

PERSPECTIVES

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The Kantor Center publishes commentary and analysis on Jewish identity and culture. You are welcome to share your thoughts on our Perspectives with us: kantorce@tauex.tau.ac.il. We are glad to share with you the fifth issue of Perspectives.



Home Cantor

Reflections of a Chazan in a Swedish Community Recovering from COVID-19

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As a young boy, I used to gaze at the Stars of David that adorn the ceiling of the synagogue. I can still smell the same scent of the room and can almost imagine holding my grandfather's hand, a hand I haven't held for almost thirty years, full of expectations as the cantor is to begin the service.

Suddenly I am back in the present and realize that I am in the same location, but now the cantor is me: I am the "chazan."

It feels a bit surreal; who am I to stand here in the white "Kittel" garb and lead all these people in prayer, and will I live up to the expectations?

I occasionally get to act as a “chazan,” a Jewish cantor, both in Israel and abroad, but once every year, I have the privilege to do so in a very special place for me. A few days before the “High Holidays” of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, I get on a plane from Israel to lead the prayer service of the High Holidays in the Minyan where I “grew up,” in the Jewish community of Stockholm, Sweden.

It is an emotional trip not only because it is where I was raised and where most of my family still lives, but also since I was once deeply involved in the different activities of the community as a Jewish educator before making Aliyah to Israel.

The Stockholm Jewish community dates to the late 1700s when King Gustav III made it legal for Jews to come and live in Sweden without having to convert to Christianity. Most active community members nowadays, however, are descendants of Jews who arrived at a later stage, including Holocaust survivors.

The community has a quite unusual setup referred to by the German word Einheitsgemeinde, or “unified community,” in which the different streams of Judaism all work under one roof.

Thus, for example, the same Community organization employs both Orthodox and non-Orthodox rabbis who respond to the needs of their respective adherents. All in all, there are about 4,500 members of the Community and an estimated additional 4,000 Jews who are not members.

Stockholm has three main synagogues, each with its own fascinating history. Among them are the beautiful Great Synagogue, which was built already in 1870 and replaced the synagogue in the Stockholm Old Town that had served the community since the late 1700s. Another is the synagogue of “Adat Jeshurun,” the only synagogue saved from the fires of the November Pogrom (Kristallnacht) in Hamburg as its more than 200-year-old furniture and Aron Kodesh (the ark where the Torah scrolls are kept) were secretly transported to Sweden.

The synagogues represent different religious streams, but most members would probably not state they belong to any specific Jewish religious movement but instead attend the service where they feel “at home.”

The Minyan I serve in is one of a few that exist only on the High Holidays. It has hundreds of visitors and was founded in 1929 and is located in the beautiful community building from around the same time. The Minyan is called “Sessionssalen minyan” in Swedish, named after the beautiful “Sessions Hall” where the service has taken place since it began almost a hundred years ago.

The style and order of prayer are Orthodox, but, again, people from all walks of life and synagogues make up the congregation on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Many

families, like my own, have prayed there for generations. Since 1998 I have also served them as a cantor.

This year was more emotional than usual. Some might have heard of what has sometimes been called the “Swedish model” in terms of its Corona strategy. It meant fewer restrictions than perhaps most other countries; facemasks are rare. Unfortunately, many thousands of people have lost their lives to the virus in Sweden, and the Jewish community had a very tragic situation during 2020 in this respect.

As a result, the community chose to halt most of its public activities until recently. During this year’s High Holidays, community members could finally meet again. I was moved by the energy and happiness of finally being together in this particular place, and it made me reflect on my role as a cantor, not only this year but every year.

There is, of course, nothing unique about a cantor being hired by a synagogue for the Holidays. The humorous Yiddish song “Hozzonim Oif Probe” (Auditioning Cantors) with a melody by Shalom Secunda declares:

*As the High Holidays draw near,
A job market opens up for cantors.
They scan the ads placed by synagogues and minyanim:
“Cantor Wanted. Must have a wonderful voice...”*

In the United States alone, for example, an estimated 250 communities hire someone externally to lead their High Holiday services; at least 100 of them are flown in from Israel. Many are not fully trained cantors but lay-cantors, a category to which I probably belong.

One of the reasons for searching for a cantor specifically around the High Holidays is, of course, the idea within Jewish tradition that those are the Days of Judgement. Hence, the choice of the person leading the prayers is significant for spiritual reasons. But there is also a general yearly peak in religious, cultural, musical, and perhaps even social expectations and demands connected to these services, including in the community I serve.

Perhaps because of these expectations, things get a little complicated since the role of the cantor is not and has never been defined in one singular way. It is not a static function. Is the role of the cantor to ensure that the prayers sound beautiful? Or is it to inspire the congregation to pray? In Jewish sources, various aspects are described. The very word “chazan” is not even the only term used. In the religious texts and vocabulary, the person leading the service is mainly called a “Shaliach Tzibbur,” an emissary of the congregation.

Just by looking at these two ways of describing the cantor, one can discern two different kinds of expectations involved. In the word “chazan” (often translated as “cantor”), one can imagine someone singing prayers in a musically pleasant way, someone enjoyable to listen to, and hopefully, someone to be inspired by. Regarding the second term, “Shaliach

Tzibbur,” the person is seen simply as a shaliach, meaning an emissary or a representative of the community. According to Maimonides, based on the Talmud, this person is sometimes even preferably an “ordinary” person sharing the burdens of everyday life with the community.

Although Jewish law has established some ideal criteria for the role, the same sources state that under certain circumstances, almost any person is fit for leading the prayers provided that the congregation accepts them.

And that is perhaps the point – since the service is not a concert and I, as a cantor, am not performing for an audience but rather representing a congregation, the only fundamental criterion is that the congregation accepts you. Which again leads us back to the expectations.

One of the most significant changes to the cantorate in modern and post-modern times has been the increased focus on the active participation of the congregants. In his essay, “The vocation of a cantor” from 1966, the rabbi and philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote:

“One must realize the difficulties of the cantor. The call to prayer often falls against an iron wall. The congregation is not always open and ready to worship. The cantor has to pierce the armor of indifference. He has to fight for a response. He has to conquer them in order to speak for them. Often, he must first be one who awakens those who slumber, before he can claim to be a Shaliach Tzibbur. And yet we must not forget that there is a heritage of spiritual responsiveness in the souls of our people.”

Maybe that situation was one of the reasons the revolution of increased participation took place. Participation was, of course, always a part of the Jewish worship service.

Still, nowadays, active participation in terms of singing along and the introduction of popular tunes to accompany the words of the prayer book is the rule in many places, almost regardless of denomination.

This phenomenon occasionally leads to a tension that I have myself witnessed between, on the one hand, the desire to maintain the traditional “nusach” liturgical style and, on the other hand, the desire to incorporate more accessible melodies to increase the participation of the congregants and those who prefer a little bit of both.

This tension is not merely a question of style or subjective taste. For many, it touches the core of their Jewish identity and experience and carries with it a world of cultural and spiritual associations.

If in the past the challenge was finding a chazan that was righteous, liked, and had a pleasant voice, the contemporary challenge would include finding someone who also meets the expectations as to the style or combination of styles preferred.

Today that could be anything from classic European Cantorial style to the style inspired by late rabbi and singer Shlomo Carlebach where the prayer leader also takes on the function of a spiritual song leader.

(As a brief aside, it can be said that while the classical cantorial style might be subject to heavy competition within the synagogue, it has become more popular beyond the doors of the synagogue in the form of “chazanut concerts” accompanied by music.)

In Israel, the “problem” of this tension and other matters of preference can be easily solved due to the wide variety of synagogues and styles to choose from. Nobody will have to be disappointed. Moreover, in Israel, an implication of the sharper division between how “secular” and “religious” Israelis spend their High Holidays is that most synagogue visitors during the Holidays are the same people who frequently visit prayer services also throughout the year.

In many diaspora communities, however, and especially smaller ones, the situation is very different. In “my” Minyan during the High Holidays, many congregants do not regularly visit synagogues during the rest of the year. This is, for them, possibly one of the most significant Jewish “events” of the year.

In such a place with only a few synagogues to choose from, the question of “style” becomes essential, and the role of the chazan becomes very serious business, possibly even in a disproportionate way.

In addition, the synagogue is seen by many as the place where one can feel “at home” as Jews and where one may reflect on one's Jewishness while living in a predominantly non-Jewish society. The days on which people show up to do just that more than any other time of the year are the High Holidays regardless of where they are on the secular-religious spectrum.

In this context, the expectations of the prayer service, and thus of the cantor, become much more than a matter of preference or even of religious experience.

I remember an emotional encounter with an elderly lady telling me how she loved one of the melodies I sang during the service because it reminded her of her childhood in pre-Holocaust Poland.

Another person asked me to do more “chazanut” (classic cantorial style singing) because that is what he admires the most about Jewish music, and a young student told me she wants more of the “Israeli modern style” singing that I partly introduced because that made her feel connected to Israel.

And then, of course, there are the people who don't want to change anything when it comes to the melodies and style; after all, when they come to service, it is supposed to sound as it always did, because: “is that not the whole point”?

In a way, all these various expectations of the cantor make a fascinating mirror of the different expressions of Jewish identity that are all gathered in that same space for a couple of hours. That is indeed a heavy responsibility.

So, what is my role, I ask myself while standing there one minute before the prayer service starts? Is it possible to make them all feel represented? I don't have a choice, I tell myself, I must try my best not to exclude anyone, for is that not what this task has been about for thousands of years – to try your best to be a Shaliach of the Tzibbur, an emissary of the community. Every community in its own way.



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