

For Cantor Eugene Rosner
On the Occasion of his 20th Anniversary as Chazzan at
Temple Beth Hillel-Beth El
November 22, 2009

The Talmud is clear that a person who serves as the Congregational Chazzan/Cantor must possess a beautiful voice and his pronunciation of Hebrew must be accurate (Ta'anit 16a-b). But medieval commentators were clear as well that finding a person with such gifts is quite difficult. And it appears that these gifts, though necessary, are not sufficient.

Responsa literature, based on our codes, reflect a rabbinic preference for a chazzan who is pious and God-fearing. Specifically, rabbis have often favored inviting one with these laudable personal attributes to serve as Chazzan even if that person was not blessed with musical or Hebrew abilities. For a community to find a person with both musical, Hebraic skills, as well as attributes of personal piety is a rare and unexpected gift.

To serve a congregation as a Cantor/Chazzan is an honor to be sure. But it is, as well, a responsibility fraught with no small degree of difficulty and contradiction. Beyond the skill and knowledge required, a Chazzan must be humble, modest and even self-effacing. Standing before a large congregation, however, it is difficult for the Chazzan to remember that his voice, the words he recites and his fervent expression of those words (Kavannah) can only be regarded as worthy when the Chazzan humbly subordinates his great personal skills to the message of the liturgy and to the responsibility of standing before The Almighty. In essence, as the Chazzan inspires the congregation, he must focus not so much on the congregation nor on himself but on God.

The following story, recounted by the great Hebrew scholar, S. Y. Agnon, describes that rare, ideal Chazzan who possesses the necessary combination of Kavannah, piety and musical ability.

Agnon tells of a holy Chazzan in Jerusalem named Avraham Hayyim. This Chazzan was born in Volozhin and was himself a rabbi as well. One Friday night Agnon was joined by a researcher who collected all sorts of tunes and songs from Jews from all over the world. (It is pretty clear that Agnon is referring here to A. Z. Idelsohn (1882-1938), the famous musicologist.) When they left the synagogue, the researcher was depressed. "I have 10,000 records of prayers and songs, but I have never in my life heard such a beautiful and holy prayer as this! I will give ten Israeli lirot (a lot of money at that time) in order to record one prayer from him, whichever one he wants!"

After Shabbat, Agnon went to tell the Chazzan. The Chazzan lived in a small, dark house. When Agnon arrived, the Chazzan welcomed him and had him sit down on a rickety bed. Agnon told him that he could earn in five minutes what he earned in ten months as a Chazzan, praying three or four times a day. He replied: "I cannot". I said: "What do you mean "I cannot"? Are you afraid that it is halakhically forbidden?" The Chazzan replied "I have no musical voice". He

saw that Agnon was puzzled so he explained: “When I come close to the ark (to pray), God gives me a musical voice and I pray before Him”*.

For the past twenty years, our Chazzan, Eugene Rosner has endeared himself to me and to our entire congregation on many levels. First, our Chazzan has been blessed with a beautiful and soothing voice. Second, he is regarded, even among his colleagues, as an expert in liturgy, nusach and Hebrew, resulting in readings and recitations characterized by accurate pronunciation and proper musical modes. Any synagogue would be fortunate to have a Cantor of such skill. But our good fortune extends further.

Eugene Rosner is the rare kind of person who expresses his own gratitude and appreciation for the blessings in his own life each and every day. Whenever he speaks to me, for example, he never fails to include a kind remark about the children he teaches, the parents who support him and the congregants who respond to him. Routinely he reminds me about his wife, Amy, and children, Morey and Elana, who fill his life with an immeasurable amount of naches. When Eugene stands before us to lead us in prayer, I surely hear the musical and Hebraic proficiency. But I hear and feel, as well, the joy, the gratitude, the humility and the deep commitment he expresses each time he sings.

Over the years, I have never sensed a hierarchy which places distance between he and I. We confide in each other. We sing and harmonize together and we appreciate each other’s humor (although I think that when he laughs at my jokes it is more out of pity than a reflection of the fact that what I said was actually funny!) I am certain that each rabbi finds inspiration in different places. As for me, one of my greatest sources of inspiration comes each week from the Reader’s Table, in the center of our sanctuary, from our Chazzan, from his fidelity to our tradition, from his faithfulness to the words of our liturgy, from his mastery of the tunes we revere and from the purity of his prayers which never fail to lift me.

Both personally and on behalf of our entire congregation I welcome all of you to this wonderful event of music, spirit and honor. I know you join me in congratulating Amy, who is such a great source of strength and inspiration to Eugene. We congratulate, as well, Morey and Elana, his greatest sources of naches. But today we are all here mostly to thank Eugene, for all he has done for us individually and for all of us as a congregation.

Eugene, Cantor Rosner, May you continue to be granted health and strength for many years to come as you lead us.

May you continue to touch our spirits and souls with music and prayers. And may you always inspire and lift us by that which reflects humility, gratitude and deep joy in the blessings we receive from God.

Mazal Tov, Eugene/Chazzan Rosner, Mazal Tov!

*Agnon, S.Y Lifnim Min Hahoma (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, 1975) pp 31-32.