

RABBIS AND CANTORS: A SACRED PARTNERSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

We recognize with pride the work done by the School of Sacred Music of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, which for over 50 years has trained men and women to serve our movement with knowledge, devotion, and a commitment to our past, present and future.

We the members of the Central Conference of American Rabbis value the critical role that cantors play in transmitting our Jewish heritage. They enrich our worship and help us create opportunities to discover the divine within each of us. We view cantors as colleagues who join with us in offering pastoral care to our congregants and in raising the level of Jewish knowledge and observance. We are mindful of the different roles we each play in the structure of our synagogues and support each other as we fulfill our sacred tasks as teachers and leaders of our people.

I. SACRED PARTNERSHIP

Within the context of this document it is assumed that the terms "rabbi" and "cantor" apply to individuals who are recognized as such by the CCAR and the ACC respectively. As clergy they enter into a special sacred partnership, serving the Jewish people as *k'lay kodesh*. Both cantors and rabbis bring to the relationship unique human qualities, in addition to skills and expertise gained in their professional training and life experiences.

It is essential that rabbis and cantors share an understanding of each other's roles, responsibilities and visions as they work together to fulfill the needs of the congregation and of the Jewish community. A successful rabbi/cantor team will have mutual respect and a willingness to work together to achieve *shalom bayit*. Rabbis and cantors should continually communicate, be ready to compromise, and always be sensitive to each other's professional and personal needs. Though we believe that a rigid hierarchical relationship is not the best model, we also believe that each synagogue needs to have a captain, and that it is the rabbi's responsibility to fill that role. We affirm this understanding of the rabbi/cantor relationship.

II. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CCAR AND ACC

The ACC and CCAR are the professional organizations of Reform Judaism's cantorate and rabbinate. As such they serve not only as the voice of the clergy of our movement; they are also a source of collegial support, and they provide the structure for dealing with issues that affect our movement, our people and our world. We affirm the great benefit that has been

derived by regular and open communication between the Executive Directors of the ACC and the CCAR, and encourage the extension of this to involve the Boards of both organizations.

Since the inauguration by the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in 1970 of the mandatory first year of study for cantorial students in Israel, our movement has benefited from the institutionalized opportunity for future rabbis and cantors to study and learn together. Rabbis and cantors should further enhance their relationship through shared textual study and professional development both during their time as students at the College-Institute and after their ordination/investiture as facilitated by our national and regional organizations. As on the national level, we believe our synagogues and our movement would benefit from the joint regular meeting of rabbis and cantors in their communities. At the very least there should be regular joint meetings which bring cantors and rabbis together for study, discussion of community concerns and hevruta.

III. MODELS OF POSITIVE CANTOR/RABBI TEAMS

In preparation of this document we turned for input to a number of cantor/rabbi teams who were identified as having the kind of partnerships that have proved to be a blessing to their congregations and communities. Surely there are many others who in like manner could serve as such examples, and we would be well served to utilize them as mentors in the future.

When asked to describe the components of an “ideal” rabbi/cantor relationship our respondents agreed that it must be based on mutual respect and be facilitated by open and frequent communication. Though there was a general acceptance among the respondents that the senior rabbi is the head of the clergy team, there was also a clear belief that the hierarchical model is not the best option when seeking to forge a sacred partnership. Our respondents preferred a model where both rabbi and cantor practice “a degree of *tzimtzum*,” using their individual talents to work for the benefit of their community and *l’shem Shamayim*, rather than being focused on personal agendas. *Tzimtzum* means the ability to listen, learn and compromise; *tzimtzum* means the willingness to divide responsibilities according to strengths rather than according to titles; *tzimtzum* means finding joy in each other’s accomplishments and giving each other “*kavod*” both in public and in private. It was generally accepted by the respondents that the rabbi oversees the professional staff and is the primary liaison to the lay leadership. They also generally agreed that the cantor supervises all music personnel and is responsible for liturgical music, Torah and Haftarah chanting, and the cultural arts activities within the synagogue. However, it was evident in the completed questionnaires that rabbis provided valued input regarding liturgical music while cantors collaborated in shaping staff decisions and in working with lay leaders. Again, for those who responded, boundaries are less important than using each individual’s talents to the fullest, while functioning not as individuals but as a clergy team.

When conflict does arise, if there is trust, respect and a willingness to communicate and to compromise, resolution is possible. All these partnerships share one additional thing as well – they never involve the lay leadership in their conflicts. There is a concerted effort to present a united voice to the congregation, and to resolve their difficulties in private.

There are many examples of rabbi/cantor partnerships which have added a measure of *k'dusha* to their communities and to the Reform movement. We would be well served to use them as mentors, on an individual and national level.

IV. POSITION PAPERS

My Relationship with Cantor Greenwald

Rabbi Janet R. Marder

Presentation to ACC Convention – June, 2004

Some words by the Israeli poet Haim Gouri: [Read in Hebrew]

“I’ll be an amulet, I’ll be good news
I’ll stand endlessly patient
by doors importuned and responding
...I’ll be the hand that rests on pain
and at night I’ll be a complaint department open and lit up
and I’ll be almost
and I’ll be your life hanging by a thread.”

Cantor Kay Greenwald and I understand each other. Both of us know what it is to be an amulet – to be a kind of ceremonial object brought out on special occasions, to recognize and celebrate and bless the people around us; to offer prayer on behalf of others; to ward off evil, to invoke the powers of good.

Both of us know about being endlessly patient and loving and understanding and forgiving with those who knock on our doors many times a day to ask something of us. We have been the complaint department, lit up and open at all hours. We have stood by the suffering; our hands have held pain. And we have seen lives hanging by a thread, and we have been almost, almost, but never quite the superhuman people we aspire to be.

Both of us are driven to be our best. Both of us are dedicated to our craft, and to the congregation we serve, and to the faith and tradition we represent. Both of us also have our own ego needs, our own strengths and weaknesses, and our own views of how best to realize the vision we share for Beth Am.

How do two strong, rather opinionated individuals who care deeply about music forge a fruitful creative partnership that brings out the best in us and brings blessing to our congregation?

Here is the model that does not work for us. It is the model of Moses and Aaron, two brothers who together led the people Israel. It’s a picture that at first looks very appealing. Amidst all the hostile sibling teams in the Torah, Moses and Aaron stand out as paragons of cooperative partnership and harmony.

But it is harmony at a price. It is written [Lev.28:1]: “God said to Moses, ‘*hakrev eilecha et Aharon achicha v’et banav ito l’chahanu li mitoch b’nei yisrael*’. Bring near to you Aaron your brother and his sons with him from among the people Israel to be Kohanim to me.”

Our Sages ask: Why were B’nai Aharon chosen for this position of honor, to serve in the sanctuary? The usual answer is that the Levites did not take part in the sin of the Golden Calf; therefore they were rewarded with the priesthood. But there is a problem with this reasoning: in the Torah the command to designate Aaron and his sons comes in *Parshat Tetzaveh*, before the sin of the Golden Calf is recounted, in *Parshat Ki Tisa*. Rashi, of course, claims that there is no such thing as time sequence in the Torah – *ein mukdam um’uchar batorah* [Rashi on Ex.31:18].

But the Ramban questions Rashi. He argues that the Torah does indeed know narrative chronology – and moreover, it is not all the Levites who were chosen for the priesthood, but only the house of Aaron. There must, therefore, have been something distinctive about Aaron that merited his singling out.

Rav Avigdor Neversol argues that Aaron was honored because his most outstanding characteristic was his complete selflessness; he was a man without an ego. Imagine for a moment that you are an Israelite leader and that you have been sustaining your people in Egyptian slavery for many years, while your younger brother fled the country long before. Suddenly your younger brother re-appears on the scene, announces that he has been sent by God to free the people, and that he will need you, his older brother, as his assistant.

It would have been natural for Aaron to be jealous and resentful. Yet the Torah indicates quite the opposite; it says of Aaron “*v’samach libo* – that his heart rejoiced” [Ex.4:14].

This utter negation of the self, says Rav Neversol, suited Aaron perfectly for the priesthood. Even when he stepped into the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, he would experience not the tiniest stirrings of pride, but would perform his service focused solely on God.

This, then, was Aaron, of whom God says to Moses: “You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth... Thus he shall serve as your spokesman, with you playing the role of God to him...” [Ex.14:15-16]. God communicates with Moses, Moses instructs Aaron, Aaron repeats his words to the Pharaoh.

It is a model, you see, not of harmony but of forced harmony – two voices singing the same tune, one compelled to follow the other: a hierarchical model in which the subservient partner is reduced to a mouthpiece for the dominant partner, echoing but not initiating sound; mirroring and mimicking rather than generating something new.

Real harmony, as all of you know, is achieved not through uniformity of sound but through a variety of tones, carefully structured to blend in beautiful ways.

So let me offer another model that better describes, I think, the relationship between Cantor Greenwald and me.

It derives from a verse in Proverbs: "*Barzel b'varzel yachad, v'ish yachad p'nei r'eihu*. Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens the mind of another" [Prov.27:17]. It is understood by our sages to describe the fruitful interchange that occurs between two assertive Torah students. As we maintain the keen blade of a knife by whetting it against another metal, so the human mind is best honed in dialogue with another. When students challenge one another they spur each other to ever-higher achievement.

This is very much our Sages' version of the ideal friendship, as well. The purpose of friendship or any close partnership, they argue, is not so much to make as comfortable and happy as to help us grow. And no one grows from interactions with a yes-man who simply affirms what you already believe, and reflects back exactly what you say to him. The ideal partner is one who thinks independently, communicates honestly and clearly, and – this is important – genuinely wants the best for you. The goal in relationship with another is not opposition for opposition's sake; it is, rather, having the courage to remain an individual, rather than a puppet or doormat for someone else.

This is a difficult path to walk. It means avoiding the extremes of rude, antagonistic behavior and spineless self-abnegation. It means overcoming the fear of conflict and sometimes saying things that are hard to say. It means learning to express disagreement in a sensitive and respectful manner. It means understanding that you are most valuable to your partner, and to the community you both serve, when you do not submerge your distinctive self. And it means, for both partners, allowing oneself to be open to another's views, and to be shaped by them.

Iron sharpening iron is what I have come to expect from, and appreciate about, Kay. She is a deeply principled person and I know that she will not shrink from expressing her principles. She is an impassioned Jew, and I know that she brings her passion with her to work. She has a powerful intellect, and will accept no abdication of the mind.

Kay is capable of teaching a course in modern Jewish thought and theology, of giving a lecture on American Jewish history, of officiating at a funeral and delivering the eulogy, of providing sensitive pastoral support to our members, and of giving sermons -- not only "sermons in song" but sermons in beautifully crafted words, as she did this year, speaking about her participation in the pro-choice march in Washington. These things do not threaten me; they add value to our congregation.

I depend on Kay to tell me when she thinks I am making a mistake. I depend on her to bring her judgment and integrity to bear on all the issues that come before us as a team. I depend on her to speak up in a staff discussion and let us know what she thinks, rather than sit silently seething with rage and complain about it later to her colleagues. I know, most of all, that she speaks her mind honestly because she cares for Beth Am and also for me, as I care for her.

The Beth Am clergy team has a captain, and the captain is me. Without a captain, we would be like that famous crew team from Yeshiva University, where everyone is shouting directions at the same time, and only one person is rowing. But I want a team of strong colleagues whom I can respect, and from whom I can learn. Sometimes their words will

change my mind. Sometimes we will agree to disagree; I make a decision and ask them to accept it with grace. Always I will be grateful to my colleagues, and especially to Kay, for bringing her whole heart and soul to the sacred work we share, and for inspiring me to live up to the best that is within me. I hope I can do the same for her.

Attributes of a Successful Rabbinical-Cantorial Partnership

Cantor Richard Cohn
President of the American Conference of Cantors
Prepared for the ACC-GTM Convention of June, 2004

Rabbi Steven S. Mason has been the senior rabbi of my congregation in suburban Chicago for almost eight years. I feel fortunate that he and I have built a very secure and respectful relationship.

I had already served North Shore Congregation Israel for ten years when Steve arrived. During the first year of his tenure, we were extremely measured about introducing change into our synagogue. I was mindful of his need for space to make his own assessments and develop his own perspectives regarding the future of the congregation. Steve counted on me to provide continuity in areas of worship and music, and to support the rabbinical transition by moving only gradually in new directions.

One of Steve's many assets as senior rabbi is a leadership style that creates growthful opportunities for others in a non-anxious environment. I have therefore had considerable latitude to create programming and to be largely self-directed around music issues. At the same time, I have made it a priority to keep Steve well in the loop when I am introducing variations or innovations. We maintain continuous contact on an informal basis, thanks in part to his generous "open door" office practice.

It also happens that Steve is an accomplished and flexible guitarist, able to move easily through esoteric keys, and adept at improvising fingerings from lead-sheets. I have thus been able to empower a seamless musical role for him in various worship settings, which is rewarding for both of us individually and in partnership. Steve has been very accommodating in the stylistic aspects of this work, making adjustments to his playing patterns so as to be integral with my approach.

As veterans on the clergy team, we have each done a certain amount of mentoring with our younger rabbinical colleagues. We touch base on how we feel the entire senior staff team is doing, and we represent a dialectic at times in the development of policy. Steve is deliberative and patient, holding the center on what is practicable, and applying appropriate balance when I press the envelope. This has been a healthy interplay, because there is an overriding recognition that we are being true to our individual dispositions.

Steve is an exceptionally strong pastor, highly compassionate and diligently mindful of offering others the benefit of the doubt. I have learned a great deal from him about not

jumping to conclusions and about perceiving the underlying causes of conflictual human behavior. He is fastidious about being present for me and my family in moments of need, as he is with congregants and other staff members. The standard he sets for integrity around pastoral decisions and all-around *menschlichkeit* establishes an important tone for the entire synagogue community.

Steve is not susceptible to being placed into relationship triangles. By checking in constantly with each other to be sure we're hearing the same things from those with whom we're both involved, we are able to avoid the "splitting" that sometimes goes on in clergy partnerships.

In terms of music issues, Steve is highly respectful of *nusach* and of my prerogatives around repertoire. At the same time, I try not to egregiously overreach the boundary of what is accessible to the congregation. We have an understanding that musical decisions will reinforce and help motivate the organic unfolding of liturgy in service to prayer. Steve appreciates the importance of music that will stretch interpretive and expressive horizons in appropriate measure. When I feel a little pressure from him to "go more accessible," I look for compositional approaches that will facilitate that priority, while continuing to challenge my creativity and allow some scope for the cantorial art. If anything, I have probably held back a bit too much on intensifying elements of *chazzanut*, but I believe I have latitude to move in that direction.

From the beginning of Steve's tenure, I have been included systematically with the rabbis in the rotation of bulletin cover articles, *divrei Torah* for board meetings and hospital responsibilities. In life-cycle areas, I have supported long-standing congregants to get into relationship with Steve and the other rabbis, and he has consistently advocated for the cantorial role in similar situations. I have ample latitude for developing strong multigenerational relationships and for involvement throughout the programmatic array.

Of course, all of this cooperation has been built on mutual recognition of boundaries. I understand that Steve has a unique responsibility for the overall synagogue program, and he recognizes my particular expertise in cantor-intensive disciplines. Our stresses emerge more often from adapting to situations in the surrounding environment than from misunderstandings between us. Constant and forthright communication is key. I feel blessed to enjoy such a positive working relationship.

As a postscript, I was asked to append a summary of the consequential elements contributing to the success of this relationship, and they are: allegiance to the spiritual mission; mutual respect; gradual or measured change; communication; accessibility; adaptability; collaboration; mutual empowerment; coordinated mentoring; integrity; *menschlichkeit*; self-awareness; mindfulness in relationship; deference to expertise; creative consensus or compromise; inclusiveness; mutual support; and respect for boundaries. I commend these eighteen tenets as standards for collegial partnerships.