

Shani Cohen

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I did not grow up always knowing that I wanted to be a Reform cantor, but I see my Jewish journey as part of a long chain of history that has led me to the cantorate. I have always felt the pull of God's instruction to our forefather, *lech lecha*, "go out from your home to the place that I will show you." My love of Judaism has rooted me through the many movements and changes in my life, keeping me grounded as I explored and traveled the world. My parents both made Aliyah to Israel, my mother after growing up with German-Lithuanian parents in Sweden, and my father at the age of fifteen from South Africa. Both from Orthodox homes, my parents decided to raise their children Conservative, providing my sister and me with a strong foundation in Shabbat and the holidays, the Hebrew language, and Jewish tradition. We moved to California when I was seven years old, where my journey to finding a Jewish spiritual home continued. Although I loved Judaism deeply, I felt instinctively that the Conservative communities I grew up in did not fit my own spirituality. My childhood congregation was where we went to pray, not to sing. We did not have a cantor or instruments as regular parts of our services, and the music did not engage me.

I had always felt that music was my gateway to Judaism, filling my home with joyful songs at every Shabbat meal, Hanukkah celebration, or Passover seder. What many learn at Jewish summer camp, I learned from my mother. She was my songleader, the one who taught me how to play guitar, instilling in me the joy, passion, and beauty of Judaism. Although I did not yet know what it meant to be a cantor, my upbringing formed my Jewish soul, inspiring in me a love of learning, and a foundation for what it meant to have a spiritual home.

Throughout college and up until I moved to Houston in 2013 to pursue a Master's in Vocal Performance, I had resigned myself to the belief that I would fulfill my musical passion on the operatic stage, separate from my Jewish practice and the synagogue. However, the first time I walked into Congregation Shma Koleinu's Kabbalat Shabbat services, I immediately knew that this space was different, that this congregation was different. The contemporary Reform music was engaging in a way I had never felt before, the rabbi spoke in a way that touched my heart and brought tears to my eyes, and the singing congregation made me feel like I could truly *pray*. My voice was celebrated as part of the congregation, and I felt free to bring my full self to my prayer experience. For the first time in my Jewish journey, I felt like I had found a spiritual home, one that reignited my connection to Judaism. CSK taught me what it meant to be a cantor and share my love of Judaism and Jewish music with others, inspiring me to become the cantorial leader that I never had growing up.

From Houston I moved to Israel for my first year of cantorial studies at the Hebrew Union College, where I was honored to be one of the inaugural JDC Weizman Fellows in Global Jewish Leadership. Though I knew from my own family history that we are all one Jewish people, connected across time and space to *klal Yisrael*, this fellowship gave me the opportunity to develop and share my passion for global Jewry as a future cantor. During my first Passover at HUC, I traveled to the Former Soviet Union, where I led a total of six seders for various Jewish communities around Belarus and participated in the annual chazzanut concert at the JCC of Minsk. This week made clear the values that I hold dear in my cantorate: the power of Jewish ritual to create spiritual moments of connection, the beauty of celebrating Judaism together with the diversity of global Jewry, and the ability of music to heal and bring people together.

I believe in the model of relational Judaism, building communities through meaningful connections and relationships. *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh lazeh*, "all of Israel is responsible for one another": Whether bringing in Shabbat with the whole congregation or with our youngest toddlers at Tot Shabbat, tutoring B'nei Mitzvah students, leading Basic Judaism with potential

future Jews, or visiting an older congregant in the hospital, my role as a cantor allows me to connect with every kind of community member. One of the reasons I pursued a degree in psychology in my undergraduate studies was to further explore human connection, and to try to understand people on a deeper level. For me, music can be a powerful tool in reaching people who might otherwise not connect with Judaism or the community. I will never forget the experience of being in the small, crowded chapel of Congregation Beth Elohim in Brooklyn, feeling the energy of the room grow as I led Carlebach's rousing melody to the words of Psalm 98. Our words echoed our actions, voices singing in beautifully imperfect harmony, *pitz'chu v'ran'nu v'zameiru*, "break into joyous songs of praise!" (Mishkan T'filah, p. 133). In that room, I felt the power of our combined voices pulling us away from our daily lives of *chol* and into the magic of Shabbat.

Even with the challenges of the Coronavirus pandemic this past year, I have found meaning in connecting with my congregational community in new and creative ways. On one surprisingly warm Friday evening in October, I got to lead my first Shabbat service in person since March. The twenty-five or so religious school students were the first to register for our fourth through sixth grade retreat, and this Kabbalat Shabbat service was our kick-off event. I stood under the looming stone pillars framing the entrance to our grandiose sanctuary building, breathing in through my tight-fitting mask the sounds of children bonding with their friends, aware that this was the first time this many children had gathered here for months. Instead of singing together, each prayer had its own set of movements: clapping and stomping for L'cha Dodi, circling our hands for Noam Katz's "Roll into Dark," and waving small electric candles in the air for Noah Aronson's "Let There Be Love." Each student dutifully sat on their spot on the stairs, the energy of the group palpable as we all reveled in the feeling of being near people, even from the safety of our socially distanced chalk circles. I looked out at the small group of masked students, their parents standing safely across the street, unexpectedly grateful for this opportunity. As their cantor in the moment, I felt so honored to be able to hold this small group of children through this challenging time, and create loving memories of Shabbat together with them.

I believe it is my responsibility as a cantor to creatively approach teaching and experiencing Judaism to best suit the needs of all kinds of community members. Congregants have said that I have an authentic and calming cantorial presence, while also bringing a fun energy to my work with younger students. Wherever I end up, I will bring the core values of who I am and where I come from, continuing the centuries-old tradition of the Jewish people. As a congregational leader, I look forward to celebrating and supporting each voice within my vibrant Jewish community through music, learning, and ritual. I feel so fortunate to have the opportunity to do this work, and I want to share my love of Judaism and Jewish tradition with others to help them find their own spiritual homes.