



# CANTOR BRUCE RUBEN, PH.D.

## Welcoming the New Director of the School of Sacred Music

Jean Bloch Rosensaft

**C**antor Bruce Ruben, Ph.D., a distinguished scholar, university academic, and composer, has served as the cantor of Temple Shaarey Tefila in New York City for 24 years. He is now bringing his professional expertise, personal commitment, and creative vision to HUC-JIR as the newly appointed Director of the School of Sacred Music (SSM).

“Over the past 15 years at Temple Shaaray Tefila, I have had the pleasure of mentoring HUC-JIR cantorial interns, who have given me wonderful insights into the SSM,” he explains “It has been fulfilling to help shape the careers of these young people.”

Ruben takes on his new responsibilities at a time of transformation in Reform worship and Jewish spirituality and brings a solid grounding in the realities of Reform congregational life. “I feel that it is very important to serve all those who enter our sanctuaries,” he says. “Some congregants want to be engaged and sing throughout the service. Others want to let the beauty of the music and the voices of the cantor and choir wash over them and bring them to a spiritual place. Every synagogue is different, and each cantor has to find the right balance. Traditional chanting, the music of the choir, contem-



porary Jewish music – the best of every era must be sustained to enrich our services. The goal is to create a synergy of worship linking the cantor and the congregant to reach the spiritual fulfillment that so many seek.”

While the traditions of *nusach* (traditional chants and melodies of prayers) and cantillation (chanting of the *Torah* and other biblical books) are still the core of the cantor’s calling as the *schaliach tzibbur* (prayer leader representing the community), Ruben points to congregations’ other needs. “Cantors are expected to provide adult education, officiate at life cycle events, and function as full-fledged clergy in ways that were not expected years ago.”

Ruben has thought a lot about the skill set required for today’s cantor. “First of all, the ideal cantor must be a strong musician, both vocally skilled and able to conduct a choir. He or she must have a level of musical proficiency that is worthy of the Master of Sacred Music degree.”

Ruben also stresses the role of the cantor as scholar and educator. The son of an academic – his father was Professor of Biology at Reed College in Portland, Oregon, where he was raised – Ruben received the Bachelor of Science, Music

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(1975) and Master of Arts, Religious Studies (1977) at Indiana University (Bloomington) and was invested as a cantor at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) in 1981. He earned a Ph.D. at the City University of New York, Graduate Center (1997) with a dissertation on “Max Lilienthal: Rabbi, Educator, and Reformer in Nineteenth-Century America,” based on substantial primary research in HUC-JIR’s American Jewish Archives, which he is preparing for publication.

Ruben has had a long relationship with the SSM. He presented a keynote lecture on “The History of the SSM” at the symposium marking its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1998 and has taught Jewish history at HUC-JIR in New York. He has also taught the history of Jewish music at the Juilliard School and has served for fifteen years on the faculty of Hunter College, City University of New York, where he has taught courses on Jewish history and the Holocaust. He has guest lectured internationally, and authored articles and study guides on American synagogue music, liturgy, Jewish life cycle, and American Reform Judaism.

He believes that “the cantor must be immersed in *yiddishkeit* and Jewish knowledge – a scholar able to teach liturgy, Jewish music history, and Jewish history, so that the music being taught or performed is understood in its context, as part of the larger Jewish heritage.” He stresses the need to teach human relations skills for those interacting with congregants at the most important moments of their lives, from the birth of their children, *b’nai mitzvah*, and marriage, to *bikkur cholim*

at times of illness and counseling at times of personal loss or crisis. “The cantor’s presence is crucial at such times. One has to have compassion, empathy, and high ethical standards to fulfill these responsibilities.”

Furthermore, he emphasizes that today’s cantor is part of a clergy team and needs to understand the structure of synagogue leadership and the range of responsibilities, from fundraising and program development, to administration and supervision of staff. “Part of the SSM curriculum should prepare the cantor for the real job description, which includes staff management, the budget process, and development.”

There is the additional opportunity for the cantor to serve as a communal leader, which Ruben has enjoyed through his work with the American Jewish Committee, as a member of the Board of the Yorkville

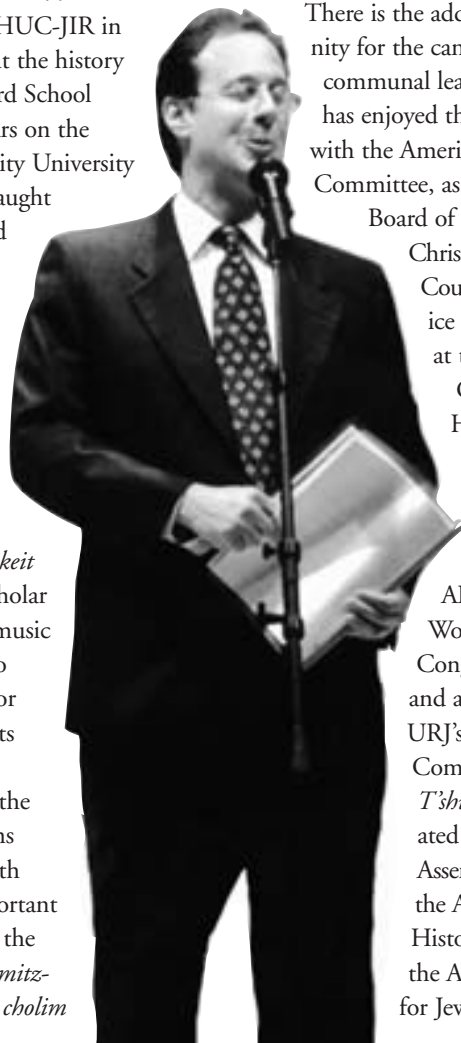
Christian-Jewish Council, and his service to senior citizens at the Brown Gardens Nursing Home. He has also served on the URJ Task Force on Jewish Ethics, on the ARZA slate at the World Zionist Congress in Jerusalem, and as a member of the URJ’s Editorial Committee for *Shirei T’shuvah*. He is associated with the Cantors Assembly of America, the American Jewish History Society, and the American Society for Jewish Music.

Ruben plans to devote his energy toward recruitment, in order to see the SSM grow and attract more students. “I want to strengthen relationships with voice teachers, heads of music schools, and Jewish studies programs throughout the country, to help them understand the opportunities at HUC-JIR. When they have a student with a strong Jewish identity and great musical talent coming through their programs, I’d like them to direct that student to us.”

He is committed to maintaining close contact with HUC-JIR alumni, who are a vital link in recruitment for the SSM. “Cantors in the field, seeing young kids coming through their programs, are mentors and role models for them. Many of our cantorial students came to us because they were inspired by the cantor of their synagogue. Sometimes it’s as simple as their saying, ‘Have you ever thought about becoming a cantor?’”

Ruben’s own journey toward the cantorate began as a casual visitor to the Hillel at Indiana University, where the rabbi discovered that he was a voice major. Soon he was helping to lead services and found the experience beautiful. When he was randomly assigned to a voice teacher, Marko Rothmüller, who had not only had a distinguished opera career in Europe but had also led High Holy Day services at a Cleveland synagogue for many years and had written a book on the history of Jewish music, “I asked him to help me learn more cantorial music in order to lead High Holy Day services at Hillel – it was my first taste of being a cantor.”

Pointing out that the SSM’s location in New York is a great asset and offers potential for new partnerships, he says, “We have tremendous resources in this city, with the various music schools, music education programs, the opportunity for guest faculty for master classes, the presence of composers, and more.”





**Cantor Bruce Ruben and his wife Judith Clurman with their son Ari. (Below) Cantors Goldstein and Ruben.**

As a composer, whose *Baruch Haba* for mixed chorus and organ has been performed at HUC-JIR Ordination/Investiture Services, Ruben enjoys writing settings of liturgy, incorporating a kernel of traditional trope (musical motif in biblical cantillation) or *nusach* as part of compositions. He has produced recordings for *Shabbat* and weddings, presented chamber music concerts, commissioned and premiered new works by leading composers, and performed in concerts of Jewish sacred, popular, and art music.

He hopes to attract composers-in-residence for a semester, to connect these visiting artists to Jewish liturgical traditions and expose students to their creativity. "I would love to identify talented young Jewish composers around the country, invite them into our *nusach* and cantillation classes and have them teach our students how to compose, with the goal of writing a new piece of music that gets performed. The process of creating new Jewish music would be exciting. We need to nurture an American musical tradition for the synagogue that is meaningful to our own era." He also aims to encourage the SSM students in their academic research, bring in guest scholars-

in-residence, and raise the SSM's scholarly profile with academic conferences.

As a member of the HUC-JIR/URJ/ American Conference of Cantors Joint Cantorial Placement Committee, Ruben looks forward to working with Cantor Barbara Ostfeld, Director of Placement, to increase opportunities for SSM graduates, offer career guidance, and establish continuing education programs to enable cantors to gain new skills to meet the changing needs of the pulpit.

He shares his love for music with his wife Judith Clurman, a faculty member at the Juilliard School and a renowned choral conductor of the Juilliard Choral Union, who has performed at Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall. She is currently preparing concerts for a Leonard Bernstein Festival at Harvard University, where their son Ari is a student.

Ruben has great aspirations for the SSM. "I want to build on Cantor Israel Goldstein's extraordinary accomplishments to bring this school to an ever greater level of excellence," he says, and seeks to further strengthen and integrate the core curriculum from the first year of study in Jerusalem through the four subsequent years culminating in investiture as cantor.

He is proud of the SSM's mission to ensure the vitality of Jewish identity and heritage and looks forward to the challenges ahead. "I want to help create a future for Jewish music. Coming to HUC-JIR offers a unique opportunity to nurture the next generation

of cantors, to teach in a stimulating academic community, and to have an impact on the future of the profession that I love." ■

