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The cantor's changing nature

By Heather Alterisio
Advocate staff



NEWTON – Although

most recognized during the High Holidays, the presence of a *hazzan*

is lauded by congregations. After all, music plays a significant role in prayer. In recent years though, the typical role of the cantor has become less defined.

According to the Synagogue Council of Massachusetts, out of about 220 congregations, only 60 or so have an ordained cantor. Of course, this only represents congregations that have recorded this information. David Bernat, the council's executive director, adds 20 congregations have some form of a soloist or cantorial soloist.

Whether because of lack of funds or not, congregations have widened their search when in need of a musical leader. Some seek out rabbis who also love music, some hire varying levels of cantorial soloists, and others have eliminated the cantor position altogether.

"For me, I think there should be cantors, cantorial soloists, and soloists," says



PHOTO: AARON GINSBERG/TJA

Argentinian Cantors Pablo Duek, Gastón Bogomolni, and Ari Litvak and Elias Rosemberg give it their all in celebration of Cantor Rosemberg's tenth year at Temple Emanuel in Newton.

Jodi Blankstein, a local cantorial soloist currently serving at Congregation Shalom in Chelmsford. "Because one just implies singing, but I went through a good deal of cantorial training."

Blankstein represents one of the unique paths taken in seeking the cantorship. While Blankstein sought to but did not ultimately become a full-fledged cantor for financial reasons, she studied enough to do many of the tasks that a cantor typically fulfills. "Now that being said, I would never claim myself to be a fully-

ordained *hazzan*," Blankstein insists.

"Hebrew College has this extraordinary thing called the certificate in Jewish liturgical music," she says. "That program is not just 'go and learn to sing a few songs,' it was four years. I had to do it part-time because my kids were five and seven at the time when I started but it took me four years to do it. I didn't just decide 'oh, I'm just going to go sing in Temple.'"

While Blankstein originally planned to complete ordination, funds and time prevented her from finishing

that type of schooling. For her, it was between sending her children to the Rashi School in Boston and finishing her cantorial studies. In the end, she chose to send her children to Rashi.

"I do know plenty of cantorial soloists that have not done a day of training, so it's interesting there's a line between cantor and cantorial soloist," Blankstein says. "Then, there's the cantorial soloist like the ones that were in my program studying their tushies off for years who also don't want to be compared to

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someone that hasn't gone a day to class, but still got a job in a great temple."

"There are people who are cantorial soloists that have never done a day of school and for that, there is a massive difference between that and a full-fledged ordained cantor," she says. "There are people like myself who went to school for four years, studied *nusach*, studied bible text and context, studied song-leading, music theory, the cantillation of the Torah, festivals for High Holiday and for Shabbat."

Still, Blankstein respects those who are true cantors. "When you become a *hazzan* of sacred music, you are an ordained cantor," she says. "The classes for the cantorial soloist program are a portion of what it is to be an ordained cantor."

For example, Blankstein says her certification program studied *nusach* in one semester, so the participants in the program could achieve a general understanding of it. However, those in an ordination program study *nusach* in a series of courses, with each one dedicated to a separate part of *nusach*.

"I didn't just want to sing," she says. "I wanted to understand Torah, I wanted to understand liturgy, I wanted to know the meaning of the prayers – what I would sing and how would I sing it. I had to take four years of intensive Hebrew and biblical Hebrew. So, cantorial soloists, if they are truly a cantorial soloist, are based through a program. Whether they've done it at [Hebrew Union College] or Hebrew College, they have studied background, not just music. The cantors have done that and then some, then

some, then some! It is more intensive. It is longer.

"I will tell you that after getting my certificate in Jewish liturgical music and singing now in a temple for 10 years, I've had so much on-the-job training, I do everything that the cantor does," Blankstein says. "The only thing I can't do on my own without a rabbi is a wedding because that's a civil service and even those are done because I've gotten my JP for the day to do that. But I can do funerals, baby-naming, bar and bat mitzvahs."

"The difference in these titles is the training," she says. "No one that is a cantorial soloist should claim to be a cantor because there is a certain reverence to that ordination, but no one that is just singing should claim that they are a full-fledged cantorial soloist because there is schooling involved in that."

"I HAVE A LOT OF respect for cantorial soloists," says Shanna Zell, assistant cantor at Temple Beth Elohim in Wellesley, "and the musicality that they bring to the community. I think that the main benefit to having an ordained or invested cantor is the time that they take studying the history of Jewish music, studying the Torah, studying Talmud, going to seminary – which really exposes you to things that are just beyond reading sheet music, and teaching you how to connect with the text, asking you to wrestle with God in ways that are just a bit more rigorous because they're in an academic setting. And I think that having that

education helps the community."

"It's not to say that a cantorial soloist is not an effective leader," she says. "Musically, I know – I just have to say some of my closest friends are cantorial soloists. I have a tremendous amount of respect for what cantorial soloists do and I think that it's a mistake for there to be this divide between cantors and cantorial soloists and I think that there's something for us all to learn from one another."

"And anybody that is steeped in synagogue life and leading music in a synagogue has something to teach," Zell says. "I do think that taking the time to devote yourself to years of education, to making that commitment and to expanding your knowledge beyond Jewish music – but especially with Jewish music – brings an added value to any community that hires a cantor. You must go from anything from all the different modes of *nusach* to different trope systems to the meaning of the liturgy and why we say the things that we do and the time of day – there are so many elements that go beyond notes on a page.

"At the end of the day, a congregation needs to decide what's right for them," she adds. "Part of that has to do with financing also, and I understand that. I just think that any congregation that doesn't commit to having a cantor as part of their team is really missing out on a lot of wisdom and musical history and that is my feeling."

DANIEL "DJ" FORTINE walks the fine line between cantorial soloist and cantor. DJ, a part-time student at

Hebrew College in the certificate in Jewish sacred music program, has full-time positions as a cantorial "intern" and a head song leader at Jewish summer camp, yet aspires to become a cantor eventually.

Temple Beth Shalom in Needham was looking for "some sort of musical leader," Fortine says, "and the job description hadn't really been posted because they weren't in a position to hire a full-time cantor – I don't think financially, but they certainly needed something."

"They hired me as their full-time cantorial 'intern' as my title because the thought is that I'll ultimately finish cantorial school and I'll be the cantor," he says.

With something to do every day from running educational programs several times a week to leading the bulk of Shabbat services, Fortine is essentially serving as a cantor – the only missing aspects being ordination and the ability to oversee weddings and funerals.

Fortine started out and continues to go back each summer as the head song leader at the Union for Reform Judaism's Eisner Camp in Great Barrington. He was raised in a Reform synagogue in New York, went to the University of Hartford's Hartt School of Music with the intention of doing something in music education, and worked as a cantorial soloist in the greater Hartford area to help pay his way through college.

When he graduated, it wasn't a matter of "now, what?" he says. "For me, it

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was a matter of, 'Oh, I've graduated and now I can just keep focusing on this cantorial stuff I have been doing.'"

Fortine believes his cantorial position is somewhat distinctive. "The URJ has this program called the shared-positions cohort, which is for camp professionals: people who work at the URJ summer camps and who also work full-time in congregations," he says. "What it enables us to do is Temple Beth Shalom pays the bulk of my salary, but the URJ throws a substantial amount toward that so I can go to camp during the summers and be the song leader at their camp. I can also continue to be a youth professional in the synagogue setting, so I can also do some camp promotion and recruitment."

Still, Fortine finds himself at a crossroad. He has somewhat of his dream position, being able to lead at a congregation and also at camp. "If I really wanted to do cantorial school full-blown, I'd have to go to HUC, Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem and Manhattan, and that would be five years," he says. "So, I would throw away the dream job for the sake of getting ordained to say that I can do this job. Do I throw away five years of time, effort and money, and go further into debt, to come out on the other side with the same job offers?" Fortine feels lucky to have Hebrew College in Newton with some form of a cantorial program.

"I don't want to suggest that this downward trend in congregational affiliation will continue, but it's certainly a possibility," he says, adding that seminaries are growing

rapidly and he's lucky to have found the job he did. While Fortine wants to become ordained, he feels conflicted. "For me, I need to be able to do it my way. Right now, I'm on the 15-year-plan. I take three credits at a time."

SPEAKING ON THE program at Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion, Cantor Richard Cohn says he sees all different types of people in both their cantorial ordination program and their cantorial certification program.

"We see people who have classical music backgrounds, we see people who come from music theater, we have people that originate in Judaic studies with an emphasis in music and we have people whose background is in informal Jewish life, Jewish canting, song leading and I guess what you would call the informal environment of the reform Jewish world," Cohn says. "I mean obviously there are elements that cross over from one to the other of those different backgrounds, but it really is four different strings of people who display an interest in the cantorial program here," he says.

"If you look through the student body, you'll find people sourced in those four sort of subdivisions," Cohn says. "In the course of their studies here, part of the goal is to strengthen all the areas of their cantorate, but not so that they become hyper-similar to one another – that's not what we do. HUCJR really is committed to helping each student become his own\her own cantor on their own terms. So, it's not like we're stamping out duplicates.

We're very aware that the education of cantors here has to be responsive to these four different backgrounds.

"Most of the applicants for the ordination program," he adds, "are people who've got a pretty clear idea that they want to make their life's work and service to the Jewish people the cantorate of the 21st century, which is one in which people really service communities in a multidisciplinary way as leaders of prayer, as educators, as developers of programming, as pastors, as community organizers, as co-clergy in various ways with rabbis."

Much like Fortine and the influence his Reform synagogue had on him, Cohn says, "I'd say the majority of applicants have relationships with mentors already who are rabbis or cantors in the field or individuals who have inspired them around this work and who they're, in some ways, trying to emulate." Students at Hebrew Union College come from all different parts of the country, around the world and varying religious backgrounds – Conservative and mainstream Reform, as well as, crossover experiences.

There are 36 cantorial students right now in the ordination program. Nine of them are in their first year in Jerusalem, while the other 27 are in New York for their remaining four years. In the certification program, there are only five students at this time.

"Certification results in being full members of the American Conference of Cantors, which is the Reform professional organization for the cantorate," says Cohn,

explaining the difference. "Most of them stay in the congregations where they are soloists, so the certification program is really intended to provide an avenue for long-term cantorial soloists in the community to have a more complete cantorial education and was constructed with the intention that most of them would stay in those communities and then be the cantors of those communities where they've been serving for a long time. In that respect, they become clergy although they do not receive ordination proper from the college institute."

Cohn does not find that there are many cantorial soloists who have the background that they're looking for in the certification program. In fact, the certification program is on a bit of a hiatus at this time because of this. "There have to be enough people who are qualified to enter the program in order to have a cohort," he says.

"So, we can only really build a cohort when those conditions exist," Cohn adds. "Certification at least through HUCJR is for people with very substantial backgrounds, which is a little bit different than starting from the beginning and you know, having a distance learning or having a hybrid program because our certification has both distance learning and on-campus learning. Our expectation is that applicants for that – for the certification – would be having very deep backgrounds before being admitted, so it's a little hard to define. That's one of the reasons that right now we're

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not constituting a new certification cohort and we're studying it, thinking about what to do next.

"Our focus is really the ordination program," he continues, "which is a very substantial immersion program that prepares people to be successful in the cantorate as we understand it and anticipate that it will be over the next few decades. That's really our primary focus and there's certainly soloists serving in lots of congregations with different levels of background, and we're always thinking about how – at least in terms of the Reform movement – how can we best serve those individuals."

In looking at the differences between cantors and cantorial soloists, Cohn says, "There's no question that typically roles and responsibilities of ordained cantors differ in various respects from what the expectations are for cantorial soloists. And not every cantorial soloist necessarily aspires to have that kind of position with all the different parts of it."

As far as the financial aspect, Cohn says, "Our students, while they're here, have very strong scholarship support. Right now the year in Israel tuition is free at HUC. We're operating under a grant that has two more years and students entering for the next year and the following year will have tuition waivers for the Israel year and when they get back to NY, they have scholarships and internships that help. It's expensive to be in NY, but we try to provide as many means as possible to offset that expense. Sometimes

people have loans, but we're really committed to making it possible to be a student here."

NOT ALL CONGREGATIONS seek out a cantor, though. For some, a rabbi can take on both roles, or at least have the ability to do so. Rabbi Cherina Eisenberg was in rabbinical school when she saw an opening at Temple Sinai of Brookline for a cantorial soloist.

"I was so excited because it enabled me to combine these two passions of mine: singing and doing music and also the rabbinic side of things," she says. The latter meant teaching, studying and interpreting texts. "So, for me, it was sort of that wonderful combination of allowing all the different parts of myself to come together."

While Rabbi Eisenberg loved music, she did not feel the need to become an ordained cantor. She felt she could study what she needed to know with a close cantor friend of hers. In order to become a rabbi though, "I needed a school," she says. "I needed other rabbinical students to support me in my learning because that learning is so diverse."

"So, I made that choice just because I had more of a music background and I knew I could fill in those gaps more easily," Rabbi Eisenberg says. "But I really actually struggled: 'Do I want to become a cantor? Do I want to become a rabbi?' Of course, everyone says, 'You should be both. You have the skill set for both.' Ultimately, I had to really make a choice, practically, and I chose to go to rabbinical school.

"I made the right choice for me," she adds.

Rabbi Eisenberg is in her third year as a cantorial soloist at Temple Sinai. She also freelances as a teacher and performs life cycle

events – currently, she is prepping for a premarital counseling session and a baby naming.

Although she is an ordained rabbi, Rabbi Eisenberg feels she cannot give up her cantorial art. "We sing our prayers in Judaism," she says. "When that song, when that prayer is heartfelt, it opens the hearts of others and that's the intention and purpose. It's powerful and it's not to be underestimated. Rabbis can give sermons – and they can be spectacular, they can move us and inspire us – but music and prayer, if done well, can do that exponentially."

RAV-HASSAN ALIZA Berger of Temple Emanuel in Newton found a way to become both a cantor and a rabbi – a feat that helped develop a new program at Hebrew College. From a young age, she knew she wanted to be a rabbi. Growing up in Colorado, she came from an incredibly music-driven congregation, despite not having a cantor. Instead, her rabbi sang the music and the sermons, which inspired her to follow suit.

At first, she pursued opera. Then she went to rabbinical school with the interest in doing opera on the side. When she was looking for a job during her first year of school though, she saw the School of Jewish Music at Hebrew College needed someone to do admissions and recruitment for their cantorial program.

"I spent 10 hours a week during my first year of rabbinical school convincing people to go to cantorial school, telling people why the world need cantors and how important it is," Berger says.

"By the end of that year, I was very convinced."

At the time, though, there was not a dual program. During her time at Hebrew College, she took cantorial classes on the side. A couple years in, they created the Rav-Hassan program. Berger worked out a deal so she could do it and graduate on time, becoming ordained last spring.

"To my knowledge, it's the first in the country, maybe the first in the world that allows you to complete both of these trainings in the same timeframe," she says. "I think it's really responding to the needs in the world. There are so many communities now that are not in a position now where they can have two clergy professionals, and the choice between a rabbi and a cantor is a terrible choice to have to make."

"The reality is, a lot of rabbis really are very musical and there's no reason why they couldn't have the training as well to be able to be full cantors," she says.

Berger's experience is unique, particularly at the Conservative congregation. At Temple Emanuel, they have two rabbis, a rav-hassan, a cantor and more. She does not find a clear difference between her cantorial work and her rabbinical work because she uses her combined skill sets as one.

"It's so delicious, the intersection between Jewish music and text," she says. "I feel really grateful to get to do both and to get to be in a community where I get to use all those skills and learnings."

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