA)

- ❖ *Team: 3 Rabbis, Cantor, Music Director/Organist, Ritual Director*
- ❖ *Approximately 2,000 member units*
- ❖ *Cantor Marcus Feldman has served since 2012*
- ❖ *Attended service November 2012*

Sinai Temple is home to perhaps the premiere music program in Conservative synagogues across the United States. On Shabbat, it includes the Cantor with organ and choir; on High Holy Days it is expanded to include a string quartet and harp in addition. In addition, the synagogue has a very rich Cantorial history including such luminaries as Leib Glantz, Carl Urstein and Meir Finkelstein.

One feature that sets Sinai Temple apart from almost every other synagogue in the country (aside from the number of worshippers present each Shabbat) is that there is a published schedule for Shabbat morning services on the website, and great care is taken to abide by that schedule to the greatest extent possible each week. It is as such:

8:45-9:05AM Birchot HaShachar (lay led)

9:05-9:30AM Shacharit (children's choir or bar/bat mitzvah)

9:30-10:45AM Torah Service (Cantor and Choir/Organ), including celebration of B'nai Mitzvah; Occasional Choral Selection

10:45AM-12:00PM Musaf (Cantor and Choir/Organ), Sermon, Celebration of Birthdays and Anniversaries, Announcements

Of course there are variations to the schedule which can cause services to run slightly past 12 or the order of services to shift. I observed services over Thanksgiving weekend, for example. That week there was a guest speaker, a choral presentation of a setting of "Mizmor L'todah" in celebration of Thanksgiving, two B'nai Mitzvah and extended announcements. I found out afterward that a small signal was given on the bimah and immediately the hidden choir and organist knew that *musaf* would be chanted as a *heiche kedusha* - still with all the pomp and circumstance of the choir and organ, but in short form. Had I not found out a last-minute decision was made, I would not have known because it

was so seamless. Even more impressive is that Cantor Feldman had only been serving the synagogue for less than five months at that point, yet had such a fluid system of getting information out quickly and in an unnoticed fashion.

The choral repertoire is a mix of both the “greatest hits” of classical twentieth century (and earlier) synagogue music and contemporary repertoire. As Meir Finkelstein was cantor of the synagogue for many years, much of his music remains a beloved part of the synagogue’s musical tradition. It would not be uncommon, for example, to hear Dunajewsky’s *Kedusha* sung immediately followed by Finkelstein’s *L’dor Vador*, then later Rapaport’s *Modim* followed by Michael Isaacson’s *Sim Shalom*. The choir rehearses as needed for major services, but has generally been singing together for so many years that the professional choristers are able to sing any piece of the repertoire with little advanced notice.

Another interesting change over the years is the sound of the organ. While originally a pipe organ, the instrument was updated with a hybrid pipe-electric organ some years ago. The console was then further updated with the ability to play sounds from an additional module such as string pads, electric piano and other instruments. The possibilities for the organist are endless and he adjusts the sound of the instrument based on what he and the cantor wish to convey at any moment.

The synagogue surely takes pride in its services, with weekly attendance of over one thousand worshippers in the main sanctuary and several other options for family-friendly and alternative worship occurring simultaneously. Rabbi Wolpe, Cantor Feldman and Music Director Aryell Cohen deserve great praise for the high level of attention to detail they exhibit in the production of each service. The joy they bring to all present is easily seen and there is a real sense of awe in the sanctuary each week.



Beit Breira Samu-El Or Olom (Kendall, FL)

- ❖ *Team: Rabbi and Cantor (Conservative membership), Rabbi and Cantor (Reform membership)*
- ❖ *Approximately 350 member units (majority belong to Reform community, less to the Conservative community)*
- ❖ *Cantor Ronit Rubin (Conservative) has served since 1999*
- ❖ *Attended service February 2013*

Bet Breira Samu-El Or Olom (BBSOO) is a hybrid community of two distinct congregations sharing one facility (hence the name Bet Breira - “House of Choice”). The Conservative congregation, Samu-El, merged in to Or Olom’s (Reform) facility some years ago, and the two congregations seem to have, for the most part, a very cordial relationship.

On Friday nights, the Conservative congregation meets in the ballroom while the Reform service takes place in the main sanctuary. On Saturday mornings, the two congregations switch places. On occasion it will happen that the Reform community hosts a Saturday morning bar/bat mitzvah service, which causes the Conservative congregation to complete services by 10:15AM (as happened the week I visited).

Cantor Rubin has made it clear that it is her goal that the congregation sing with her as much as possible. She uses many traditional melodies and fills the spaces in between with correct *nusach*, though in order to keep the Congregation engaged and singing she chants at a very fast pace. As she and Rabbi Schonblum are very concerned that services should not go beyond a certain length of time, sections of the service are, on occasion, skipped over or abbreviated.

There were no revolutionary ideas, and it did not seem that there was great (if any) variance in the musical component of the service from week to week. There is certainly something to be said for consistency, however too much of a good thing should occasionally be revisited.

All in all, it was a prayer experience enjoyed by those present and all seemed moved in a positive direction at the end of the morning. I would be curious to see how they react to a different type of service with more variance and in which time was not such a constraint (they completed *shacharit*, Torah reading and *musaf* in under two hours).

Anshe Emet Synagogue (Chicago, IL)

- ❖ *Team: 4 Rabbis, Hazzan, Ritual Director*
- ❖ *Approximately 1,300 member units*
- ❖ *Hazzan Alberto Mizrahi has served since 1992*
- ❖ *Attended service November 2012*

Anshe Emet is a large urban synagogue - the major Conservative synagogue in Chicago. It is one of a shrinking number of synagogues in the country which celebrates *hazzanut* and employs a renown Hazzan who has not only mastered the traditional styles but continues to innovate with new and different musical styles.

Shacharit is led by a lay-person or student in a traditional style, and begins at 9:30AM. The Anshe Emet website describes as a “beautiful Shabbat experience”, full of life-cycle events, with “prayer participation and Torah study [at] the core of the spiritual service.”

Hazzan Alberto Mizrahi is one of the leading interpreters of Jewish music, in its varied styles, in the world. His vision is one of constantly bringing the best of Jewish music to his congregation, be it classical cantorial recitatives, Sephardic melodies or the latest compositions. By fusing many styles of music in the same service, Hazzan Mizrahi has kept his congregation engaged in the sacred sounds of Judaism while allowing them to be constantly excited and challenged by new music.

In an interview about his philosophy of worship music and *nusach ha-tefillah*, he attributes his success to continually updating his repertoire and presenting new-found music to his congregation. Additionally, he believes that it is very important to his services that, “*nusach* is the host, other music is the guest.” This is a very important concept, and one that is not realized often enough. In making such a statement Hazzan Mizrahi does not at all deny that there must be a place in the modern synagogue for popular melodies, “traditional” melodies and even borrowed melodies. However, that music must be surrounded and embraced by the traditional prayer modes which have accompanied Ashkenazi Jews in prayer for centuries.

Musaf involves a beautiful blend of traditional *nusach*, well-known congregational melodies, *hazzanut* and contemporary repertoire. In just thirty minutes or

so, Hazzan Mizrahi takes his congregation on a musical journey spanning over a century of Jewish music. This is a very important function to note as it allows the greatest number of people in a multi-generational synagogue to be touched by something familiar to them and relevant to their lives. The biggest treat of all, however, is to hear the sweetness of the Hazzan's voice as he interprets each note and syllable as if it were a gem which he was entrusted to guard. He takes such joy in bringing others closer to song, *tefillah*, each other and God, and it is apparent both in his delivery of the service and in the reaction of his congregation.



Temple Gates of Prayer (Flushing, NY)

- ❖ *Team: Rabbi, Cantor, Ritual Directory*
- ❖ *Approximately 175 member units*
- ❖ *Hazzan Benjamin Tisser has served since 2010*

Temple Gates of Prayer is the oldest continually-operating synagogue across the North Shore of Long Island. It has a rich Cantorial history including such leading Hazzanim as Moshe Bazian z”l, Jacob Mendelson, Aaron Bensoussan and others. This rich heritage still influences much of the musical tradition that exists in the sanctuary today.

The fact that a traditional style of *davening* has remained in place for so many years is greatly due to Rabbi Albert Thaler, who has served the congregation since 1981. Rabbi Thaler has a great affinity for *hazzanut* and correct *nusach*, owing much to his experience as a *baal tefillah* when he was a young boy on the Lower East Side and again as an adult in Princeton, NJ. The former long-time director of Camp Ramah in Nyack, Rabbi Thaler also holds a place in his heart for contemporary American Jewish and Israeli repertoire, which does have its place in the service on occasion and certainly finds its way into nearly every communal meal.

Services at Temple Gates run from 9:00AM to 12:00PM. *Shacharit* begins at approximately 9:30AM, and the Torah service around 10:15AM. Following is a sermon at 11:00 or 11:15AM and a *heiche kedusha musaf*. With the exception of Purim and Selichot, services are not accompanied by choir or instruments. The congregation prefers a professional cantor to lead the service in a very traditional style, including a recitative (or the flavors of one) in most every service.

Having served as the cantor of Temple Gates from 2010-2013, I have developed the philosophy that it is right for this congregation to be challenged with an unfamiliar piece of contemporary music on occasion, but that I can best serve them with fluid improvisatory *davening* in a more traditional style. When presented with a new piece the congregation generally accepts it well, but as a group prefers to sing familiar melodies week after week. Prior to coming to Temple Gates I had a strong sense that the worship experience should not be the same week after week, but since arriving I have learned that in certain congregations it is not such a “wrong” idea.

Over the past three years I have had the opportunity to introduce the congregation to different aspects of Jewish music and how other melodies can fit into our services, both through educational opportunities and on the bimah. Perhaps the greatest change made in the past three years is our *Hallel* service. Prior to my arrival, there were a few well-known melodies, but the bulk of *Hallel* was recited privately or in responsive English. If the idea behind *Hallel* is that we should rejoice in God as a community on a holy day, I feel we should be rejoicing aloud. With the slow and steady introduction of four new tunes, the entire mood of the *Hallel* service has changed 180-degrees since my arrival. Part of this surely had to do with my selection of melodies appropriate to the community, and part of it had to do with the trust they have in the Rabbi and me as their leaders.

Temple Gates remains unique in that it is a community which celebrates high-level traditional *hazzanut*, and it will remain so for the foreseeable future. They enjoy modern music, and the few remaining children know the modern repertoire from USY, Ramah, Schechter Schools or Hebrew School, but most agree that the modern songs have more of a place at special events or at a celebratory meal than in the services of Temple Gates of Prayer.



CONCLUSIONS

There is an old adage “two Jews, three opinions”. How, then, can we create “the solution” with over 600 congregations in a movement that leaves such major decisions up to each congregation individually?



The following was taken from a blog entry by Hazzan Mizrahi entitled, “‘Nusach’ - say it quietly!” (July 30, 2012), and summarizes briefly the issue at hand:

The Orthodox movement has decided that most services should be chanted as quickly and amorphously as possible in a “nusach” that reminds one of the Penitential prayers of “Selihot” and sometimes “Tisha B’Av”. Yes, there are exceptions, thank goodness, but in general, a vast number of Orthodox friends have neither heard a real Hazzan nor care to spend the time doing so. Conservative and Reform still teach “nusach” in their Seminaries but, especially in the Reform, cantors are advised to sing mostly contemporary-sounding folk songs, preferably with guitar accompaniment. “Ech naflu hagibborim – How the mighty have fallen!” The grandeur of the music in the Reform synagogue has all but disappeared. Finally, I turned around one day and was shocked to find that my Conservative movement pulpit, Anshe Emet of Chicago, is one of the very few left in which snippets of real “hazzanut” can be heard.

Judaism is going the way of acculturation in the name of progress and “participation.” Hazzanut (cantorial music of the late 19th through 20th centuries) is all but gone. It is understandable, after the catastrophe of the Sho’ah, that our “audience” has been decimated. We are living in fast moving and ever changing times. Yet, we truly should be careful for what we wish; we might get it. As the awe and greatness in hearing Jewish words of prayer float to the heavens in beauty and sweetness give way to campfire songs, sung together, in perfect mediocrity, we may find that the answers to our problems have become the problem, itself.

Through these past ten months of visiting and studying different communities, I have come to realize even more clearly than before that the dilemma of retaining *nusach ha-tefillah* in the synagogue is one that is not specific to any one locale or community; rather it is one afflicting congregations and bimahs across the country. To further complicate the issue, many synagogues are tightening budgets and are no longer retaining professional Hazzanim, the guardians of our musical tradition.

This idea was discussed in the Introduction as Dr. Isaacson's idea of the "simultaneity of time". We are living in 2013, in Los Angeles or Chicago or New York or South Florida, yet we must be cognizant of our past and look with great hope to the future. Many of the synagogues I visited, namely B'nai Torah Congregation and Anshe Emet have learned and adopted this philosophy. Both offer inspiring worship that honors several eras of synagogue music, woven into a beautiful tapestry that is their service.

The very first conclusion I would draw is that the key to any great measure of success is excellence. This lesson was first taught to me by Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove of the Park Avenue Synagogue. He contends that with a finely-trained Hazzan, a professional music program and well-delivered sermons, the prayer service has by default an air of excellence which excites and attracts the congregation. This is as opposed to the "campfire songs, sung together, in perfect mediocrity" that Hazzan Mizrahi speaks of in his above post. The honest truth is that even many of the Hazzanim who sing such music cannot and do not connect to it; and we know that if the delivery is not honest (from the *kishkes*), the piece will not have the power to move people.

The second lesson is that *nusach* is perhaps the greatest "clock" we have. It grounds us in sacred time, alerting us to sacred moments of a normal day, alerting us that something special is about to happen, or reminding us that indeed a holy day is upon us. What more powerful a reminder of this than music? We chant the same prayers day in and day out, but by changing the melody for a special occasion we change the mood of the whole service, creating an aura of beauty and joy if done effectively.

It is because of this that it is necessary to repeat that no matter what else is sung in the synagogue, *nusach* must be the "host" and any other music must be

the “guest”. It must be said at this point that not every piece of the service chanted in *nusach* should sound like a piece composed by Israel Alter z”l or Moshe Ganchoff z”l; it must be sung in such a way that is appropriate both to any given congregation and to our modern times.

There exists a sense that that a traditional cantor should wear a mitre and robe and bring forth a certain sound. There exists a sense that traditional *nusach*, often confused as synonymous with cantorial recitatives and concert pieces, is sung by the cantor who loves the sound of his own voice. It is my contention that neither of these is the case in the majority of synagogues today, and that if it is the case it must be remedied quickly. Nostalgia is a wonderful thing (and we see in many areas of society, including the resurgence of jazz music and in the new-found love of well-cut men’s suiting, for example), but we must be judicious in when we provide glimpses into the past and how often we do so in relation to the amount of time spent focusing on the music and needs of today’s Jews.

In considering all of the above, we must remember that “Rome wasn’t built in a day.” Change will happen naturally, whether or not we will it. However, successful change happens slowly, over time, with great care. On the one hand we cannot escape the fact that with every change there is the potential to upset (or even lose) a few synagogue members, but we must look forward with conviction, knowing that the changes we look to enact are for the greatest possible good - bringing Jews closer to God and to each other.

Another major consideration is that of repertoire choice. It may seem obvious, but not all repertoire is appropriate to every congregation. While some melodies such as Goldfarb’s “*Magein Avot*” or Finkelstein’s “*L’dor Vador*” may seem like universally-accepted settings, there are surely congregations that prefer other settings which have become engrained in their musical heritage. If, for example, a synagogue enjoys for the most part traditional *hazzanut* and does not have an affinity towards contemporary repertoire, a melody by Joe Black or Josh Nelson may not be appropriate to services (unless perhaps it is introduced as a special presentation by a religious school class, for example).

In our case studies, we have observed that some congregations do, and some do not, engage varied forms of musical accompaniment during worship services. I would argue that musical accompaniment has the great power to add levels of enhancement and enchantment to the services that nothing else does. This, of course, is with the caveat that the accompanying instrument is carefully selected

for both the intended purpose and space, and perhaps even more important that the proper musician is playing.

From 1967-1998, Aminadav Aloni was the organist at Valley Beth Shalom. His background was as an Israeli classical and jazz pianist, and he learned to play the organ on the job. When he played, it was almost as if something indescribable was happening - there was music in the sanctuary, but of a nondescript type that seemed to come and go exactly as necessary. Even more amazing, perhaps, is that all the instrumental music at Valley Beth Shalom is improvised and therefore it changes from week to week based on the mood of the music director, the cantor's chanting and the general ebb and flow of any service. To contrast, Aryell Cohen has served as organist and choir director of Sinai Temple for 38 years. Sinai Temple is famous for its large electric-pipe hybrid organ and its well-rehearsed professional choirs. There is not a moment the cantor is at the pulpit when it is not very clear that a well-rehearsed musical production is taking place. The organ is played meticulously, sometimes with the added overlay of string pads, and the choir knows every note and syllable perfectly; it is impossible to ignore the grandeur. B'nai Torah has a choir of mostly volunteers conducted by Hazzan Sheini Steven Hevenstone which joins the cantor for the Torah Service and *musaf*. Much of the time the choir sings under the cantor, holding chords to support his improvisations. Other times they present pieces of varied styles, from Meir Finkelstein's compositions to melodies from the Sephardic communities. Each congregation's musical heritage reflects the style of the community.

As music professionals and as *k'lei kodesh*, *hazzanim* must first and foremost be sensitive to the needs of the community in which they serve. There is no single "right" answer to the congregation which thinks all it needs are congregational melodies which become weekly sing-a-longs in shul. Each professional team must study other congregations (and possibly poll their own) in order to begin the process of creating more meaningful and musical services.

A final suggestion: the clergy must work in partnership and in support of one another. Together they must study various models, and I would encourage rabbinic colleagues to spend some time listening to different styles of synagogue music (including variations of "traditional *nusach*"). This allows colleagues to sit on a more level field and arms both with the same basic knowledge, though each retains distinct area of expertise. By making joint decisions, the image of a strong

community with a united professional leadership is shown, and an excellent team is the first good step toward organizational excellence.

