

קול ששון וקול שמחה: CANTOR

THE VOICE OF JOY AND GLADNESS

ISRAEL

AT THE SCHOOL OF SACRED MUSIC

GOLDSTEIN

Jean Bloch Rosensaft

Cantor Israel Goldstein reflects on his life and career at the culmination of his nineteen years of dedicated leadership of the School of Sacred Music.

How did a British soccer player become the Director of the School of Sacred Music (SSM)? Cantor Israel Goldstein's journey from avid London athlete to renowned New York cantor illuminates the trajectory of 20th-century Jewish history and the evolution of the cantorate from its Golden Age to its contemporary vigor.



Israel Goldstein at six months old in London, England.

The roots of Goldstein's life's work can be traced to his primary role model, his father, Cantor Jacob Goldstein, who during the 1920s and early 1930s was the cantor of the leading Orthodox synagogue in Vilna, known as the Jerusalem of Lithuania and a vibrant cultural and religious center of Jewish life. Despite the vitality of life in Vilna, his mother, Toba, foresaw the impending threat of the *Shoah*, and the family

immigrated to London, where a colleague had recommended his father to the New Synagogue in Stamford Hill, then a prosperous suburb of the city. Goldstein was born there in 1936, survived the London blitz as a young child, and was evacuated periodically to Wales and other safe havens. After the war, he attended the Avigdor High School where many of his classmates were orphaned Orthodox children who had been rescued from Nazi Europe by the school's founder, Rabbi Solomon Schonfeld.

Goldstein's vocal talents were recognized when he was five years old. "I sang in my father's men and boys choir, which was situated in the loft of a cathedral-like synagogue that seated 1800 people and would be packed to the rafters on Jewish holidays, with the windows

open so the many people standing outside could listen," he recalls. "My father leading these services was an incredible, electrifying experience. I remember saying to myself, if this is what being a cantor is all about, I want to get in on this!"

The choir had about 30 singers on *Shabbat*, and as many as 60 on holidays. Goldstein memorized the music by ear. "I soon had my own following – all the girls and women in the balcony who could see me in the loft! My choir position was boy alto, but when you talk about positions, I was right half of my soccer team," he adds.

His family immigrated in the early 1950s to New York, where he graduated from a yeshiva high school on the Lower East Side. There was no soccer team,



Cantor Goldstein's parents Jacob and Toba with his Aunt Yocheved and sisters Sally and Betty at the train station leaving Poland for London in 1932.

but Goldstein followed baseball and basketball. “I couldn’t get into football – I just didn’t understand that game.” He attended Yeshiva University for a short while, but left to study at HUC-JIR. “My father did not encourage me to become a cantor, because he felt that the Golden Age of the cantorate had passed, but he said that if I wanted to do this, I had to go to HUC-JIR, which he knew to be the best school and the place where many of his colleagues taught.” Goldstein studied with the giants of cantorial art: Cantors Moshe Ganchoff, Abraham Shapiro, Eric Werner, Abraham Binder, Isadore Freed, Lazar Weiner, and Lawrence Avery, and received his B.A. and investiture in 1959. While he never studied formally with his father, he learned by observing and listening to him, by being in his choir, then leading his choir and occasionally substituting for him at the pulpit.

At HUC-JIR Goldstein participated in the School of Sacred Music’s renewal of Jewish music in America after the *Shoah*, when



Israel Goldstein's class photo at HUC-JIR in the 1950s.

liturgical traditions were transplanted from the destroyed synagogues and communities of Europe. Simultaneously, he became enthralled with the possibilities of contemporary music in the synagogue and the importance of the organ at that time. “Of the many composers I admired, Isadore Freed affected me the most, because he opened up all kinds of harmonic possibilities that had not been possible in my traditional approach to music and indicated a new direction for me.”



Cantor Israel Goldstein and Ellen Goldstein (seated) surrounded by their daughters Dena and Cara and grandchildren Emma, Ashley, Amanda, and Aron.

Goldstein initially served a congregation in Stamford, Connecticut for a year and in Caldwell, New Jersey for two years, but found a home for the past forty-three years at the Jericho Jewish Center. The call to join the faculty at his *alma mater* came in 1974 from his mentor, Cantor Avery. He began teaching during the academic year that culminated with the investiture of the first woman cantor, Barbara Ostfeld, and he has witnessed the burgeoning number of female students and their successful integration in the field over the decades.

Goldstein’s forte has been teaching the traditional cantorial courses and coaching students for the past thirty-two years. “I felt that I could help young cantors become the cantors they should try to be, and as a good listener, students have sought me out for guidance throughout the years.” This affinity prompted his becoming the Director of the School of Sacred Music in 1987, where the cantorial course of study had grown to be a four-year Master of Sacred Music program. “My first grant application was an unsuccessful attempt to get funding to commission new compositions tailored for women’s voices, because traditional cantorial music was

designed for men’s vocal range. As time went on I found more and more music was being written for women’s voices and it became far less of an imperative than when I first started as Director.”

Over the years, Goldstein has enjoyed composing and arranging liturgical music. He has written the piano accompaniments for a number of Cantor Moshe Ganchoff’s compositions, including the weekday “*Maariv Service*” and “*Tfilot Moshé*” (published by the Cantors Assembly) and the prayer “*Magein Avot*” (published by Transcontinental Music). Sacred Music Press recently published four of his liturgical compositions, entitled “*B’chol Levacha Uv’chol Naf Sh’cha*.”

Goldstein has also officiated and concertized in London, Jerusalem, and Tel Aviv and in major cities throughout the United States and Canada. He is the soloist on four archival recordings of “Great Synagogue Composers,” including the recording of High Holy Day works by Abraham Birnbaum and Israel Alta. In October 1993 he sang a recital at the Old Jewish Theatre in Odessa, Ukraine, as part of the 2nd International Festival of Jewish Art Music.



Cantor Goldstein surrounded by cantorial alumni at Congregation Rodeph Sholom, at the tribute concert honoring him for his devoted years of service to the SSM.

Under his aegis, the cantorial program was expanded from four to five years in 2003-04, in order to accommodate the full range of prerequisites beyond the study of liturgy and voice: Judaic studies and education courses; professional development training, including student pulpit and pastoral chaplaincy internships; spiritual growth mentorship; and a thesis and senior recital demonstrating scholarly accomplishment. Aside from the rigor of this program, Goldstein stresses that “having a voice and musical skills are the essential elements that distinguish the cantor from the rabbi or educator. I am always advocating for talent during admissions. Leave the rest to us at HUC-JIR.”

Goldstein regards the Year-In-Israel Program as vital in establishing camaraderie among future cantors, rabbis, and educators during their required first year of study in Jerusalem. This interaction is reinforced during their remaining stateside years of study through shared courses in religion, philosophy, Midrash, and education, with some cantorial students pursuing a dual Master’s degree in Jewish education. All of these

developments point to an evolving job description for the cantor.

“With some exaggeration, of course, years ago it was a great voice that got the job, but today’s congregations are seeking greater participation in worship and a cantor who brings so much more to the role. Beyond being a life cycle officiant and having extraordinary talent, today’s cantor is expected to have strong interpersonal relationship abilities, a thorough grounding in higher Judaic studies through our curriculum, pastoral counseling and spiritual guidance skills, and more. The more we train our students in these areas, the more successful we, and they, are.”

Over the past nineteen years as Director of the SSM, Goldstein has had the privilege of presenting 192 students at Investiture Ceremonies. In preparing them for this milestone, he has strived to nurture his students’ strengths, explaining “I’ve been able to draw them out, expand their self-perception, and show them that they are more flexible than they think they are. I’m hoping to continue that as a member of the faculty.” Goldstein

is also looking forward to having the opportunity to coach more students, a role he greatly enjoys, without the distractions of his former administrative responsibilities.

He will also have more time to enjoy family life with his wife Ellen, a gifted artist and calligrapher, his daughters – real estate attorney Dina, educator Cara, and homemaker/former communications professional Toba, his C.P.A. son Jakob, and his grandchildren, Ashley and Emma Cohen; Amanda, Danielle, and Aron Denenberg; Chaim Yehoshua, Moshe Dovid, Avraham Menachem, Hindy, Nochum Meir, Shlomo Yosef and Miri Goldstein; and Maya and Jesse Avraham Jamil.

Reflecting on his association with HUC-JIR, beginning as a student fifty years ago, Goldstein acknowledges that the cantorate was his destiny. His teaching and mentorship have shaped the lives of hundreds of cantors, strengthening their ability to touch the lives of countless individuals in congregations and communities far and wide. His enduring friendship signifies a “lifetime warranty” for his students, who reciprocate with great affection and a shared dedication to ensuring the continuity of Jewish heritage and values for the generations to come. ■