Forty Years of Cantorial Adventures

It is hard to believe forty years has passed since I began as a cantor, one of the few ( 2 or 3) female cantors to serve a traditional synagogue in l981, in Norwalk, CT. I began to think about the significance of 40. Moses wandered with our people in the desert for 40 years on the way to the Promised Land. A google search also brought up a bunch of movies, “ 40 Year old Virgin”, “ 40 Years a Slave”, “ 40 Years of Zen”, it seems 40 is a significant number. “ 40 years in the wilderness represents the time it takes for a new generation to arise.”

( Numbers 32:13)

While 40 years is a significant number, I feel I am still learning, still evolving and still discovering music and prayer that uplifts and changes you. The lessons from my many years, also 40, of studying and learning from Prof. Elie Wiesel have continued to enrich my life and inspire me.

How have things changed over 40 years?

When I was contemplating a cantorial career, the conservative movement hadn’t fully accepted women as cantorial students wasn’t giving the same degree as men, or acceptance into the Cantors Assembly, the organization that places cantors in jobs and provides much support and comradery. I wasn’t interested in the reform movement at the time, wanting to sing my grandfather’s music in a more traditional synagogue. Luckily the synagogue in Norwalk accepted me ( over 18 male candidates) and I took the one class my father couldn’t teach me, cantillation at the Jewish Theological Seminary Cantor’s Institute. My grandfather, Cantor Adolph Katchko, had composed an entire thesaurus for cantors that is still used as a textbook in the cantorial schools. I was very fortunate to study with my father, Cantor Theodore Katchko who studied with his father. I also felt my studies with Prof. Elie Wiesel gave me a unique perspective on Jewish history, prayer and identity.

When I started in l981, I was the second woman to serve a full time conservative pulpit in this country, Cantor Elaine Shapiro, a graduate of the Cantor’s Institute was the first in West Palm Beach, Florida. It was national news and the Associated Press splashed it across the country, as a fourth generation female cantor it seemed to make the news. I remember the feeling of isolation, of being watched and measured carefully to see how I would do. Before I accepted the position at Congregation Beth El in Norwalk, I remember auditioning for a synagogue and they asked me if I was going to “ breastfeed on the bima?” Imagine anyone asking that today! When I got the job, a nearby reform rabbi proclaimed, “ what will you do next? Go topless on the bima?” An elderly man once asked me after the morning minyan when I was very pregnant , “ Nu? Hazzante, how do you feel? How’re the nippelech?” It still shocks me today and provides a huge laugh at late night convention gatherings. There seemed to be a fixation on breasts and the idea of a woman cantor. The thinking that once you started with a woman cantor, you were going down the slippery slope of vulgarity! That seems insane today! Insane and illegal!

Imagine the lawsuits today! I can say, “ ME TOO!”

I founded the Women Cantors’ Network in l982 to help bring women cantors together, and I’m proud to say it continues to grow and embrace women ( and a few male) cantors in a nurturing, open and supportive way.

In 1984 the New York Times did a story on the Women Cantors’ Network and the writer chose a title, “ Female Cantors Fighting Professional Isolation”. I had nothing to do with the title, but it infuriated a local cantor so much that I was banned from any local concerts or organizations for many years. He felt it was undignified for the cantorate to be stained with that article title. I had nothing to do with it, but I was punished. I doubt that would happen today.

Today women cantors are a majority in reform and equally present and active in the conservative and reconstructionist movements. In l984 I got in Glamour Magazine’s column called something like, “ You Won’t Believe What Happened to Me”. A little girl about 3, went to another synagogue and saw a male cantor and proclaimed, “ I didn’t know men could be cantors!” In l984 this was news. Today it happens all the time!

40 years later, I still believe I have the best job in the world. It never feels like work, it is an honor and a delight, a privilege and a way of life. Imagine filling your life with the beauty of Jewish music, of prayer, of helping people celebrate beginnings, and helping them mourn the ends of life. It is a roller coaster ride I’ve been on for 40 years and I don’t want to get off just yet. There’s so much more to do, learn, share and sing!

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