

Jennifer Blum



To learn about worship from a Jewish cantor's perspective, Shabbat Shalom met with Jennifer Blum, a student cantor from New York City. And, from music to matzah ball soup, she gives a comprehensive view of worship.

Shabbat Shalom*: What is a cantor?

Blum: The role of the *chazzan* or cantor, as a synagogue functionary, actually goes back farther than that of the rabbi. The *chazzan* was originally the person who was in charge of whatever happened in the synagogue. In the first two centuries C.E., *chazzanim* did everything from clean the synagogue building to engage in debate with non-Jews over the validity of Judaism vis-à-vis the rival faiths of the late Roman Empire. Among the *chazzan's* many tasks was the leading of worship. Over time, the details of worship grew and both the worship text and the chant to which it was sung became increas-

ingly complex. Eventually, the cantors became specialists in leading worship, at the expense of the other tasks they once performed. Today, the cantor's role is somewhat varied. The *chazzan* is generally regarded as an expert in the multifaceted art of Jewish music. He or she is charged with leading the sung sections of our liturgy and of transmitting to the congregation the musical heritage of our people. Along with the rabbi, the cantor serves as equal spiritual leader. Because the cantor is generally in charge of all musical aspects of the prayer service and life of the congregation, the responsibilities typically involve leading Sabbath, High Holy Day, and festival worship and co-officiating with the rabbi at all life-cycle events. Many cantors have responsibilities teaching music in the religious school, organizing and conducting the synagogue choirs as well as preparing children as they study to become *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah*. It is also not uncommon for a cantor to involve him or herself with pastoral care responsibilities.

Shabbat Shalom: And the cantor can be male or female?

Blum: The 1970s and 1980s have been a period of great innovation in the American Cantorate. As part of restructuring identity, women have found a niche at the heart of ritual culminating in the investiture of the first female cantors among the Reform movement which occurred in 1976 and the Conservative movement in 1987.

Shabbat Shalom: So a cantor is almost like a rabbi's assistant?

Blum: Not exactly. They are really regarded as equal clergy members. The cantor and the rabbi often share many of the same duties and responsibilities for a congregation but the cantor distinguishes him or herself as the primary teacher or leader of Jewish musical tradition.

Shabbat Shalom: So you went to school just to be a cantor?

Blum: Yes, I am currently in my fourth and final year of training at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.

Shabbat Shalom: Do you like it?

Jennifer Blum, a professional cantor, is currently pursuing her master's degree in Sacred Music at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York City. She received her bachelor's degree in music from Northwestern University and is originally from Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Blum: Very much so. I really feel that the Cantorate is a perfect fit for me because it encompasses all of my main loves and interests. When I was a student at Northwestern University, I thought that I was going to graduate and become an elementary school music teacher. I loved the fact that I was going to be working with children passing on my love for music. The wonderful thing about the Cantorate is that I can certainly still do that; but additionally, it is a job that enables me to pass on my love for Judaism and Jewish music which has always been a very large part of my life and identity.

Shabbat Shalom: When you're going through school to be a cantor, is it theological classes that you take? Or is it more?

Blum: We do have many theological courses that we take in conjunction with the rabbinical students studying at the school. Bible, Jewish texts, Jewish history and philosophy and liturgy constitute a portion of our studies. We also spend a great deal of time studying and learning about Jewish music and the role of the cantor both throughout history and today. Many classes focus around the practical aspects of the Cantorate, for example, how to teach religious school music, how to successfully run and conduct a volunteer choir or a children's choir, how to counsel a family who has just lost a loved one. We do learn a great deal of music. Half of the music curriculum involves learning traditional Jewish repertoire and being able to chant it directly from a *siddur* or prayer book. The other half of our studies is learning Reform repertoire, which often includes some form of instrumental accompaniment such as organ, piano, or guitar.

Shabbat Shalom: What are some of your earliest memories of worship and prayer?

Blum: My earliest memory of worship and prayer must have been around the age of three or four. I remember sitting in the sanctuary of the temple I grew up at—Temple Israel in Minneapolis, Minnesota. My family was with me, and we prayed

together at services for the High Holy Days—*Rosh Hashana*, which literally means “head of the year” is the festival of the Jewish New Year and occurs on the first and second of the Jewish month of *Tishri*, as well as *Yom Kippur*, which is our Day of Atonement and the most solemn day of the Jewish calendar. *Yom Kippur* occurs on the tenth of *Tishri*. What I remember most vividly about these services, quite honestly, is the music. We were blessed with an amazing cantor who had both a beautiful voice and soul. I remember being deeply moved by the cantor's chants and melodies as they resonated throughout the sanctuary. You couldn't help but feel like you were being transmitted to another level or place . . . I also have many memories of celebrating Jewish holidays with my family. Usually, holidays in our house centered around the wonderful Jewish foods which were unique or special to that holiday. For instance, on *Pesach*, my family enjoyed my grandmother's famous *matzah* ball soup.

Shabbat Shalom: What's that?

Blum: Never had *matzah* ball soup? On the festival of *Pesach*, the eating of leavened bread is strictly prohibited. We eat unleavened bread of *matzah* to remind us of the Israelites' hasty departure from Egyptian slavery in which they only had enough time for the baking of unleavened bread from the only dough available which was unfermented. Eating *matzah* on Passover is a perpetual reminder of our deliverance from Egyptian bondage. A food custom on Passover is *matzah* ball soup, which is tiny balls of *matzah* meal in a chicken soup broth—it's pretty delicious. So another one of my earliest memories would probably be sitting in the kitchen with my grandmother while she cooked up a pot of her fabulous *matzah* ball soup which only made an appearance once a year on *Pesach*.

Shabbat Shalom: Did your family pray together when you were a child?

Blum: You know, no, not all that often. On the High Holy Days, we

always went to the temple as a family. Most of my memories praying as a child are of me worshipping during services at religious school on Sunday morning. I also very vividly remember my Consecration, which marks the beginning of a child's formal Jewish education—usually when the child enters Kindergarten. At this ceremony, I received a little tiny *Torah*, which I still have and cherish deeply. I remember this day very clearly for all its significance. While I probably didn't understand that at the time, my parents certainly played a very large role in communicating to me the importance and necessity of Jewish study and performance of ritual.

Shabbat Shalom: So, you felt a sense of accomplishment?

Blum: I don't know if it was a feeling of accomplishment so much as an excitement and anticipation of what was to follow. I have a brother who is three years older than I. I used to see all the wonderful things he was learning in religious school and Hebrew school and wanted to be just like him learning the same, exact things. I think that this Consecration service was really significant to me because it signified that I, too, could begin to embrace this wonderful thing called Judaism that meant so much to my entire family. While I didn't know exactly what that meant, I was eager to begin exploring it.

Shabbat Shalom: I know in the Christian world people speak about having this high sense of calling, or God leading them. Looking back, do you feel like that has been the case? Or, do you feel like it's more your decision?

Blum: That's a wonderful question . . . Yes, I have always felt that God has had a plan for me. Shortly after I was born, I became terribly ill. After having spent nearly a month in the hospital, miraculously, an experimental drug helped to reverse what the doctors believed to be a fatal situation. I suppose I feel that for some reason or another, God did not believe that it was my time to be taken from this Earth. I believe that

I have an obligation to help others see both the beauty and mystery of the ways in which God works. In retrospect, I think that I came to this realization later in life as I began to consider entering the Cantorate.

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Now I feel that my purpose in life is to help empower people to realize their own relationships with God.

Shabbat Shalom: So, what is your vision? What purpose do you expect to fulfill in what you are doing?

Blum: Above, all, I see it as my role to facilitate the prayer experience in order that I might help people to better understand their relationship with God. I also see it as my goal to expose people to and to connect people with our very rich and diverse tradition of Jewish music. I believe that there is no better way to touch a person's soul than through the singing and listening of Jewish music.

Shabbat Shalom: Now, what are some factors that play into that? I heard someone describe music like love; you can't really put a finger on it. Is that the way music affects you?

Blum: Yes, it's extremely difficult to pinpoint precisely the effect music has on a person. Music certainly has very definite psychological as well as physiological benefits. On the physiological level, singing fosters overall well-being. The physical act of singing can relax a person and bring about a state of euphoria quite similar to the famous "runner's high."

Often, I feel that when I sing, music serves to transport me to a different state of being. I feel that when I am singing, I tend to glow from within—it is a feeling that can not be achieved through any other means. When I listen to music, I'm filled with a similar feeling of calm and inner peace.

Shabbat Shalom: It is clear from what you've said that music plays a very big part in making the worship experience touch our feelings and emotions. But, what should be the relation between emotions and thought in worship? Should one be more prominent? Should there be a balance between the two?

Blum: Ideally, yes, it is my goal to strike a balance. I don't think any person can define for another what would constitute the ideal mix of thoughts versus emotion in prayer. Each person comes to pray with his or her own spiritual needs. My role is to provide a varied and rich musical experience which, hopefully, will in some way reach all those who worship with us. I think that this can best be achieved through exposing people to a variety of musical expressions. I often find myself choosing music which is more melodic in nature because I think that people find this more accessible and easier to grasp. I do like to create a prayer environment in which people feel

that it's safe and welcoming to sing along with me. I want people to feel involved in the experience of prayer rather than to merely sit back and listen.

Certainly, there are times in a service where passively listening is appropriate. I see it as my primary challenge to strike a balance between both worship experiences.

Shabbat Shalom: Would you say that is typical to yourself or a general trend in worship?

Blum: The trend that I often see in worship these days is cantors and rabbis who want to raise the con-

sciousness of their worshippers. This may mean exposing people to modern or contemporary readings or liturgy, or singing a contemporary musical setting of an ancient melody. I do believe that we have a responsibility to keep alive our ancient traditions while at the same time making them fresh and applicable to the world in which we are living today.

Shabbat Shalom: Briefly, what is worship? What is prayer? And, how are they related?

Blum: When Jews and Christians speak about worship, I think they both have in mind some kind of communication with or apprehension of God. My teacher at Hebrew Union College, Dr. Larry Hoffman, would say that when the individual worshiper has a need to worship, we mean that a person in prayer must be able to actually encounter God, to recognize the Divine encounter for what it is, and learn to express the communication, verbal or otherwise. Worship, or the act of prayer, enables people to encounter God. In Judaism, we encounter God through private prayer as well as communal worship.

Shabbat Shalom: So, worship is a personal and corporate communing with God. But, in more detail, what is the nature of it? Is it this high mystical thing where God is up there and we are down here? Is it more personal and intimate as if you were talking to a close friend? Or is it a little bit of both?

Blum: For centuries Jewish philosophers have been asking the same perplexing questions and each has been able to shed light in his or her own, unique way. I believe that each human being has been created in the image of God and thus, we all possess God-like qualities. Through worship, study of *Torah*, and performing acts of kindness or loving deeds, we help to sustain the world and uphold our relationship with our Creator.

Shabbat Shalom: You have addressed this question quite a bit already, but what role do you see music playing in prayer and worship?

Blum: Jewish tradition has long

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respected the power of music. Although the elaborate musical rituals of the Levitical orchestra and chorus were silenced when the Second Temple was destroyed, music flourished in the synagogue. Music was the perfect vehicle for conveying both the literal meaning and the sentiment of new texts which came to substitute for the ancient sacrifices which were offered to God. I see music's role as an enhancement of the prayer experience. Certainly, one can pray without music, and we often do just that. When music is incorporated into the worship experience, it has the power to evoke deep associations and feelings and to define each of us in time and space. Like nothing else, I believe, it has the power to link us with other Jews all around the world and across centuries of tradition.

Shabbat Shalom: What other vehicles are effective in communicating our thoughts and feelings to God?

Blum: There are many different possibilities for ways to communicate with God besides music. Some people see dance or art as a means for communication with the Divine. In the services I led during my two-year student cantor internship at Temple Beth-El in South bend, Rabbi Morley Feinstein often beautifully utilized contemporary readings or poems to add to the worship experience. Together, we created moments in the service for private meditation and thought and other times for communal worship. There are times when Rabbi Feinstein either read a portion of the service alone or else I sang a portion of the liturgy. At other times, the entire congregation sang or read together as a united community.

Shabbat Shalom: Building on the ideas of vehicles or the elements of the worship service, it seems there are times when the audience is more engaged or attentive than other

times. Do you sense that there are certain times when your congregation is more engaged in worship? For example, a weakly recited prayer versus a stirring song, or vice versa. If this is the case, what do you do to bring them into communion with God throughout the whole worship service?

Blum: It's extremely difficult to gauge the effectiveness of prayer. We as prayer leaders like to believe, of course, that we are reaching out to our congregants and enabling them to have a meaningful prayer experience. We also like to believe that we are providing a worship setting in which individuals are engaged a majority of the time. Unfortunately, I am sure that we do not always succeed. Congregants are usually quite vocal about what their particular needs are; and if, in fact, they are being met. As prayer leaders, our challenge is to be open and responsive and sensitive to the many and varied needs of those praying with us. From

a cantorial perspective, I have found that services which are most successful are those that provide opportunities for both congregational singing and solo cantorial expression. There are places in the service when I love people to join in and sing with me, other moments when I want to create an opportunity for meditation and reflection.

Shabbat Shalom: A long-standing controversy for people of faith has been the question of what type of worship style is appropriate, which is closely related to the use of various musical instruments. What should be our practice and attitude regarding the use of different musical instruments and worship styles in the synagogue and church?

Blum: I can only answer the question from my perspective as a student cantor working within the Jewish Reform movement. In ancient times, when the sacrifices were offered, Temple worship was accompanied by a veritable orchestra, even though we have no record of what those instruments sounded like or what music was played. The psalms speak of lyres, harps, trumpets, and drums as they urge us, "Sing a joyful song" to God. The use of instrumental accompaniment often served to enhance or beautify ritual. Throughout the hundreds of years of our Dispersion, Jewish communities flourished all over the world. Many developed their own widely diverse musical styles, often borrowing heavily from the surrounding culture. The resulting variety of musical practice has produced aesthetic divisions among Jews as individual communities cling fervently to their unique practices. In many American Reform communities today, as was the practice in the Second

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Temple, instrumental accompaniment is utilized to enhance a simple chant and make it more aesthetically pleasing to the worshiper. Composers writing music for the Reform movement will often score pieces for organ or piano accompaniment. It is not uncommon to hear pieces written for guitar, flute, cello, drum, etc., accompaniment as well. For many composers writing today, there really are no limitations.

Shabbat Shalom: As a point of clarification then, an Orthodox service would have no music?

Blum: They certainly would have music but no musical accompaniment. In an Orthodox service, the prayers are chanted *a capella* or without the use of instrumental accom-

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paniment. The cantor generally faces east, in the direction of the *Torah* ark and Jerusalem and often chants with his back to the congregation. The cantor prays or *davens* directly from the prayer book and the music is generally improvised based on a specific *nusach* or musical pattern. The pattern is specific to the time of the service and sometimes even to the specific prayer within the service.

Shabbat Shalom: Have you had a lot of exposure to Orthodox chant in school?

Blum: At Hebrew Union College, we learn to chant prayer for either a traditional or Reform setting. Both are quite interconnected and so exposure to and knowledge of both is necessary.

Shabbat Shalom: What is the significance of the Sabbath in relation to prayer and worship?

Blum: All Jews, whether liberal or Orthodox, concur that *Shabbat* is a time for spiritual refreshment and a break in the routine of daily labor. For many, the Sabbath is also a day of synagogue worship. Sabbath services usually feature study and discussion of the weekly *Torah* reading, as well as the singing of festive songs.

Shabbat Shalom: Ideally, what should be the relational dynamics between the worshiper and God? Or what do you want to happen for your congregants as they worship?

Blum: I can not give you an answer about what "should" be the relationship between the worshiper and God because each person prays to God for different reasons. As Jews, we do believe in a personal God whose many ways may be beyond our comprehension, but whose reality makes the difference between a world that has purpose and one that is meaningless. We believe that all human beings are created in God's image and thus we are endowed with

infinite potential for goodness. We believe too, that human beings actualize their potential as part of a greater community. The people Israel is such a community. We go back to Sinai and have continued to exist despite all odds against us from then until now. At Sinai, we received the *Torah* which provides us a moral and ethical framework upon which we live our lives. Jewish belief, then, can really be summed up in three words: God, Torah, and Israel. I'd like to be able to teach a child that God can be realized in infinite places and in infinite forms. God may take the form of a stranger on the street or the bank teller we visited over the noon hour. With this in mind, we must treat all people with respect and love.

Shabbat Shalom: So this should be our awareness. What would you classify as your expectations of God?

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Blum: I can comment on how Jews view God. Our God is a God of creation, revelation, and redemption. Belief in one God is central to Judaism as a religion. Judaism teaches that God created the universe and that this creation is a continuing process. We as human beings

are charged with being partners with God in bringing about creative evolution. We believe that God revealed the *Torah* to Israel. Revelation is primarily associated with standing at Mount Sinai, but we believe also in continuing revelation thereafter. Third, we believe in redemption, that God will someday redeem us all in the end of time just as God intervened in history once to rescue the Jews out of Egyptian bondage.

Shabbat Shalom: You talked about a need for both private and corporate worship. Are there any essential differences which are important to be aware of, or which complement one another in developing a whole meaningful worship experience with God?

Blum: Personal prayer between the individual and God may take place anywhere, any time, and with no one present but God and the individual worshiper. Public services, however, have traditionally required what is known as a *minyan*, that is, the presence of at least ten adult male worshipers. Behind this idea of a minimum number is the notion that Jewish spirituality is in some sense communal. We all received the *Torah* together on Mount Sinai, and we are all part of the people Israel. To clarify, not all public prayers require a *minyan*, but those prayers especially associated with God's sanctity do: the *Kaddish* (memorial prayer) or the *Kedushah*, which celebrated God's sanctity with the words, "Holy, Holy, Holy."

Shabbat Shalom: From your experience with worship, what methods or ways of corporate prayer and worship have you found to be particularly meaningful?

Blum: I believe that there is an incredible amount of wisdom in the idea that the *Kaddish* or memorial prayer is to be recited in the presence of a *minyan*. For a person mourning the death of a loved one, reciting this prayer among an entire community can be immensely comforting. Speaking as a cantorial student, one prayer which immediately comes to mind is the *Birkat Hamazon*, a blessing which we can

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recite either privately or as a community to thank God for the meal which we have enjoyed. One of my fondest memories of hearing this prayer chanted communally occurred in Israel when I spent a year of study there in 1994. I remember walking down a narrow street in Jerusalem one Friday night after dinner time and from all different directions came the sounds of families chanting this blessing. It was an awesome experience and one that I know will stay with me.

Shabbat Shalom: Do you have any unusual methods of prayer that you have found to be effective in your personal life? Or, how do you pray when you are by yourself?

Blum: I don't think that I consider the way in which I pray to be unconventional or unusual really. In Judaism, we have a number of prayers to be recited should one witness a beautiful sight or a natural wonder. So, if I'm outside and I witness a rainbow or a beautiful sunset, for instance, I like to take a moment to acknowledge and praise God. Since I was a child, one of my personal rituals has been to recite the *Shema* before bedtime. This is the prayer which expresses the oneness of God and is the central affirmation of Jewish faith.

Shabbat Shalom: What are the differences you have found between a "traditional," or scripted prayer, or maybe one handed down orally, and a prayer when you're expressing it yourself?

Blum: I would say that there are more parallels than differences. Most of our prayers fall into certain categories. We have blessings for enjoyment to remind us that nothing should be taken for granted. These blessings enable us to express to God our amazement with the world. Second, we have blessings which thank God for the privilege of being able to perform a *mitzvah*. For example, the blessings we say over lighting the Sabbath candles each Friday night. Lastly, we have blessings that we say thanking God for the senses such as smell, taste, and touch. Most scripted prayers generally have the same formula: they start with a personal address which is generally in second person. This serves to emphasize that our God is a God who is close or near to

us. We then switch to third person as we talk about the act itself and God's magnificence. The rest of the prayer stays in third person as we recite all of the things that God has done for us.

Shabbat Shalom: How can we teach our children to love to worship, pray, and make music? In other words, how should we seek to shape their heritage with these elements?

Blum: Well, I think that first of all, we need to begin to reach out to children at a very young age. Certainly, we can make a difference in an older child's life, but I think that the earlier we get them through the doors of the temple or church, the more impact we will be able to make. I think that one of our biggest challenges is to make worship and prayer and music exciting to children. We have to be

willing to take risks, act silly if need be, and say, "this is a really neat thing to be learning about." We need to physically bring children into the synagogue or church or home, perform the rituals with them, show them the Jewish symbols and then, when all that is done, hope that these ideas and skills are reinforced when they leave and go back home to their parents. I think that one of the main secrets to making this whole process work lies in educating the adults or parents so that they know what it is they are supposed to be reinforcing! As far as music is concerned, we need to sing with our children and expose them to all different varieties of Jewish music. Sometimes this might mean taking an ancient prayer and setting it to a contemporary rock or pop song that they love. To a child this says, "Wow, even music can be made cool and fun!" I really be-

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lieve that if children can relate to their Jewish world through a piece of music, they are going to be enriched as human beings . . . You know, we have so many teaching "moments" or opportunities to impart knowledge or information to a child. If we just try to keep our eyes and ears open at all times, we have the wonderful ability to make a lasting imprint in a child's life.

*This interview was conducted by James G. Moon, a graduate theology student.