

The Op-Ed Pages

Ordaining Cantors is Mostly Good for Congregations

By Dana Evan Kaplan

Kingston, Jamaica (JTA) — Six graduates of the cantorial program of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion were ordained Sunday at Temple Emanu-El in New York. The key word here is “ordained.”

Since the cantorial school was established at HUC in 1948, cantors have been invested rather than ordained. The difference, as JTA put it, was more than “a word.” It is a declaration of independence, a certification of equality.

In preparation for the change, the HUC cantorial program already had been expanded from four years to five, thus matching the rabbinic program. A concerted effort was made to argue that cantors are full members of the clergy, with diverse and challenging duties, and not just “singers” who show up on Friday nights and Saturday mornings and disappear until the following week. The seriousness and intensity of the cantorial program was stressed.

The change was inevitable, so there is little point in arguing that it should not have been made. The Academy for Jewish Religion, a nondenominational seminary in New York City, already ordains cantors; HUC needed to stay competitive. While the change is going to make professional life more difficult for rabbis and deprive them of certain job opportunities in smaller communities, it may help to bring new life to certain mori-

bund synagogues, allowing them to choose from a broader pool of spiritual leaders.

Synagogues are struggling to explain to congregants why they are worth thousands of dollars a year in dues at a time when there are so many other ways to be Jewish. I just completed a CLAL-sponsored fellowship program called Rabbis Without Borders in which one of my colleagues started an online congregation that now interacts with more than 10,000 people a year from all over the world. And I just finished a manuscript on Reform Judaism for the Jewish Publication Society in which I wrote about rabbis who train the children of unaffiliated Jews for their bar and bat mitzvahs over Skype and take them to the Grand Canyon or the Colorado Rockies or even Alaska to mark their entry into adulthood.

With society changing so rapidly, synagogues are desperate to find formulas that will keep them functioning. They want as many options as possible and don't want rabbinical organizations — effectively labor unions — to dictate to them.

I've seen the breakdown of the rabbinic placement structure from a rigid protocol to a very loose situation in which congregational profiles are posted on password-protected websites and CVs are forwarded to search committees with few restrictions, limitations, or stipulations. For these commit-

tees, what matters is whether candidates can motivate their congregants and draw in unaffiliated Jews and potential converts. Where they studied and what their connection might be to the Reform movement is of less importance — a triviality, if we are to be blunt.

For a small congregation, it makes good sense to hire a cantor instead of a rabbi. I know of a small congregation in Florida that engaged in a lengthy search for a Reform rabbi but found that nobody reasonably competent was interested. With limited resources, and located in a less attractive part of the state, the congregation eventually hired a cantor to become its spiritual leader. He later was ordained privately and served with distinction until his untimely death.

In contrast, I led Congregation B'nai Israel in Albany, GA, for 10 years before my move to a historic synagogue in the Caribbean. Not being blessed with a good voice, I was reliant on a classically oriented choir. When the temple decided to modernize the music and make it more participatory, the choir was resistant. If I had been a cantor, I could have stepped in and helped to create a dynamic musical experience that could have enriched the spiritual experience of our services. All of my scholarship in the world could not compensate for sounding like a frog.

The change to ordaining cantors is not all good. Congregations will

have two types of clergy with the same level of authority. In an egalitarian era this is bound to lead to a tremendous increase in conflict between rabbis and cantors. While I see institutions where rabbis and cantors get along fabulously, even before ordination I witnessed a tremendous amount of dissension.

Two examples of major turf battles between rabbis and cantors: In one congregation, a new rabbi is appointed to find the cantor has so much charisma that he feels overshadowed. People love listening to her voice and gravitate to her after services, bypassing the new and now marginal rabbinical appointee. In another, the senior rabbi departs suddenly and the associate rabbi is promoted. The cantor refuses to accept his authority, arguing that she contributed more to the synagogue both professionally and organizationally and should have been made the effective CEO rather than the associate rabbi.

Neither conflict ended well, either for the individuals or the institutions.

As revolutionary changes go, this is relatively minor. It is, however, one more indication that the American Jewish religious marketplace is becoming a more competitive environment. Under such circumstances, neither denominational labels nor professional credentials are going to mean all that much.

From one perspective, this is a



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long overdue shaking-out of the deadwood. From another viewpoint, we are entering into a Darwinian phase that may see increasing numbers of rabbis — and possibly also cantors — fighting for their professional positions under increasingly adverse conditions.

Let us hope and pray that the consequences will be a more vital and dynamic Jewish religious experience. The odds of that happening, unfortunately, are no more than 50-50. ✪

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Moderate Middle Must be Heard on Israel Debate

By Peter A. Joseph

NEW YORK (JTA) — The intellectual food fight over Israel that has played out over the Op-Ed pages of virtually all Jewish and many mainstream newspapers in recent weeks may have settled down, but the passion of the discussion has made one thing very clear: The boundaries dividing American Jewish opinion on Israel, and its policies regarding Palestinians, have become as contentious as the borders between Israel and the West Bank.

In the American Jewish dialogue on Israel, extreme polarization reigns. With the most dominant voices coming from the far left and right, the discussion has become alienating in its endless — and more importantly, ineffective — moralizing by both camps. The vast majority of American Jews is deeply concerned about Israel's security and recognizes the need for a two-state solution that would ensure it. But in a world divided between the antagonistic right and left, centrists are being shut out of the conversation.

What is the way forward for American Jews who want to be effective advocates for Israel but not apologists for its continued presence in the West Bank?

In truth, American Jewish advocacy, like Israel's political realities, is complex and cannot be addressed effectively through sound bites. But that is exactly

what voices on the fringes have offered as their efforts have been directed at rallying political bases rather than advancing reasoned policy concepts. Instead of staking out principled, nuanced positions that reflect an understanding of competing narratives, both sides have adopted an oversimplified rhetoric that feeds fierce debate in the American Jewish community and shrinks political space for pragmatic policy.

Ironically, while the American Jewish left is more vocal than ever, it also has become more irrelevant. While correctly promoting the idea that there is not only one way to be pro-Israel, the left has joined with the right to fuel a with-us-or-against-us paradigm that has resulted in the highly charged debate. The left's vocal and consistent condemnation of the Israeli government, as well as its lack of sensitivity to Israeli public opinion, has significantly undermined its pro-Israel claims. Consequently, it has never been more politically expedient for politicians and community leaders to disassociate from liberal Zionists.

The American Jewish right shares equal blame. It has sought to capitalize on the left's failings, seeking to turn Israel into a partisan tool that can be wielded against President Obama and undermining bipartisan consensus support for the Jewish state. Faced

with a choice, many organizations, community leaders and politicians quite naturally align themselves with the right, lest they risk alienation from a comfort zone of support for Israel. Others are disengaging from Israel advocacy altogether to avoid the seemingly endless debates that often resemble a dog chasing its own tail.

The net result is a ridiculous and ineffective way for the pro-Israel community to proceed if it wants to lobby effectively for ensuring Israel's future. The tenor of the discussion has taken American Jewry further away from being able to lobby for a two-state solution and a secure Israel. Successful pro-Israel advocacy today requires mobilizing the majority and moving away from the extremes. This means rejecting the left-wing notion that peace will be achieved only by pressuring the Jewish state to capitulate to Arab demands, and the right-wing notion that Israel must never be questioned.

Successful pro-Israel, pro-two-state advocacy requires engaging the broader American Jewish community, the democratically elected government of Israel and the Israeli public. It also requires rejecting all efforts to undercut bipartisan support for Israel based on the with-us-or-against-us mentality. To be sure, American Jews do not need to support everything that the Israeli government says or

does to be pro-Israel. But just as knee-jerk support for anything the Israeli government does is unhelpful, so too is knee-jerk condemnation.

The past few weeks of mud-slinging have highlighted how alienating and polarizing many of the tired left- and right-wing arguments about Israel have become. Enough already! It is time for the moderate majority to come together to form a centrist, pragmatic, pro-Israel, pro-two-state message that drowns out the noisemakers on the fringes and leads to a secure, realistic and effective path



Peter Joseph

forward for Israel to thrive. ✪
(Peter A. Joseph is the chairman of the Israel Policy Forum.)

Monitor Hate Crimes, as Promised

By Gidon Van Emden

Washington (JTA) - How much homophobia is there? And how much anti-Semitism? How many Muslims are beaten up because of who they are?

The only accurate answer today is, “We don't know.” Organizations that combat hate and bigotry do not know how many crimes were committed with a hateful motive because such incidents are not being monitored properly.

A recent study by CEJI-A Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe shows that most hate crimes watchdogs in Europe

do not know how many incidents there are. They are working with anecdotal data culled from the media and the occasional phone call. Such sources, while important for their illustrative value, are neither consistent nor usually as detailed as they should be. (Full disclosure: I used to work for CEJI and helped launch this study.)

Indeed, the 56 participating states of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, an international organization of which the United States is

(Continued on the next page)