



‘The voice of my ancestors’

Gelman helps reinvigorate Buffalo shul

Joyful, boisterous singing and clapping emanate from a tiny synagogue in Buffalo’s Elmwood Village neighborhood. The seats are filled, and that’s remarkable: until recently, the aging and dwindling congregation often found it impossible to round up even 10 men for prayer.

No one has been more gratified by the dramatic turnaround at Congregation Beth Abraham than **Irwin Gelman, PhD**, Interim Chair of Cancer Genetics at Roswell Park. Outside his professional life, Dr. Gelman is a cantor, or liturgical singer. In May 2009, he helped launch a renaissance at Congregation Beth Abraham by leading the popular music-centered Sabbath services held there one Friday evening each month.

Friday-night services, he says, are a time to “leave our burdens behind, sequester ourselves in a holy place and time with family and friends, and enjoy each other with music, with lots of hugs and kisses. We enjoy a meal with each other and we leave the week behind for a certain amount of time.”

In the music of the Sabbath he recalls the voice of his late father, Charles Gelman, who was a cantor before him. “My father had an extremely beautiful, sweet voice—very Old Country,” says Dr. Gelman. “He taught me that the music has to have *ta’am*—a Yiddish word that literally means *flavor*, or *soul*. He said, ‘When you’re singing, this part should make people laugh; this part should make people cry.’ In true cantorial tradition, the music conveys emotion to the congregants, and from the congregants to God.”

Before the Nazis swept through his home in Poland and murdered his family, Dr. Gelman’s father grew up at the epicenter of Judaism’s rich musical heritage. He, too, was the son of a cantor, absorbing from his father and the other Jewish men of his *shtetl* the music of the Sabbath, of holy days and festivals. Emigrating to the States after the war, he perpetuated their memory and heritage as a cantor at a synagogue in Hamden, Connecticut. Dr. Gelman is heir to that tradition.

“It’s almost genetic, and I say that with real knowledge of the field,” he says. “When I was five, my father had me sing solos on High Holidays. My father’s friends would come across a record of some famous cantor—a horrible, scratchy recording—and play it, and turn to me and say, ‘OK, let’s hear you sing it.’ That recall was expected of me.”

Irwin Gelman embraced and surpassed those expectations. At 10, he performed Jewish songs in Yale University’s Woolsey Hall; at 12, at the Shubert Theater in New Haven. At 13, he sang the entire service for his bar mitzvah. The same year, with just a week’s notice, a small congregation invited him to sing the services for High Holidays, the most sacred days of the Jewish calendar. “I didn’t know [the music for] High Holiday services,” he recalls. “So my father took me out of school and I learned to do the services in a week, with the sheet music and cassette tapes.”

After college, he petitioned successfully for admission to the Cantors Assembly, the professional organization for cantors, passing the examination even though he had not undergone the formal training of a cantorial school. For 20 years, he served as cantor of the Conservative Synagogue of Fifth Avenue in New York City. He has sung for High Holidays at synagogues across the country, and has officiated at weddings, funerals, and baby-naming ceremonies.

Dr. Gelman says his role as cantor is not incongruous with his role as scientist. “Good research requires a tremendous amount of book knowledge, but ultimately it becomes an art form that needs the other side of the brain,” he points out. “Music and science control different parts of my brain, and they complement each other.”

But even as a scientist, some things he cannot explain with detached rationality. Back in the ’70s in Israel, while visiting an older cousin who had grown up in Poland before the war, Dr. Gelman accepted an invitation to sing Sabbath services at a local synagogue. Afterward, a member of the congregation asked his cousin, “Who is that cantor? When I went to your bar mitzvah in your shtetl, I heard the exact same music.”

“He had heard my grandfather do the service,” says Dr. Gelman.

“I do feel I have the voice of my ancestors.”

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