

The Origin of the Cantor

By: Cantor Paul Kowarsky

People often ask me: "What should I call you: *Chazzan* or Cantor? I figure, if those are my choices, I'm doin' just great.

The term Cantor is a word of Latin origin, meaning Singer, and designates the solo singer in the Synagogue. I wonder whether the death of Latin as a spoken language has any bearing on the gradual demise of the Cantor in our Orthodox Synagogues - probably resulting from a fading understanding and appreciation of our rich liturgical musical heritage. I apologize for being facetious, but this is a "sore point" for me and my Cantorial Colleagues the world over. Like most qualified Cantors, I prefer to be addressed as *Chazzan*, because of the meaningful connotation of the term, and the qualifications and attributes inherent in it.

How did the position of *Chazzan* arise? After the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E., the Jewish people were taken into captivity, and the sacrificial system was abolished. The Rabbis decreed that it was inappropriate to perform Temple sacrificial ritual in foreign places, while the Holy Temple was in ruins.

The Jewish people, in order to maintain contact with their country and religion, gradually began to substitute prayer, the offering of the heart, as it were, for sacrifice. In 536 B.C.E.. when they returned to Palestine, the tradition of oral prayer was soundly established, although the system of praying was not yet in place. People who wanted to pray together in groups, formed themselves into a *Knesset*, a congregation, and they appointed as their leader. a *Rosh Haknesset*, the head or President of the Congregation, and a *Chazzan Haknesset*. The first *Chazzanim* were probably not prayer leaders, but rather administrative officials or caretakers, somewhat akin to the Executive Director of today. But, now we meet for the first time, the term which later became the official title of the Cantors of our Synagogues.

The metamorphosis from administrator to *Sh'liach Tsibbur*, leader of prayer, was gradual. After the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 A.C.E., there were probably insufficient personnel qualified to function as *Sh'lichei Tsibbur* in the many Synagogues that had developed. And so, the *Chazzan* was retained as precentor, a Latin term meaning "to sing before", or rather "to lead in singing". By the 6th and 7th centuries, because he had always served the Congregation in some manner and was familiar with the prayer chants, the *Chazzan* assumed the task of leading the Congregation in prayer.

In the diaspora, the *Chazzan* became a very important figure in Jewish life. He inherited the Levitical chants, which were sounded in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. He intoned the liturgy, which now replaced the sacrificial rites. During the 10th and 11th centuries, when our people encountered others whose music was quickly developing scientifically, the *Chazzanim* began to concentrate on the advancement of Liturgical Music.

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The Jewish people themselves composed the many melodies and *Nuschaot* (prayer modes), the musical responses of *Baruch Hu Uvaruch Sh'mo* and *Amen*, the distinctive Kaddish tunes, and the original and unique melodies of the *Avot*, in our *Amidah* for each service.

In a long and gradual process of acculturation, our ancestors blended the songs of their parents, with the folk tunes and classical music of their own times and places. Thus they created the basis of our cherished musical tradition. The *Chazzanim* then organized, systematized, modified and refined the melodies which they had inherited, until they slowly became Jewish Tradition. Whatever the true origin of our music, the tunes and chants are now firmly entrenched in Judaism, having been sanctified by centuries of usage.

And so we see that *Chazzanut*, the *Chazzan*, the People of Israel and the Liturgy, are irrevocably bound up in Jewish Prayer.