

Meet HUC-JIR's Students

It's a Wednesday morning in February, and inside the Minnie Petrie Synagogue the melody of the traditional blessing for wine floats through the packed room as a young woman holds the room captive with her song.

Except she has a backup band, the four-piece Afro-Semitic Experience, and they are performing Kurt Weill's jazz setting of "Kiddush." And the singer went to Carnegie Mellon as a math major/jazz minor and worked for three years as a financial analyst for Lehman Brothers before coming to HUC-JIR as a cantorial student. So, to put it simply, a few things here are bordering on the unusual.

HUC-JIR AND ALL THAT JAZZ

Samantha Massell

Dressed in gold brocade, **Lisa Shapanka Arbisser**, SSM '09 leads her senior recital – *The Fusion of Jazz and Synagogue Music*. This being her last semester of a five-year stint at HUC-JIR, Lisa is ready to start a career in, what she calls, "singing for a purpose."

As a teenager, Lisa was very involved with her Reform synagogue, Temple Shalom in Aberdeen, NJ, and went through *bat mitzvah* and confirmation, in addition to four years at a Hebrew high school. At college she spent her junior year studying physics and math in Israel. During her senior year, she recalls, "finance and math were all I really knew, so I decided to look for a job that would leave me the free time to explore other areas."

Lisa joined Lehman Brothers, which she says was interesting, but not exactly what she wanted to do. She went to synagogue more often and met her future husband, who also enjoyed going there. She began taking voice

lessons and participating in an opera workshop, and got involved in the choir at Central Synagogue. After speaking to the cantor, she decided that it was time to get back into music, but performing just for the sake of performing was not for her. "I wasn't interested in classical music or oratorios or German Lieder or modern music. Synagogue music was something that really appealed to me."

After Janis Cohen, Lisa's cantor from her home synagogue, suggested that Lisa consider becoming a cantor, the "seed was planted. I decided this is something that I wanted to do, and I told my parents. Their reaction: 'You're leaving a job on Wall Street that pays you nicely not just to be a cantor, but to be a student again for five years?'" Lisa laughs now, as she retells her story, but "they were shocked."

"I wanted to do something more with my life rather than sitting behind a computer, and working in an office all day...there had to be more to a profession, and to life, than just this." It became clear that it was working as a professional in a synagogue, which she says is all about "connecting with people and created sacred relationships, leading people in worship, and teaching."

During her first year of study in Jerusalem, she was an English teacher to a mother and her two children who had lost their husband/father to terrorism. "I was sent there ostensibly as an English tutor. But it was really just to be there for them, to be their friend, and to remind them that there's a life outside of the grieving and the pain." Upon her return to the States, she became Mrs. Lisa Shapanka Arbisser and began the next four years of study at HUC-JIR's School of Sacred Music in New York.

Her interest in jazz-liturgical music was sparked by an album that "Frank London of the Klezmatics had done for Cantor Jack Mendelssohn's film, *A Cantor's Tale* – where they took four traditional *hazzanut* (cantorial) pieces and broke them down and made them into avant-garde works." She not only created her senior thesis and recital around the concept, but also plans to include the fusion idea in her cantorate.

Dr. Mark Kligman, Professor of Jewish Musicology, noted during her recital that "the Jewish love affair with jazz goes back nearly to the beginnings of jazz itself. In the 1929 film, *The Jazz Singer*, the young son of a cantor leaves home in pursuit of the jazz world. Al Jolson's character was forced to choose between the world of jazz and the world of the synagogue. Now, however, the barriers between the two have long dissolved. Today, composers for the synagogue explicitly borrow jazz idioms and sometimes create entire jazz services. Working jazz musicians borrow from *hazzanut*, *nusach*, and familiar synagogue melodies to create their art, and cantors and congregations strive to integrate music and composers native to this land, and create a unique, authentic American-Jewish experience."

Lisa concurs: "One of my conclusions in my thesis is that you can really use the musicians

in your congregation. Ask them to be involved in the creative process of worship, because it's a way for them to be engaged more deeply in congregational life. In the process, you're also raising the level of music in the worship experience."

Lisa suggests that anyone interested in either being a cantor or simply learning more about Judaism ought to follow through. "Everyone," Lisa states, "has their own Jewish journey." For Lisa Shapanka Arbisser, a pioneer in the field of fusion Jewish liturgical music, the journey is just beginning. ■

*Lisa Shapanka
Arbisser, SSM '09*

