

A CANTOR! IS THIS A JOB FOR A GOOD JEWISH BOY?

By: Cantor Paul Kowarsky

March 24th, 1984

Is a Cantor a job for a good Jewish boy? It's an interesting question, which I am going to let you answer. When I have finished talking, you can decide.

You know, there are many requirements and qualifications necessary for a Chazan to possess. A Chazan should be free of transgression; have a good reputation; be modest and humble; be learned; he should be able to read the Torah and Prophets. He should also have a sweet voice.

There is a lovely story about a Synagogue which was looking for a new Chazan. There were several candidates who came to audition. One particular Chazan came and auditioned for the position. He was a real "Sh'liach Tsibbur", who possessed all -- well, almost all the qualifications necessary for a Chazan. He davened, and the next day, he met with the Cantorial selection committee. After the meeting, the "balebatim" of the committee were discussing the candidate. "Terrible voice!" cried one; "Croaks like a frog!" yelled another. And so they went on until a little elderly fellow on the committee began to speak. "Ay friends", he said, "do you all agree that this Chazan is free of transgression, has a good reputation, and that he is a modest and humble person?" "Yes!" they replied unanimously. The "balebos" continued: "Do you all not agree that this Chazan is also learned and able to read the Torah and the Prophets?" "Yes!" came the reply from the committee. "You all agree," continued the older man, "that he possesses almost all the qualifications for a Chazan. Are you trying to tell me that just because he has a terrible voice, you're not going to hire him?"

The three letters of the word "Chazan" have been interpreted as the initials for "Chacham" (a man well versed in Torah), "Zakein" (an older man, who is at least 30 years of age, with a beard): and "Nasui" (married) -- Nothing about how many children he needs to have -- I must have misread it or something.

The term "Cantor" is a word of Latin origin, meaning "singer", and designates the solo singer in the Synagogue. The title was probably adapted from the Church. Cantors generally prefer to be called "Chazan" because of the meaningful connotation of the term, and the qualifications and attributes inherent in it. Now how did the position of the Chazan arise? When the Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, and the Israelites taken away into captivity, the sacrificial system was abandoned. It was deemed inappropriate to recreate Temple activity on foreign soil so long as the Temple lay in ruins.

The Jewish captives, in need of some spiritual ties with their homeland and with their past, gradually began to substitute prayer, the offering of the heart, for sacrifice. By the time they were permitted to return to Palestine, in 536 BCE, the tradition of oral prayer, although not yet systematized, was well established.

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Groups of worshippers formed themselves into a "Kneset" (Congregation), and chose as their leaders a "Rosh Hakneset" and a "Chazan Hakneset". The Chazan was not a prayer leader, but probably an administrative official or caretaker.

However, here we meet, for the first time, the term which was to become the official title of the Cantor we know today.

It is uncertain when the change of the office of the Chazan to that of leader in prayer occurred. However, it is first recorded in "Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer". Apparently, after the fall of the 2nd Temple in 70 ACE, there were not enough personnel qualified to act as "Sh'lichei Tsibbur", and the Chazan was eventually retained as "precentor" (from the Latin: "to sing before" - "prae canere" - to lead in singing.) Consequently, the Chazan, who had always served the Community and Synagogue in one way or another, and had a basic knowledge of the prayer chants, was by the 6th and 7th Centuries, able to assume the task of leading the Congregation in prayer.

The Chazan in the Diaspora became a very important figure in Jewish life. He was, to begin with, the inheritor of the Levitical chants which were sounded in the Holy Temple during the daily services and sacrifices, which took place in Jerusalem. He intoned the liturgy which now replaced the rites and chants.

As time progressed into the 10th and 11th Centuries, and our people crossed the paths of the peoples whose music was rapidly developing scientifically, the Chazzanim lent attentive ears to this musical progress, and set their sights on liturgical musical advancement.

The Jewish people themselves created the hundreds of tunes and "Nuschaot", the responses of "Baruch Hu Uvaruch Sh'mo" and "Amen", the distinctive "Kaddish" tunes, and the original and unique "Avot" melodies. In a long process of acculturation, our ancestors blended the echoes of the remembered songs of their fathers with folk tunes and classical music of their own times and places, and created for us the basis of our musical tradition.

The Chazzanim, for their part, organized these melodies, modified and refined them until slowly they entered the tradition. Whatever their origin, they are now part of us, having been sanctified by centuries of long usage.

So we see that "Chazanut", the "Chazan", the people of Israel, and the liturgy, are irrevocably bound up in Jewish Prayer.

People often ask me: "How did you become a Cantor?" "Why did you become a Cantor?" "Why", I say, "I sometimes wonder myself." How, I can tell you.

When I was 9 years old, I was in a car with the famous Chazan Shlomo Mandel, who had come to South Africa from Warsaw. I was singing at the back, when he turned to me and commented: "You have a beautiful voice, why don't you join my shul choir?" He asked me to go to his choir director and audition. I did, and sang, for want of more appropriate repertoire: "A Song of Love is a Sad Song Hi Lily Hi Lily Hi Lo". I got the job. It was a choir of men and boys in an Orthodox Synagogue.

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I became the boy alto soloist, and remained in the choir until after my Bar Mitzvah. There I learnt a tremendous amount from my Chazan, and from just being in the choir and constantly participating in the services. I joined the "Bnei Akiva" religious youth movement and studied in the local "Yeshivot" and Hebrew Schools. In B'nei Akiva, we had our own Synagogue, and services were conducted by the youthful members of the group. The entire service was based upon congregational participation. There I learnt to chant portions of the Shabbat and Festival services.

After my voice changed, I stopped singing for several years, but studied music on a secular level. On completing high school, I went to Israel where I studied at the Tel Aviv Cantorial Academy under the famous Chazan Leibeke Glantz. On returning to South Africa, I spent a further three years studying "Chazanut" privately with Chazan Shlomo Mandel, voice production with Professor Francis Russell, who after retiring as principal tenor of the Covent Garden Opera House, London, England, came to South Africa to produce and direct opera, and teach vocal production.

Music I studied privately and also at the University of South Africa, where I obtained a diploma in the Theory of Music. When I was 20, I davened as a Chazan on "Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur" for the first time, and when I turned 21, I signed my first contract as a full-time Chazan in South Africa. I actually continued my Cantorial, vocal and musical studies until I left South Africa nearly 8 years ago.

Today in North America, there are three schools, one in each of the three branches of Judaism, where students may prepare for the Cantorate. Depending on a person's background and ability, the course of study may be completed in three to five years. Upon graduation, the student receives a diploma as a Chazan. The schools are: The School of Sacred Music (Reform); The Cantors Institute (Conservative) and the Cantorial Training Institute of Yeshiva University (Orthodox).

Personally, I feel that what is truly lacking in the education process of the modern Cantor, is the lack of practical training. If ever I become involved in the Cantorial education system on a broader level, I will advocate a practicum period, that is, a period of apprenticeship or articles, where the aspirant Cantor will learn from being with an experienced Chazan, the day-to-day life of the Chazan, and what it involves in the Synagogue and Community. Learning the theory, I believe, is not enough to succeed in the Cantorate.

The Chazan remains now as always, first and primarily, a "Sh'liach Tsibbur", the emissary of the Congregation in prayer before the Holy Ark. However, the Chazan's job does not end there. The nature of the North American Synagogue affords him additional challenges and opportunities. These centre around the Synagogue's function as a "Bet Midrash", a house of study, for young and old. The Chazan may become involved in teaching Jewish music, cantillation, choral singing and folk songs to students of the religious schools and to adults who enroll in the

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Synagogue's adult education program. The Chazan also shares with the Rabbi the responsibility of visiting the sick, comforting the bereaved, and officiating at joyous occasions.

You know, Placido Domingo, the famous opera singer, once likened the relationship between himself and his voice to that of Siamese twins. They are physically joined, but must be regarded and treated as totally separate entities. I buy that analogy completely. Unless you are a professional singer, you cannot imagine what is involved in the use and care of the voice. Assuming that the Chazan has had the proper vocal training, and therefore has learnt to use his voice correctly when singing, he has to continue to take care of it, and ensure that he does not abuse it - ever.

Care of the voice is part of a Chazen's everyday life. There are no real hard and fast rules, but I'll tell you, from my own experience, a little bit about what it involves. Regular vocalizing, that is using the voice by singing, is essential, almost on a daily basis. Besides the two very small vocal cords which stretch and vibrate as they meet each other during singing and talking, there are many muscles which are utilized in the phonation process. These muscles need to be exercised correctly, and warmed up constantly by the singer. It's like an athlete; the principles of gradually warming up, and constant exercise are applicable to the athlete and singer alike.

A professional singer is very conscious of even the slightest change in the sound of his voice, and the way his throat feels and responds. After all, I support 7 people on 2 vocal cords, that's (what) 3 1/2 people on each vocal cord. Some responsibility on each cord, huh!

As part of the voice care process, I do not drink milk nor eat any milk products, since they tend to produce excess phlegm. Before I sing, I never eat nuts of any kind. The little particles may cause constriction in the throat. Liquor taken just before singing can cause dryness, or swelling of the cords. Even coffee or tea may sometimes cause dryness in the throat. Smoking is taboo. So is red wine. Believe it or not, coughing, excessive clearing of the throat, shouting, and even laughing very loudly are harmful for the voice, since they cause a sort of "banging-together" of the cords. This could damage the very delicate membrane and edges of the cords. Excessive talking is extremely harmful to the singer's voice. And, again, you may find this hard to believe, but whispering is harmful too.

Of course, it is obvious that a singer should try to avoid getting colds and throat infections; he should keep his throat warm and properly protected at all times. I never talk in the cold air after I've sung. The vocal mechanism is hot after all the singing I've done at a service or concert, and the shock of the cold air on the voice could be extremely harmful. Nasal breathing and no talking is what is required. Dryness is one of the biggest problems for the voice. I keep my house, my office and my dressing room

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properly humidified at all times. Insufficient sleep, tension, anxiety, nervousness - all of these affect the voice of the professional singer. So for me, Friday nights are always reasonably early nights.

The dilemma really is that the success of even the trained professional singer depends on the intrinsic health of his vocal cords, which he cannot see. If some sort of infection is brewing inside the throat, the singer can't see it - he can feel that something is wrong. Nevertheless, as the trite saying goes; "The show must go on", so the singer sings -- and perhaps strains because of the developing infection, and causes harm to his throat. Perhaps if I could wake up every morning, and check my throat to be sure that the entire vocal mechanism is in good shape, my life would be so much easier, with far less anxiety and tension. During my twenty years in the Cantorate, I served Synagogues in South Africa, the United States and Canada. I want to share just a few of the interesting experiences which I encountered. When I became a lawyer and appeared in court for the first time, the judge said:

"Mr. Kowarsky, it's a pleasure to have you in my court; you must be the only singing lawyer at the Bar". "No, Your Honour", I replied, "I'm the only legal Cantor, we have in the City".

I had occasion once in South Africa to officiate with my Rabbi at a Wedding in a small town, where the Rabbi was on vacation at the time. We arrived a few moments before the "Chupah", and didn't really get a chance to meet the couple. I suppose you know that it is essential for the groom to give to his bride a ring which is his own property. Anyway, we're all under the Chupah, the Rabbi asks the best man for the ring, and then asks the groom: "Is this your ring?" "No!" replies the groom. Absolute stunned silence throughout the Synagogue. "What do we do now whispers the Rabbi to me?" "Ask him whose ring it is" - I suggest in an undertone -- "Whose ring is it?" asks the Rabbi of the groom. "My grandmother's," comes the reply. Thank G-d the grandmother was in Shul. She came up to the Chupah, formally sold the ring to the groom (on credit, needless to say) and the Wedding Ceremony proceeded without further mishap.

Some grooms are so nervous when they get up to deliver their wedding speeches. One got up and started: "Mr. Toastmaster, Rabbi Cohen, Captain Kowarsky"- Captain of course, I gave him the salute, and the groom continued.

I get all kinds of questions from congregants. One recently asked me: "What is "Sfira", Cantor?" "Sfira," I replied, is a period of semi-mourning, when..." Before I could finish the sentence, the congregant interrupted: "What do you mean -- semi-mourning, does that mean that you're mourning for someone whose only half-dead?" Not exactly, I said.

I once went to a Shiva here in Toronto. I was due to conduct the service which was being held in the Penthouse where the deceased had lived. The service was scheduled for 8:00 p.m. At 7:30 p.m. I walk into the building and into the elevator. I see buttons

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numbered 1 to 5 (no Penthouse button). A sign in the elevator reads: "For Penthouse, no need to press button." I wait -- and wait. Nothing happens. I decide: "Let's try 5, its closest." I go to the 5th floor. Nothing doing - No Penthouse. I go down to the ground floor. By this time I'm aggravated and flustered. I wait again in the elevator. It doesn't move. What do I do? I press 5 again. On the 5th floor I walk around looking for a way to the Penthouse above. No sign of anything. I go back to the elevator and wait. It's now 8:00 p.m. and I hear the people somewhere up there in the Penthouse begin to "daven." "Ashrei Yoshvei Veitecha," chants someone. I'm going nuts. The people continue to daven. "Baruch Hu Uvaruch Sh'mo," and "Amen" I respond from my lonely position in the elevator. I press "ground" and down we go. Just then someone walks into the building.

"How the h... does one get into the Penthouse?" I yell. "Oh" comes the reply, "you go to the foyer of the building, press "Penthouse" there, and then, when you enter the elevator, it will take you direct to the Penthouse. "Why didn't they say so?" I yelled, and found myself in the Penthouse. The family accepted my explanation for being late, and accepted their apology for not indicating correctly how to reach the Penthouse. The humorous story tended to lighten the burden of the bereaved family somewhat, and, in fact, we became close friends thereafter.

But not all is humorous in the Cantorate. In South Africa, I had occasion to officiate at the Funeral of a young 10-year-old child. It took place in a small town about 100 miles from where I was the Chazan. The Rabbi and I went to conduct the Funeral. It was a whole-day business. At the end of the day, as we were leaving to go home, the father of the poor deceased boy came up to the car and said: "Cantor, I really want to thank you for coming all this way to officiate at the Funeral." "It's a pleasure," I replied, and couldn't stop biting my tongue all the way home. Sometimes, we just say the wrong things. Once in Toronto, I walked into a hospital room, and introduced myself to the patient, a woman, who was in a robe, sitting in front of the mirror, putting on make-up. "How are you today?" I asked cheerfully. "Well, so-so," came the reply. "I'm getting ready to go home in a little while." "That's wonderful!" I exclaimed. "Not really," she responded. "Do you have time, Cantor?" "Of course," I said. She proceeded to explain that she was going home because the Doctors had just discovered that she had cancer in her throat, and there was nothing they were able to do for her. I sat and spent a long time with her, trying to make up for my thoughtless comment. I think I did. She died not long after that incident.

But sometimes we say the right things. I used to visit a congregant who was suffering from Cancer. She underwent an operation and it seemed to have been a success. Suddenly the patient deteriorated, and she was told that she would not have the use of her legs for the rest of her life. This story she told me on a particular visit. Then she said: "You know Cantor, I'd rather die than have to live like that, I mean it," And I knew she did. She probably expected me to respond: "No! Don't say that. You have children -- where there's life there's hope," etc., etc. I didn't. I said: "I can understand just how you

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feel, and I don't blame you." This cemented our relationship, and I spent many a long hour at her bedside until in fact, she did die, not very long thereafter. Someone once said, feelings are, they are neither right nor wrong. I think it's important to bear this in mind when dealing with sick and grieving people.

Another time, I hit on the right thing to say in a hospital room was when a congregant was taken to hospital and had to undergo an operation to remove a malignancy that had developed. I was sitting with her just prior to the operation, and she was yelling: "I have Cancer. What can I do about this Cancer? Why me?" and so on. When she stopped, I said: "You know, I don't believe you have Cancer." That has a connotation of someone riddled with it in a particular area. "You, I believe, have a malignant growth, which, in all probability, will be removed by surgery, leaving you in good health." She looked at me, thought about it, and said: "Yes, you're right." Her attitude became calm, and she settled down in her bed. The operation was, in fact, a success, and she's fine now, thank G-d.

You win some - you lose some, like in every profession, I suppose. It is essential for the Cantor of today to be alive to the prevailing situations in his particular community. He must realize that if he is to maintain his position and prestige as of old, he must gather his old threads, and re-weave them into new patterns. He must constantly be at work, especially in the proper production, preservation and care of his voice, and should remain a serious student of music. Above all, the Chazan must feel that his Judaism is not a matter of business, but rather an integral part of his spiritual make-up. His musical renditions must become saturated with the history and traditions of our people. With the right education, background, experience and attitude, the Cantor will be enabled to interpret the prayers of his people in a way as to move his congregants, and to cause them to feel that only in the Synagogue, can they derive true spiritual inspiration.

If the Cantor is to retain his importance in Synagogue life, he must remain conscious of the true meaning of his ancient title: "Sh'liach Tsibbur" (the emissary of the people in prayer). He must constantly revere his position, so that his congregants too will continue to respect and value it.

I think for me, the most important aspect of my profession, is the constant awareness that I am praying to G-d, when I sing in the Synagogue, and not performing before an audience, If I become moved and inspired when I chant the prayers, I know that the Congregation will too. "D'varim hayots'im min halev, nichnasim el halev." (Words which emanate from the heart, enter the heart).

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An old prayer book contains this meditation for the Chazan to recite before he rises to chant a service:

"I beseech Thee, my God and God of my fathers. Be of assistance to me as I stand in prayer for myself and for Thy people, the House of Israel. Remove from my mind all varieties of strange thoughts and anxieties so that my thoughts be not confused. Strengthen my heart so that my devotion may be directed to Your Holy Name and my service be consecrated; that I may have only good impulses and not be ruled by evil inclinations. And let my heart love and revere Thee so that I may stand before Thee to serve and to sing in Thy name. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable before Thee, my Rock and my Redeemer, Amen."