Your Power, Your Song
By Hazzan Riki Lippitz

There is a powerful tool already in your hands. It can bring laughter to a person who has lost comprehension. It can restore consciousness to someone deemed unreachable, and it can turn exhaustion to hope. It is music.

Hearing a familiar song can “wake up” a family member, friend or congregant who suffers from dementia. Brain science has now established that the parts of the brain that process music remain unaffected by Alzheimers and dementia. When someone hears a familiar song, the amygdala, where emotional memories are stored, is musically stimulated, bringing that person back into coherence for a short time.

There are lots of ways to make this happen. You, your Hazzan, or a group of singers can be a powerful instrument. Remember that hazzanim carry a vast repertoire of songs in mind that can be tapped at any moment. We are trained to walk comfortably into a senior residence or hospital room; we know how to sit with someone patiently. We can help you bring music into a silent room.

Right now, in your own synagogue, you can form a small group - perhaps including members of your adult choir - who could bring this pleasure to congregants who suffer from memory loss. Sing something upbeat, and a person may open their eyes. Offer Jewish songs that you learned as a child, perhaps for Hanukkah or the Passover Seder. Sing through an old Allan Sherman song, and inspire laughter. When you start your visit with music, a person may then be able to converse.

But you may ask: what can I do if I am not a singer? The phone in your back pocket can magically become a channel for hours of instrumental and vocal music. Popular songs, Broadway musicals, Yiddish melodies, Shabbat songs can be found on Youtube.

These songs have filled our most vital years with memories and are linked to deep emotions. Next time you’re with someone suffering from memory loss, open Youtube or another music platform, choose a language, or an artist, or a song - or just play through all the songs of a favorite musical show. Let the music flow and watch frustration melt away. Then consider creating a playlist for that person, so they can enjoy personalized music all day.

Music and Memory (MusicandMemory.org) is the national project to which you can turn for inspiration and much more information. Because of the importance of restoring humanity and dignity to all people, I encourage you to explore and bring these efforts into your own community. The power of music is divine and inexhaustible. We can tap into this source of affirmation and joy for someone we love every moment that they are alive.

Hazzan Riki Lippitz serves Oheb Shalom Congregation in South Orange, NJ. She teaches music and memory techniques as a representative of the Good People Fund, which supports the Music and Memory Israel (il.musicandmemory.org).

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As some of you know, I am something of a multi-professional: psychologist, cantor and rabbi. My first graduate degrees were in neuropsychology. After receiving my doctorate at Johns Hopkins, I spent some dozen years engaged as a re-search scientist, clinician and professor at Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School. Though this work was professionally rewarding, something was lacking. I always had a passion for music and Jewish music in particular, and so after completing a Fulbright Young Scientist year in Israel at Tel-Aviv University, I came back to the States and enrolled at Jewish Theological Seminary to study for the cantorate. I was the first cantorial student to receive a Wexner Graduate Fellowship, whose raison d’être is fostering Jewish leadership. Within this fellowship, I spent several years navigating with colleagues across the Jewish professional world and denominational spectrum to help define for them (and truth be told for myself) precisely what Jewish leadership looks like for a cantor. I learned a lot in those years, including the unfortunate fact that titles and education are often used to define boundaries rather than to enable self-actualization.

Later, I went on to found both the Cantor-Educator Program and the Jewish Special Education Program at Hebrew College, and served as the Dean of the School of Jewish Music, as well as the inaugural Korman Professor of Jewish Special Education. Somewhere along the way I also completed rabbinic ordination, not so much because I wanted to be a rabbi (I never really had had that aspiration), but more precisely to help open doors for cantors in the realm of Jewish leadership. My students at Hebrew College were looking for Rav-Hazzan role models, and insofar as I was already engaged in many rabbinic roles (including teaching in the Hebrew College rabbinical school), I chose to enhance my cantorial portfolio in this way. That decision itself could provide a fruitful topic for discussion in these pages, but I’ll hold that off for another day.

Following seventeen years at Hebrew College, I was given an intriguing opportunity to step into the leadership of a small Jewish day school where my own children were students. In fact, I had always been interested in day school leadership and was already serving on the board of this school. I took the plunge and have not looked back since. For the past seven years I have been serving as a Head of School, first for the MetroWest Jewish Day School in Framingham, MA (PreK-8) and most recently this year for the Schechter School of Long Island (K-12). I have found enormous challenge and gratification in this position and feel that my training as a hazzan (as well as pediatric neuropsychologist) has been instrumental in enabling me to succeed at these posts.

As a Head of School, each day I am presented with opportunities to use all my talents, skills and passions: to teach, to lead, to mentor, and to help foster the emotional, cognitive and spiritual development of those students in my charge. It is an enormous responsibility, but one that is somehow liberating despite being simultaneously daunting. As cantors we have many modalities in which to engage and serve, music being just one (albeit an important one). For me the moment of transformation comes when all those modalities of mind, body and spirit come together: *Im ruchi g’vijati*. At those times, *Adoshem li v’lo irah*—God is mine and I do not fear my future or ours as a people.

Hazzan/Rabbi Scott H. Sokol, PhD is Head of School at the Schechter School of Long Island in Williston Park, New York.

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**Nachalah: Where Tradition Lives**

**A New Independent Minyan in New York City**

By Hazzan Jack Mendelson

Two years ago, on Shabbat Chanukah, my Nachalah (heritage) minyan had its first service. It started when I began a quest to find something fulfilling to do in my retirement. I noticed that independent minyanim were popping up all over Manhattan and hazzanut—Eastern European cantorial music—was generally not in the picture. As anyone who knows me will tell you, aside from family, *chazzonis* (Yiddish for *hazzanut*) is who I am. I’ve always been a warrior for *chazzonis* and I’m determined to try to keep it alive. Perhaps I could create a minyan where this traditional musical form of *tefillah* (prayer) could continue to flourish.

First, founding principles. Nachalah would be dedicated to the concept of *hiddur mitzvah*, the beautification of the commandment to pray. Why not a service that would feature *chazzanis* as “host” and modern, new melodies as “guests.” We would use musical instruments, fusing ancient and modern *tefillah* (prayer), and feature four or five terrific *chazzanim* (cantors) accompanied by a who’s who gathering of Klezmer/Jazz musicians.

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CA 2020 Mission: Ancient Pathways/Modern Voices
An interview with Mission Chairman Hazzan Nathan Lam

The flyer for the Cantors Assembly 2020 Mission to Italy begins: “For over two thousand years, Jewish communities have existed in Italy. Our ancestors settled here during the pre-Christian Roman era and through periods of prosperity and times of persecution, have held a continuous presence until today. We'll explore these roots and routes - historic, religious and of course, musical! Join us as we sing, study, sight-see and celebrate together through inviting, intriguing Italy.”

This introduction to our exciting mission is inspiring in itself. But, in my interview with Hazzan Nate Lam, its 64 words became a musical theme and variations as he spoke about the history of Italian Jewish Communities; the Jewish music of Italy and its unique flavors; the opportunities to learn and study from three outstanding scholars; the availability of fantastic Kosher restaurants; and much more. By the time we finished speaking, I was ready to book my trip!!

Hazzan Lam has made five trips so far to Italy to plan the mission, working with the Jewish community in each city. He shared that the community of 20,000 in Rome is tight knit, with one-half Libyan Jews and the other half Jews of Roman and Sephardic descent. Our first evening begins with a welcome concert organized by the Jewish community of Rome, featuring the two Cantors and male choir of the Great Synagogue.

We will have an opportunity to tour the Great Synagogue—one of the most impressive in Europe—but if you'd like to experience Shabbat in the Great Synagogue, Hazzan Lam suggests coming several days early to Rome. “You'll have time to visit many more sites, perhaps take a day tour to Napoli, and eat at many of the almost 20 Kosher restaurants near the Great Synagogue. There are Sushi ones, meat, dairy, you name it, teeming with people from all over the world. Sunday night is jammed with people and the energy is great.”

Hazzan Lam is especially excited about the great lecturers we will hear on the trip:

- Dr. Stephen Berk, Professor of History at Union College in Schenectady, New York; Director of the Program in Russian and Eastern Europeans Studies.
- Dr. Mark Kligman. Chair of Ethnomusicology at UCLA; Mickey Katz Endowed Chair in Jewish Music; and Director of The Lowell Milken Fund for American Jewish Music.
- Dr./Hazzan Ramon Tasat, Cantor of Shirat HaNefesh in southern Montgomery County, Maryland and expert in Italian Jewish music.

As the papal states opened Rome to Sephardic Jews in 1492, so did the Medici of Florence. As in Rome, we will have a special concert with the Florence Jewish community. Hazzan Lam points out that the music in every city is different; each had and has its own flavor. A side trip from Florence takes us to Ferrara, where there is a special visit to the new Museum of Italian Judaism and the Shoah, exploring 2,000 years of Jewish History, and includes an introduction by the museum director, Simonetta Della Seta. Following this unique experience, we travel on to Venice, where we spend time at the Campo Del Ghetto, the oldest ghetto in the world. Our farewell concert followed by a reception is at the famous and beautiful Arsenale.

This interview began and now ends with the thought that there is so much to see, sing, study and celebrate in this musical journey with the Cantors Assembly to Italy. As with the previous missions to Poland, Germany, and Spain, the Italy mission is not just for cantors. Anyone with a love of Jewish music or history is welcome! Thank you Hazzan Lam for updating us on this exciting trip.

For full itinerary and additional details, contact www.ayelet.com/conferences or call 1-800-237-1517.

Hazzan Nathan Lam serves Stephen Wise Temple in Los Angeles, California. He is a Past President of the Cantors Assembly, President of the Cantors Assembly Foundation and Director of International Missions of Good Will, and Dean of the Cantorial School of the Academy for Jewish Religion, California.

Interview with Sacred Sounds Editor, Hazzan Pamela Schiffer.
Nachalah …
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We were fortunate to receive grants for us to get started and the minyan began to take shape. We decided to start with a Friday night Kabbalat Shabbat and Maariv service using the “slim” version of the Sim Shalom siddur. Our first season we met at the 92nd Street Y and Hebrew Union College. We now daven at the Society for Jewish Science Center for Applied Science located at 109 E 39th Street.

Our service begins at 6:30 p.m. with the Backwards Niggun. This is a Romanian Chassidic tradition where the Chassidim would bring in Shabbat at sunset, starting by a lake and then walking backwards towards the synagogue singing this niggun.

We do both improvised and set pieces, with lots of congregational singing. In those moments we do both traditional and “now” compositions; a nice detour from the tradition. Come and you’ll hear Rosenblatt, Ganchoff, Oysher, Glantz, etc., along with songs from Nava Tehila (Jewish renewal group in Israel that focuses on creating musical and engaging prayer spaces), Meir Finkelstein, new compositions, etc. We have a handout for each service that lists composers, bios of cantors and musicians, service highlights, and some texts. And each service we commission a one page d’rash relating to Jewish liturgical music from a different music or rabbinic scholar.

At the minyan we present both women and men singing hazzanut. In addition to guest cantors, both my son Daniel and wife Fredda take part. I can proudly say Danny is one of the minyan favorites. His cantorial and musical artistry is incredible and his versatility in hip hop, opera and other genres makes for some great hazzanut! Fredda’s contralto voice is reminiscent of female chazzantes—women in the early 20th century who could imitate the male voice. We also invite students from the Jewish Theological Seminary and the Hebrew Union College who have real talent for chazzonis to come and sing. It is a great experience for them and good for us as well.

A real find is Yoel Kohn, a Satmar Chasid who left the community at the age of 30. He is unobservant but for one thing he loves from his former life—Chazzonis. Listening to him is like being back with the greats of the Golden Age of Chazzonis. He has even developed a fan base from this minyan!

Other special guests include renowned members of the Klezmatics—trumpeter Frank London and violinist Lisa Gutkin—and internationally known clarinetist Michael Winograd.

I hope you can join us this year at Nachalah. Our schedule and service information is on my website: https://cantorjackmendelson.com/nachalah—where-tradition-lives.

Having retired from the active pulpit, Hazzan Jack Mendelson, past President of the Cantors Assembly, still teaches at both the Jewish Theological Seminary and Hebrew Union College. His one man show, “The Cantor’s Couch,” continues to play across the country, and he is the subject of the documentary “A Cantor’s Head.”