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When I wrote my first personal statement, nearing the end of my studies in January 2020, I began with a reflection on the recent URJ Biennial: “After a joyous and raucous journey through the music of our movement, the instruments faded and fell away. A lone voice rang out, ‘*L’chi lach...*,’ and the voices of 5,000 people rose up to join in unison and in harmony. Those of us on the stage stepped back from our microphones, showing the congregation that we wanted to hear their voices, that we needed them in order to create this sacred communal moment. That Friday night song session at Biennial reminded me why I do this work.”

We, of course, know that everything changed in March 2020. I remember singing Shabbat melodies and prayers alone into my Zoom screen from my newly repurposed dining table “sanctuary,” watching congregants’ mouths move, but hearing no sound. That Biennial song session couldn’t have felt further away, yet the importance of singing in community suddenly resonated even more strongly than I originally thought. Our experience of pandemic isolation affirmed that there is something special and transformative that happens when people sing together. I will cherish forever the truly miraculous feeling of connection and wholeness I experienced when we were finally able to once again gather and sing together in person. As a result of the pandemic, I have come to find even deeper meaning in intimate gatherings. I relish my weekly opportunity throughout the school year to sing with religious school students and their parents in Sharing Shabbat, a special time that families commit and set aside to spend together on Shabbat at temple – connecting, praying, learning, finding meaning together, and building a real, caring community. Instead of a crowd of 5,000, I was singing with a group of 50 – and it felt just as sacred.

I am deeply invested in that interplay, in the holiness that can be created when everyone in the room leans in and engages fully together. There are moments – when the community’s

voices are louder than mine – that take my breath away, leaving me with immense satisfaction and a feeling of deep connection, both to the people gathered and to God. There are also listening moments, when, in my role as cantor, I offer words or music that give congregants space to hear a still, small voice inside. I believe that it is in this balance of singing together and listening to one another that we create meaningful prayer and ritual.

As a cantor, I strive to find balance in many ways – among the voices leading and participating, among the styles of music we sing, and among the needs of the various ages and stages of the congregation. I also strive to be present to my own experience internally and to respond intentionally to what is happening in the moment. For me, the key is to use music and spoken word to weave a tapestry of meaningful prayer with my worship partners and the congregation that allows for meaningful interplay among all these dynamic forces.

In order to weave, we must wrestle with our tradition and with our world as it is today in order to engage meaningfully with Jewish life. As *b'nei Yisrael*, children of the one who wrestled with God, it is in our DNA to do so. As a cantor, I see my broader task as engaging and sometimes struggling with our rich and ancient texts, from the Bible to liturgy and beyond, mining them for meaning and relevance to our lives today. Whether helping a wedding couple study the text of a *ketubah* or exploring a challenging Torah portion with a *b'nei mitzvah* student, it is my responsibility to illuminate and provide access points for these traditional texts to the congregants I serve. As we read and wrestle with these texts, we take ownership of our Judaism, making it our own. This is one of my sacred missions as a cantor: to innovate with creativity and intention while sustaining tradition, to honor the past while building for the future.

Like riding a bicycle, I believe that meaningful Jewish engagement is best achieved by moving forward in order to stay upright, while also bringing along the traditions and customs we've carried in our baskets for thousands of years. Each time I open my prayer book, I am

thinking about ways to reframe the old and make the new holy.¹ How can I use melodies of different types to elevate and transform a text I thought I had already unpacked? What new facets can I help bring to light for myself and for the congregation?

The beauty of our tradition is that we come back to the same stories and the same prayers over and over again in a never-ending cycle of discovery. Just as we roll the Torah from Deuteronomy back to Genesis each year, seeking new insights as we return to the same *parshiyot*, I am committed to remaining curious about our texts, our music, and the ways we will engage with Judaism in the years to come. I am only one voice, and I recognize that creating a meaningful Jewish future will require all of our voices. I look forward to the harmony we will create together – *l'chi lach!*

¹ Based on Rav Kook's teaching: "The old shall be made new, and the new shall become holy."