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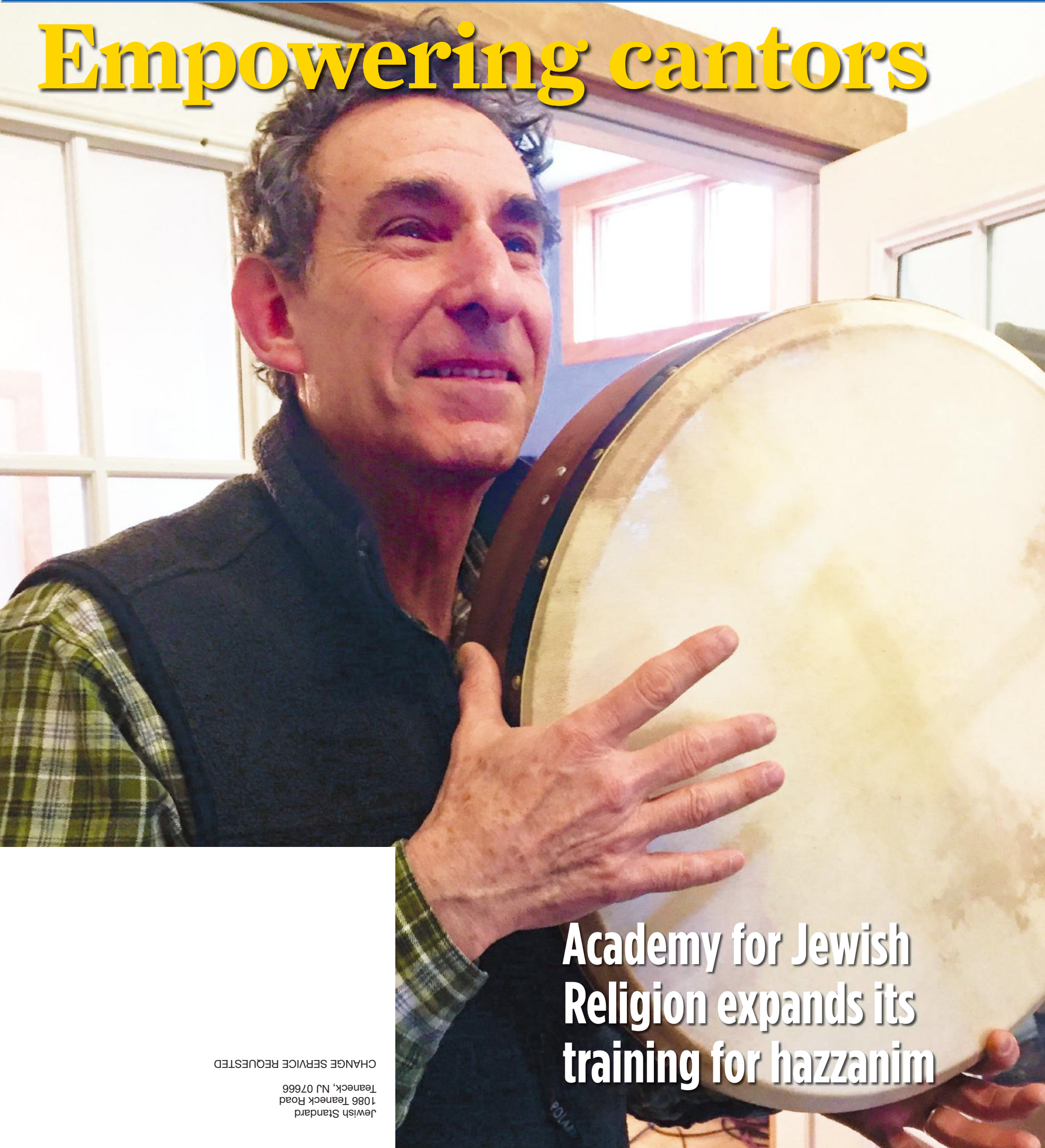
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Empowering cantors



Academy for Jewish
Religion expands its
training for hazzanim

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Cover Story



Hazzan Michael Kasper leads a communal sing at the Academy for Jewish Religion.
ALL PHOTOS COURTESY AJR

‘Music can pierce your heart’

Academy for Jewish Religion intensifies its cantorial program by adding peace studies

JOANNE PALMER

The Academy for Jewish Religion in Yonkers is going to intensify the demands it makes on its cantorial students, signaling its understanding of the importance of their work and their status in the community as it does so.

Aside from the conventional method of requiring more credits from them, it also will mandate that they take some of those credits in a field called peace studies.

And you know what? It makes sense. The Academy is a post-denomi-

national, pluralistic school whose students often are starting second careers. They tend to be older and arguably wiser than their counterparts in more conventional seminaries, and by definition just by being there they’re risk-takers.

They are open to learning, and to marrying tradition and experimentation. Their knowledge of the world and their fields enrich the classes; students in any school always learn from each other, but here there is a great body of experience that students consciously can teach each other.

So, the new cantorial program.

“There are a couple of parts to what we’re doing,” Dr. Ora Horn Prouser of Franklin Lakes, AJR’s executive vice president and academic dean, said.

“AJR has always been at the forefront in training cantors as true co-clergy,” she continued, touching on what’s often a sore point in the synagogue world. There tends to be a hierarchy in many synagogues, with rabbis firmly at the top and cantors teetering beneath them. But cantors, like rabbis, are synagogue professionals, who have skills, voices – and also hearts and heads. Traditionally, a cantor is a shaliach tzibur – the community’s

emissary. Traditionally, it's a position freighted with emotion and meaning. Still, the relationship can be tense.

The AJR is working to counter that tension by empowering its cantors. "We have always ordained our cantors, rather than investing them," Dr. Prouser said. "From the beginning, we have taught substantial courses for cantorial students – text study and cantorial skills and professional skills. We have included homiletics and counseling and education and chaplaincy. From the beginning, we recognized that our cantors were trained to be not only daveners – to use their voices for song and prayer – but also to use them to teach and to speak.

"The new curriculum is jumping off from there. It is a continuation – but it became clear to us that despite the text study and training they were getting, our cantors still were missing something. Their backgrounds still could have been stronger."

The conventional part of the new program asks cantorial students to do more. "We have strengthened the Hebrew curriculum, so now it is the same as our rabbinical program, and we have added Talmud," Dr. Prouser said. "We had always offered all kinds of text study – Bible and halacha – but we hadn't offered Talmud. It became clear that cantors have to have facility with Talmud, even if it's not as much as rabbis. Our cantorial students will be required to take a year of Talmud – rabbinical students have three." Cantorial and rabbinical students will take that first year together.

"We've always had rabbinical and cantorial students study together," Dr. Prouser said. "They really consider themselves partners and co-clergy." Often, she said, students don't realize their position in the hierarchy until they graduate and get jobs. "I have had people tell me 'I didn't realize there was going to be a place where they didn't want to hear me talk.'"

The other piece of the beefed-up cantorial program, the new part, is peace studies, she said.

Hazzan Michael Kasper of Nyack is, among many other things, the dean of cantorial studies and director of student life and placement. He's also the newly retired cantor of Congregation Sons of Israel in Nyack, a former dancer and choreographer, and a psychoanalyst who continues to see patients. He's



Dr. Ora Horn Prouser talks to a student at AJR.

formidably well equipped to oversee a program that includes both analytic and emotion components and brings together seemingly disparate pieces that meld surprisingly well. (He's also a clear inspiration to anyone looking for a second career.)

"Traditionally, liturgically, cantors are the go-between between the congregation and God," Hazzan Kasper said. "Traditionally cantors would learn all the

correct nuschaot" – the liturgical melodies that go with each service – "and for a long time they'd act as soloists. A bunch of decades ago, a movement toward more communal and congregational singing began.

"One of the greatest recent composers of congregational melodies is on our faculty – Sol Zim – and we are honoring him," he added.

"It just occurred to me, in a conversa-

tion I was having with one of our students, that one of the things we want to do as cantors is build community." That wasn't a new thought; "the business of being a cantor or a rabbi nowadays includes a lot of talking about building community.

"So then I had the question – what does a cantor do, what can a cantor do that we are not really doing to build community?" What is specific to cantors? What can only cantors do, or at least what can they do better than anyone else?

"As I thought about that, I thought about the kinds of communities we want to live in, and it seemed to me – and this also wasn't anything that people didn't know already – that we want to live in a peaceful community, a place where people get along even when they disagree. And the more I thought about it, the more I realized that cantors are in the perfect position to help make that happen, to build on the kind of work we're already doing.

"So then the question was how do we get there? What do we need to do that we haven't been doing? What do we need to study that we are not already studying that will move us along?

"I began to do some research, and soon it just seemed obvious that this academic field of peace studies is where we



AJR students work in chevruta in the school's library.

need to be.”

Wait. The academic field of peace studies? What is that?

Peace studies, an admittedly “amorphous concept, draws from a bunch of different fields – history, psychology, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, and others,” Hazzan Kasper said. According to the internet, its goal is to “understand the causes of armed conflict; develop ways to prevent and resolve war, genocide, terrorism, gross violations of human rights; and build peaceful and just systems and societies.”

“It turns out that there is an entire field of academic research about music and the resolution of conflict,” Hazzan Kasper said. “It seemed to me that it is a natural fit, and we had to find a way to meld our cantorial studies with the field of peace studies. It was a natural move that would serve us all well.”

The Academy has told cantorial students that they must take four more two-credit courses; now, both cantorial and rabbinic students will need 140 credits. Cantorial students will have to take three courses in peace studies. “The first one will be an introduction to the field from a Jewish perspective,

meaning that we will teach peace studies using Jewish texts that speak about the desire for peace or the desire for war, and how they do or don’t work with each other. The second course will be about building community

“I can tell you from my first career, as a dancer, that everyone in the world can dance,” Hazzan Kasper said. “Dance is very powerful expressive tool, that people just get on a gut level. But I think that music is possibly



Cantor Sol Zim, who teaches at AJR, is a prolific and beloved composer of liturgical music.

from the perspective of peace studies, and the third will be about how cantors use music and their voices in the service of conflict resolution.”

It is important to realize that although peace studies seems ambitious, even global, in its reach – and certainly there is a global lack of peace and a matching need for peace studies – it need not be on such a large scale. “We think about global issues – we might think about Israelis and Palestinians,” Hazzan Kasper said. “Or we think about war zones, about all the places in the world where there is war. We think about the Holocaust. Of course that is all real and true, and of course there will be cantors on the world stage.

“But really every congregation I am aware of would be well served by more peace and harmony.”

We tend to think macro, but the micro matters too.

So once you can accept the idea of peace studies, how does music fit in?

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A snowstorm kept students home in February, so they spent the day, starting with Shacharit, together on Zoom. This is what it looked like.



Cantor Lisa Klinger-Kantor presents Rabbi Cantor Howard Nacht at his ordination.

even more visceral, even more primal, than dance.
 “When people sing together something happens.
 “I could say that it’s inexplicable, what happens

when people sing together, but I think that it is explain-
 able. When people sing together, not only are there
 vibrations in the room, but those vibrations can pierce

your heart.”
 There are two parts to a cantor’s art as a singer. Part
 of it is to perform; to be a soloist, to be the shaliach

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tzibur. The other part is to enable communal singing. “When cantors perform, sing, chant, by themselves, as soloists, they can have an enormous affect on people,” he said. “But when people sing together, it is healing in a way that is essential.”

When they lead that singing, they must learn to set their egos – something vital for any performer – aside. It is a neat trick.

Although talent matters a great deal for a cantor, “talent plays no part in communal singing. The thing that plays the biggest part is the participants’ willingness to join in and sing.

“We all know about congregations where a sanctuary that was built 50 years ago for 500 people and now houses a shrinking congregation of 100 or 50 ends up being a room where people sit in all four corners, in aisle seats, unwilling to sit together.

“That might be meaningful for the participants – a makom kavua,” someone’s accustomed seat, the place where people go for the comfort of knowing their place in a community. “It may be what they are used to, but it doesn’t get them to where I want them to get. I want a holy community, formed by design, that is there not only to pray but to find community.

“I do not mean to belittle the idea that people who come there just to pray are missing the boat. I mean that there is more. There is something else that also is worthwhile.” And in this case, it is possible to have both. “Both forms are essential and valuable. Valuing one doesn’t mean devaluing the other.” This is not a zero-sum exercise.

So yes, Hazzan Kasper said, he can understand why the connection between a cantorial program and peace studies, as deep and valid as it is, might not be intuitive. “We are forcing a connection now – and I think that it will be an essential connection going forward,” he said. “People can say that we could have accomplished the community building without all this peace studies stuff, but I think



Yuval Ron, who will play at the AJR’s concert, embodies the intertwining of music and peace.

that if we could have done it, we would have done it.

“I don’t think that we are yet at the place we want to get to, the place where most congregations want to be, the place where most cantorial students want to be. We want to add something.

“With peace studies, we are taking a baby step. We are taking that step boldly, but it still is a baby step.”

And, he added, “being engaged in peace studies forces us to think about peace and harmony. It forces us to be engaged in pursuing it. To make peace studies prominent is to force the conversation to happen – and I mean that in the most loving way. It will put us in the place we need to be in.”

Just as the cantorial program is adding classes rather than substituting one class for another, “we are not sacrificing anything” by instituting the peace studies curricu-

lum. “We are only adding.”

As it celebrates its new cantorial program, the Academy for Jewish Religion will open its new academic year with a tribute to two of its faculty members, cantors Lisa Klinger-Kantor and Sol Zim. Both a benefit dinner in Scarsdale on Sunday, September 15, and a workshop in Yonkers the next day will feature Yuval Ron, an Israeli Oscar-winning composer whose work embodies both the ecstatic joy of music and its role in helping people move toward peace. (See box.)

“Yuval Ron – and also the Iraqi-born Israeli Yair Dalal – are peace activists who use music as a medium,” Hazzan Kasper said. “Both travel and sing and really use their voices and their music to bring peace and harmony to everyone they encounter.”

“Yuval Ron and his ensemble play middle eastern music,” Dr. Prouser said. “Their emphasis is on peace, harmony, healing, and growth. They often bring together performers from the three Abrahamic traditions, and they emphasize the need for community.”

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September 29– 6:30 PM
September 30 – 8:45 AM
October 1 – 8:45 AM

YOM KIPPUR

October 8 – 6:00 PM
October 9 – 9:00 AM
Mincha—4:50 PM

Youth Programming

Sept. 30, Oct. 1, and Oct. 9 at 10:30 AM:

FAMILY SERVICES

Songs, stories and snacks
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PRE-K PROGRAMMING

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BABYSITTING

10:30 to 1:00 9/30, 10/1 & 9

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Who: The Yuval Ron Ensemble

What: Will play “a concert of peace, hope, and the mystical sounds of the Middle East.”

Where: At Shaarei Tikvah, 46 Fox Meadow Road, Scarsdale

When: On Sunday, September 15, at 7 p.m.

How much: \$30 for adults; \$12 for anyone 18 or younger

To honor: Cantor Lisa Klinger-Kantor and Cantor Sol Zim

For more information and tickets: go to or call (914) 709-0900.

Who: Yuval Ron

What: Will lead a day of workshops

Where: At ARJ, 28 Wells Avenue, Yonkers

When: On Monday, September 19, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

How much: Free, but registration is required

For more information: Go to www.ajrsem.org

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