

Cantor Emerita

This is a very great honor. Thank you so much to the Board, to Presidents Obeiter, Holden, Alterman, Vogel, Dobkins and Rubin and to Rabbi Fine, for agreeing to bestow this very great honor on me. It is unusual for Emerita or Emeritus to be bestowed on someone who has not spent multiple decades serving one community. I am deeply grateful and humbled to be recognized in this way.

When I came to Temple Israel I was excited about the people I had met. Intelligent, sophisticated, educated, multidimensional, funny, kind, earnest, passionate people who cared about the things that really matter in life. I thought I might find friends here, and feel less isolated in a community where there are other Jewish babyboomer geeks like me. And boy was I ever right! You trusted me to serve as your spiritual leader for 6 weeks when I first arrived, before Rabbi David Saltzman came to serve as interim rabbi. Then Rabbi Fine came, and one Friday night I was standing next to him, facing the ark, singing Bar'chu, and I had one of those "Déjà vu All Over Again" moments! I felt like we had been doing this together forever, and I felt joyful and inspired.

I discovered something here at Temple Israel. I didn't realize it was missing from my other two cantorial pulpits until I had it. A Jewish Family of Choice. (something all converts need, by the way) From the moment Jo Rosen stood on her toes and looked across the baggage carousel at Newark Airport when I arrived for my interview on February 14, 2008-my life changed for the better, for the "good" as it says in the musical Wicked. Jo fed me spaghetti that night and became sister, mother, sounding board (oh and Michael Rosen started a long tradition of making me crack up until I cried)....and she was followed shortly by other remarkable people who became friends and fans and confidants..... we met Stephanie Gottesman the next morning for my tour of Ridgewood, and then Abe Davis and Elaine Silverstein for lunch....and then Bob Obeiter and Jerry Vogel before the Friday night service that night.....and then a group of crazy people at Tamara Freeman's house Saturday night – who became the core of our wild and wonderful Music Committee that has borne such gorgeous fruit..... Once I got here, a whole crew of people started feeding me dinner when there was a board meeting or I had evening lessons, making sure I relaxed and rested, finding ways

to make my life easier, taking care of me. And then there was Maureen, Jose, Tina, Judy. Each of you, of them, is worthy of a whole speech. Tina's wisdom, generosity and friendship, Jose's kindness, strength and willingness. Tina and Jose's senses of humor, individually and collectively (together you could die from it!) Judy's intense devotion to being of service to the clergy and the school, her patient endurance to copy CD after CD for Tefilah Goals, rolling up her sleeves and doing what has to be done. Maureen's scrappy, down to earth Jersey competence, authority and absolute intolerance for nonsense, her grasp of the intricacies of managing the physical plant and the finances...all of the staff helping me be the best I can be.....this is what a good family does for each other. Being clergy of a congregation is an intrinsically challenging personal choice, but that challenge is magnified if one is both a convert and single, without a Jewish family of one's own or a confidante at home who can support the details of daily life. (I always wondered why my professors at JTS were so concerned about my being single..) This family-of-choice is much bigger now, full of lots of Jewish mothers, Jewish sisters and brothers and nieces and nephews, aunts and uncles. My son Rafi moved here in 2011 and was embraced by all these new family members – who come to see him in plays and musicals and “kvell” almost as much as I do. Rafi and I have often stopped to acknowledge how amazing it is that there are people we can call when we need something or life gets messy. (I'll never forget when Manny Haber operated on Rafi's foot on our kitchen floor one weekend!)

Then something else happened. My own family of origin, the Gentile family that I left behind when I became Jewish...their place in my orbit changed. My mother entered her final illness and passed away in 2012. I spent a month in San Diego when she died, much of it alone. I struggled to process the experience of the loss of a non-Jewish parent with all the years and all the layers of my Jewish learning and creating a Jewish identity. I rediscovered pieces of my history and my identity that had been long buried by my intense and heartfelt dedication to Judaism. I have had a long Jewish adventure far away from my family of origin – and now I am yearning to come full circle, to return to and heal my family connections – and have a new Jewish adventure that includes them. I believe that what I have learned about family and community at Temple Israel has made it possible for me to turn toward my own family in a new way.

One of the great lessons I have learned from my 35-year Jewish journey is that no matter what new lives we create, what personae we inhabit, what identities we build and nurture – we bring our whole selves, the sum of all the parts, to whatever we do. I tried, in the early years that I was practicing and exploring Judaism as a new, dewy-eyed convert, to submerge, leave behind, all I had been before. That did not work very well, or for very long. That was why I decided that I needed to bring along the pre-Jewish Caitlin to support the Jewish Elisheva. Hence, Adon Olam to “Danny Boy”. It is a testament to how comfortable I immediately felt that I actually mentioned that to Bob Obeiter in conversation when we first met on Friday night - I can't remember all the details of how or when Bob dared me to sing it the next morning at my interview Shabbat service. I do remember that I felt it was worth the risk – if the community couldn't handle who I was, maybe I didn't belong there. The fact that you embraced me for who I am, made all the difference.

So here's the real point, the “ikar”. We, you, have to bring your whole self to Judaism, and to anything that matters in your life. Humans are tribal, pack animals. We need to belong to a pack to feel whole. We no longer need the pack to survive physically – we get into trouble when we think we don't need it to survive emotionally. Temple Israel and JCC – RCBI, is your pack. I have always needed that tribal sense of “belonging”. The world of cantors is one of my tribes – AND there are ways in which I have never quite fit in there. The Jewish people are my tribe...but there are ways in which I am also an outsider. You, Temple Israel, allowed me to become one of your “Alpha Females”. You allowed me to lead you AND you taught me what community really is. I've always been a little precocious, and true to form, I became clergy before I really completely understood what it meant. Now I get it. It's about showing up. You do it for each other, and you have called on me to be present at a higher level than before. I have learned that when I least want to get up and leave the house, when it is the least comfortable to show up – that's when I end up being most inspired, moved, transformed by my service to you. It's the combination of a little more effort than is convenient and the sense of purpose that is created by that, that makes the magic. This is a gift beyond price that I will take with me.

I have to talk about our kids. It was here at Temple Israel that I fell deeply in love with teaching and I love it more with each passing year. I am so grateful that in

my 8 years here I have been privileged to help some very special people grow up. Jerry Vogel comes to mind. Cayla Whittaker, Benjamin Unger, Sarah Butensky, Carly Haber, Dan Gluck, Joshua Unger – (name all children in attendance and acknowledge parents of others). This year's 5th and 6th graders, including Ilana Unger and Max Rothschild, were preschoolers when I came. I cannot name them all here. Every child I worked with here changed me – I discovered that I could become part of his or her extended family, a special adult who made a difference – like a magical aunt or fairy godmother. You and your children opened your hearts to me. It's not the same everywhere. – There are kids who took what I taught them and far surpassed my own skills. There are preschoolers and kindergartners now who haven't known me very long but are connected to the synagogue because I had free reign to be goofy in Tot Shabbat....and I can't forget the wonderful adult students, musicians, parents, lay leaders and friends who are doing things they wouldn't have dreamed of before I helped them find the next door to open. My partnership with Rabbi Fine has been a deep source of strength, fun, friendship, guidance and "excitement" that has helped me grow. I expect that partnership to continue, as I do the friendships and familyships....I heard it said once "I don't know if this is a friendship or a RELATIONSHIP, but I'm on some kind of a "ship"with you!" And I'm definitely on some kind of a "ship" with all of you!

So..Temple Israel is and will always be the peak of my service as a congregational cantor. I am moving into a new phase of my career, of spiritual and ritual leadership. This next incarnation will build on my cantorial career but be something different. Many of you have asked what I will be doing, where am I going now? I will be staying in Ridgewood for at least another year. I am living with Bob Obeiter and Rita Benezra (they couldn't be here today because of a family wedding out of town) I will be staying at the Union for Reform Judaism, where I have worked part time for the past 5 years, managing the Introduction to Judaism classes for New York City, northern New Jersey and the West Hudson Valley and expanding the program to Long Island. I will continue to tutor the b'nai mitzvah students of Temple Israel as Cantor Emerita. My next congregational posting will be to Temple Hatikvah of Flanders, NJ, where I will be serving as their interim spiritual leader while they look for a new rabbi.

I have been considering the idea of becoming a rabbi for a little while now. This next position is an opportunity to “try that on for size” while I prepare for my relocation to San Diego to reunite with my family of origin and continue to build my life of Jewish service.

The honor of Cantor Emerita is also a solution to a dilemma. Once I decided I was not relocating to California right away and would continue to live in this community for a time, I didn't want to feel uncomfortable about coming to Temple Israel, or that members might feel awkward in my presence. As Cantor Emerita I still have a home here. I have the privilege of leading prayer on the bima, to teach, to conduct life-cycle ceremonies, and be present at important moments of this extended family. I am so honored, so grateful for this gift of Emerita.

I love the Jewish tradition of Tzedakah. This is something other cultures don't share....Jews give to the community when their hearts are full. Full of sadness when we remember our loved ones at Yizkor, full of joy and gratitude at life's moments of profound blessing, at a simcha, full of appreciation when the community shows up at shiva when we lose someone, full of kvelling over our children, full of inspiration at the great spiritual moments of our Jewish calendar – the High Holy Days, Sukkot, Simchat Torah, Chanukah, Purim, Pesach.....Each holiday is a container, a structure like a sukkah, within which we can experience our human response to the seasons, our tribal response to our history, and our visceral connection to the other members of our pack. I want to give a b'racha to Temple Israel, as I leave in one sense, and continue in another.

The words of Debbie Friedman's Traveler's Prayer seem just right.

May we be blessed as we go on our way

May we be guided in peace

May we be blessed with health and joy

May this be our blessing, amen.

May we be sheltered by wings of peace

May we be kept in safety and love

May grace and compassion find their way to every soul

May this be our blessing, amen.

Amen, amen, may this be our blessing, amen.

Coda

Because I knew you, because I knew you, because I knew you.....

I have been changed For Good