

When Prayer is not Enough

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You may know this joke: a man is drowning in the ocean and several people with boats come to rescue him. He responds to each of them, “No, thank you. I’ve been praying, and God will save me.” When the man arrives in heaven, angry with God, God asks him, “Why didn’t you get on the boats I sent?”

Prayer is rarely enough. Jewish leaders are acutely aware of this reality today. Cantors, in particular, know that there is far more to our jobs than leading prayer.

When the Israelites notice the Egyptian army chasing them, they cry out to God (Exodus 14:10), complain to Moses (Exodus 14:11–12), and Moses reassures them that they will be saved (Exodus 14:13–14). Then, there is a gap in the narrative between verses 14 and 15, when God responds to Moses, saying:

מִהֲתַצַּעַק אֵלַי דִּבַּר אֶל־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּסֵעוּ:

Why do you cry out to Me? Tell the Israelites to go forward.

A close reading of these verses reveals a lack of clarity both regarding the order of events and our characters’ behavior. The following questions can illuminate the successes and failures of Moses’ leadership at this pivotal moment for the future Jewish People:

First, if the Israelites felt comfortable praying directly to God, why did they subsequently complain to Moses? And did Moses initially pray to God with the Israelites?

These two questions, in different ways, paint Moses as accessible. While it is natural and common for leaders to field complaints, maybe Moses invited their criticism by being too approachable. Or perhaps he lacked confidence in his role, understanding himself as one of the Israelites

rather than as their leader. Although Seforno does not write this explicitly, he comments on verse 15 that:

“Moses’ outcry was one of concern with the rebellious attitude of the people who not only were afraid—something that could be forgiven—but who had dared to be sarcastic in their hour of danger, ridiculing Moses’ leadership to the point where he was afraid that they would refuse to enter the sea when told to.”

When leaders are too accommodating or lack confidence, they risk losing their constituents, facing excessive complaining and far worse outcomes, especially in moments of crisis.

Next, if Moses did indeed cry out to God *with* the Israelites, why would he also reassure them that God would deliver them? This question also points to a possible lack of clarity about Moses’ position. Moses seems unsure of himself, stuck between God and the people. In vital communal moments, leaders’ role confusion can be catastrophic.

Finally, if Moses did not pray to God with the Israelites, why does God tell him to stop? The Babylonian Talmud (Sotah 37a) fills in the gap by imagining that Moses prayed separately:

At that time, Moses was prolonging his prayer. The Holy One, Blessed be God, said to him: My beloved ones are drowning in the sea and you prolong your prayer to me?

There is a time for prayer and a time for action. Both the Torah and the Talmud caution that praying extensively in a moment that calls for decisive action can have devastating consequences.

As a cantor, I believe in the power of prayer. Personal and communal prayer can be transformational. Both we and God need our prayers. Yet there is a limit to what prayer can accomplish. As Jewish leaders, cantors embody both prayer and action.

I am proud that Conservative cantors are ambassadors for the education they receive at JTS, which is simultaneously academic, deeply meaningful, and relevant. Conservative cantors model how to hold both tradition and change in their prayer-leading, especially as they balance and blend traditional Jewish music—including but not limited to *hazzanut*—and new developments in Jewish music. Today's cantors do much more than lead services. The following five pillars describe what I believe it means to be a 21st-century cantor, defined more by our overall service to our communities than through our prayer-leading alone:

1. Cantors are spiritual leaders: full members of a clergy team and staff team, who collaborate with lay leaders. They are team players who model authentic engagement with Conservative Judaism.

2. Cantors are community builders. Our current moment calls for a relationship-centered approach to building communities. Cantors respond to the needs of our constituents, which necessitates knowing our people well and finding ways to help them learn, grow, connect with one another, and bask in their accomplishments. Empowering congregants to take an active role in the ritual life of a community through service-leading; reading Torah/Haftarah and chanting *megillot*; serving as *gabbaim*; and offering words of Torah are all essential to building community.

3. Alongside their rabbinic colleagues, cantors are pastors and officiants. Furthermore, as the roles of rabbi and cantor increasingly overlap, supporting people in the highs and lows of their lives has become a bigger part of the cantorate. To ameliorate rabbinic burnout and pipeline challenges, cantors can be available to respond to bereavements, to lead lifecycle events, and to officiate services independently.

In fact, an increasing number of cantors in the Conservative Movement now serve as sole clergy members (*Kol Bo*) of their synagogues.

4. Cantors are educators for every age and stage, from singing with children in an early childhood center and tot service, to running a children's choir and religious school *tefillah*, to training b'nei mitzvah and inviting teens back after b'nei mitzvah to participate in synagogue life, to staffing teen trips and running HaZamir chapters, to adult education.

5. Last but certainly not least, cantors are experts in music and *tefillah*. These are the nitty-gritty skills taught in the H. L. Miller Cantorial School: Hebrew, musicianship, liturgy, *nusah* (modes and motifs of prayer services), chanting, *hazzanut*, Jewish music history, Yiddish and Ladino repertoire as well as old and new Israeli and American Jewish music.

We recently surveyed the past ten years of JTS' Cantorial School alumni. One of our survey questions reads: "Which roles have taken a significant amount of your time since your ordination?" Here are the many roles that at least one third of the respondents checked, not including prayerleader:

Administrator, b'nei mitzvah preparation, choir director, community programming, educator, Torah reader, lifecycle officiation, organizational leader, pastoral visits, planning and performing in concerts, public speaking, religious school/nursery school, song leader, spiritual guide, Torah/prayer coordinator, and writer.

Because of the breadth of cantors' training and experience, I urge Jewish day schools, Hillels, and Ramah camps to also consider cantors for positions that are typically held by rabbis.