

20th Anniversary Tribute Speech

By: Cantor Paul Kowarsky

September 16th, 2000

Many of the early Cantors, who spearheaded the development of the modern Cantorate, were known by nicknames related to voice quality, corporal characteristics, personal idiosyncrasies and synagogue affiliation. So we hear about Yossel Bass, Yeruchom Hakoton, Nisi Belzer, Chone der Bavuster and Yankele der Heizeriker. To my knowledge, my given names remain intact in the community, and for that I am very grateful. Who knows what my appellation might be, and I prefer not to hazard a guess.

More than 20 years ago, I hesitated to audition for the Cantorial position at Beth Tzedec, since it was to involve a second immigration to Canada, this time from the United States - previously from South Africa.

“You owe it to yourself to audition. Beth Tzedec is not just another synagogue!” were the persuasive words of Paul Rothstein, then chairman of the Board of Governors. Rothstein was correct; Beth Tzedec is indeed not just another shull, but one of the leading congregations in the world. So when president Joe Kerzner and his Cantorial selection committee informed me of their decision to invite me to accept the position of Senior Cantor, I was elated and extremely proud.

Two decades have passed. Much has changed. The Bar and Bat Mitzvahs of today were not even born when I arrived at Beth Tzedec. The brides and grooms at whose weddings I officiate now, were infants and toddlers in the summer of 1980.

I have survived 12 presidents. Bob Cohen is my lucky number 13. I was happy to see many of these presidents come, but I must admit that sometimes I was even happier to see some of them go.

Despite the political problems which inevitably permeate synagogue life, I have myriads of wonderful memories, which are indelibly imprinted in my mind.

Over the years, I have tried to establish and maintain a high standard of liturgical music, as befitting Beth Tzedec, a flagship congregation in the Jewish world. But it continues to be imperative for me to adjust my style of davening, of leading the congregation in prayer, so as to meet the challenges of an ever-evolving Jewish community.

Congregational participation at services is the theme of the times, and although that is indeed paramount, nevertheless the modern Chazzan must not relinquish his commitment to the traditional recitative, the Cantor's free chant, his improvisational mellismatic interpretation of our sacred prayer heritage. I endeavour to ensure that my congregation sings appropriate repertoire rooted in our traditional liturgical nuschaot, our precious prayer modes and motifs, which have been handed down to us through the generations, and which I vow to continue to guard throughout the remainder of my Cantorial career.

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Recently, I returned from my sabbatical, during which I visited synagogues and Jewish Community Centres in many parts of the globe. I attended services, led services, and met with clergy and lay leaders. We must never lose sight of how fortunate we are to belong to Beth Tzedec, a haven for everyone to enter at will - a synagogue with its vast reservoir of boundless opportunities for education, prayer, consolation, culture and comfort. How lucky we are, to reside in the most livable city in the world, in this great country of Canada. Even though on occasion we sing "Oy Canada, vots going on mit you?"

All over the world strict security measures control the access to Jewish community centers and houses of worship. In Zurich, for example, a person is not permitted even to enter the Kosher Restaurant, housed on the ground floor of the Jewish Community Centre- adjacent to the sidewalk, without passing through strict security, including the presentation of his/her passport.

Here in Canada, multiculturalism is the motto, and every person is free to practice his religion openly and with the respect of the Government and the general community. How truly blessed we are!

I am grateful for all the support, understanding, care and concern that I have received from my congregation at large, throughout my tenure as your Chazzan.

My association with my predecessor, Cantor Emeritus Joseph Cooper, has always been one of mutual respect and collaboration in the best interests of our congregation.

I have been privileged to have worked harmoniously (relatively speaking, I guess) with Rabbis Friedberg and Frydman-Kohl, as well as with the other Rabbis, Cantors and Ritual Directors who now serve, as well as those who have served Beth Tzedec in the past. Actually, I was not too happy with our current clergy, who gave me only 3 verses to read from the Torah for my Aliyah this morning. The last verse ended "Baruch Atah B'vo-echa, Uvaruch Atah B'tseitecha" – "Thanks a lot for coming, and thanks for going." The test of sincere friendship is that it must transcend the tides of conflicting viewpoints, and Baruch, ours does just that. Your words of tribute at services this morning were of the highest order, and I was deeply touched.

How fortunate I am to have worked with a Choir and Choir Director of the calibre of Gordon Kushner. From my interaction with Gordon, I have learned and grown so much, albeit not always in the right places. The surprise new musical rendition of "Ya-amod" when calling me up to the Torah today, was magnificent. Thanks to you and the choir.

I would be remiss if I did not pay tribute to my former secretary Rosemary. Thank you for being here tonight. To Florence, Lenore and the office and maintenance staff, thank you for all you do so obligingly and efficiently. I wish Florence a speedy and complete

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recovery, and I am so glad that you are with us tonight. Special thanks to Zina Glassman and Simcha Simchovitch for the beautiful display which they arranged in the display cases, regarding my career at Beth Tzedec. Of course, Bill and Sharon made sure that the bar completely hid the entire display. Thanks a lot!

Bob Cohen, my presidential friend, words that emanate from the heart penetrate the heart. Thank you so much for your words of tribute to me. I am sure my mother will be thrilled.

To my true and sincere friends Sharon and Bill of Caterers York, I can only imagine how hard you worked. Your boundless efforts to make this evening the resounding success that it is, will remain with me well into the future.

Ben Maissner demonstrated by his chanting and singing this morning, why he is regarded as one of the most gifted and versatile talents in the Cantorial fraternity today. You brought great honour to me, and I was truly moved by your davening.

My dearest friend Cantor Jerome Kopmar is one of the leading Jewish musicologists, composers, and Cantors today. Your address from the pulpit was a brilliant masterpiece and created an electrifying atmosphere in shul today. Jerry, what can I say about the superb "Shehecheyanu" that you composed in my honour. I was absolutely overwhelmed.

The enormous vocal, musical and performing talents of Mark Dubois are matched only by his kindness and his friendship. I could never express adequately how much my vocal coaching with you, Mark, has meant to me. Nathan Rosen and I have worked together weekly for the best part of 20 years. Thank you Nate for sharing your great talents.

My special gratitude goes to Victor and Rene Topper, and I call to mind Victor's late parents Harry and Fraida, both of whom I knew very well. The Toppers made these Cantorial Shabbatot and lectures possible through their generous endowments. "Yasher Koach - a greisen dank eich."

I extend my sincere thanks to Marvin Miller and Howard Black, the captains of the team of dedicated workers who so tirelessly put this fabulous tribute together.

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At every Jewish Simcha, there is a tear of sadness. The sudden and untimely death this past week of Aaron Black has deeply saddened the Beth Tzedec family. Aaron was a very dear friend to me and my family, the loving father of Howard Black, co-chairman of this tribute. Aaron was also a past president of our congregation. I ask you please to stand. Let us devote a moment in silent contemplation to Aaron's memory. "T'hei nishmato tsurah bitsror Hachayim" - May Aaron's soul be ever bound up in the bonds of eternal life, and may he rest in peace.

Please be seated.

My pride and joy are my beloved children, by birth as well as by marriage. My life is blessed by all of you, each one in a different way. Girls, your speech was fantastic.

Someone once said: "A mother is a mother still, the holiest thing alive". Thank God my mother is in relatively good health. May she be blessed with many more good years.

No words of gratitude would suffice to thank my dearest Barbara for her role in my life. As I always tell her: "Just say thank you," and I certainly do.

To each and every one of you who came here tonight, you have honoured me by your presence.

Finally, to God:

"I beseech you, my God, and God of my ancestors, be with me as I stand in prayer for myself, and for my congregation. Strengthen my heart so that my devotion may be directed to Your Holy Name. Let my heart love and revere You, so that I may continue to stand before You, to serve and to sing in your name. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart, be ever acceptable before You, my Rock and my Redeemer."

Amen, and thank you all very much.