



Lowell Milken Center for  
Music of American Jewish Experience

# The Journey of Women in the Reform Cantorate: Celebrating 50 Years of Sacred Leadership

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Stories of Music

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## Enduring Understandings:

- ♦ Pioneers and supporters have played a crucial role in breaking barriers and fostering the inclusion of women in the cantorate, illustrating the importance of mentorship and support networks in religious and professional journeys.
- ♦ Innovation and Tradition in Religious Leadership: Innovators within the female cantorate have contributed to both preserving and transforming Jewish liturgical traditions, demonstrating the dynamic interplay between innovation and tradition in religious practice.
- ♦ Broadening the Cantorate's Impact on Jewish Life: The broadening of the cantorate has had a significant impact on Jewish communal life, affecting not just the liturgy but also the broader cultural and spiritual life of Jewish communities.
- ♦ The Ongoing Journey and Future Hopes: The continuing evolution of the cantorate highlights ongoing efforts toward inclusivity and the potential for further transformation in Jewish religious life, with hopes for a future where diverse voices are fully integrated into religious leadership.

## Essential Questions:

- ♦ What role have pioneers and supporters played in breaking barriers for women in the cantorate, and what can this teach us about fostering inclusion in religious and professional spaces?
- ♦ How does the inclusion of women in the cantorate demonstrate the balance between preserving tradition and embracing innovation in Jewish liturgy?
- ♦ What challenges did the first female cantors face, and how do these challenges inform our understanding of gender equality in religious leadership today?
- ♦ What has been the impact of female leadership on Jewish worship and the broader Jewish community?
- ♦ How might the inclusion of women in the cantorate inspire future generations to engage with and transform Jewish life?

## Lesson Outline

Introduction

The Reform Cantorate

Women's Musical Roles in Jewish Life: Tradition and Transformation

Before Women Were Ordained: The Early Trailblazers

Julie Rosewald, Betty Robbins and Susan Mandell

Cantor Barbara Ostfeld and the First Generation of Ordained Female Cantors

Making History—and Making Space for Others

Women's Leadership and the Sound of Prayer

Mentorship and Institutional Support—The Heart of a Thriving Cantorate

Why HUC Matters

The Power of Mentorship

What If HUC Didn't Exist?

Cantor Benjie Ellen Schiller: Shaping the Sound of Modern Jewish Music

Singing into Leadership—How Jewish Summer Camps Helped Launch Women into the Cantorate

Overview

Why Camp? Why Music? Why Women?

Hava Nashira: A Spiritual Songleader's Summit

Pioneers of a New Sound

Debbie Friedman

Cantor Jeff Klepper and Rabbi Dan Freeland (Kol B'Seder)

Voices from the Field: Case Studies

Cantor Ellen Dreskin

Cantor Lisa Levine

Looking Forward: The Future of the Cantorate

Coda/Conclusion

In this lesson, we will explore a significant and transformative development in the history of Jewish religious life: the inclusion of women in the cantorate. The role of the cantor, or *chazzan*, has been a central one in Jewish worship—guiding the community in prayer, leading sacred music. However, a cantor is far more than a musical officiant: they are guardians of Judaism’s sacred heritage, inspiring, educating, and empowering the Jewish people through teaching, accompanying congregants through times of suffering and loss, while rejoicing with them in life’s most precious moments. The cantor’s voice and spirit serve as a bridge—linking the Jewish people to our sacred tradition, to one another, to God, and to the eternal rhythms that shape the human journey.

The role of the cantor evolved significantly from its origins as an amateur or itinerant position, often filled by someone with a strong voice but little formal training.

## SLIDE 2


The Haskalah, or Jewish Enlightenment, encouraged modernization and integration into European society, influencing synagogue life and elevating the standards of Jewish education and music. In the 19th and 20th centuries, particularly in Europe and North America, the rise of the synagogue as a central institution and the influence of Western musical and educational models led to the professionalization of the cantorate. Cantors began receiving formal training in music, liturgy, and pastoral care, and took on expanded responsibilities within Jewish life.

Traditionally, this role was reserved for men, but over the past half-century (and more!), women have played a significant role in the cantorate, bringing new perspectives, voices, and interpretations to Jewish liturgical practice.

In addition to expanding the musical and liturgical palette, many women cantors have modeled a style of spiritual leadership that is deeply relational—marked by attentiveness to people’s inner lives, pastoral sensitivity, and a collaborative, non-hierarchical approach to community; from “telling” to “inviting,” and has opened space for more voices, more stories, and a broader understanding of what sacred leadership can look and feel like.

## SLIDE 3

### Pair-Share:

-  **Have you ever seen someone in a leadership or public role who made you feel more represented or connected because of who they were—whether that was their gender, background, age, or something else? What impact did that have on you or your understanding of what leadership can look like?**

The decision to welcome women into the cantorate has been both a reflection of broader changes in society and a catalyst for change within the Jewish community itself. It raises important questions about tradition and innovation, gender equality, and the evolving nature of religious leadership.

## SLIDE 4

## Group Discussion:

- ? How can tradition and innovation work together—or come into conflict—in religious life?  
What are the risks and rewards of changing something as central as who can be a cantor?**

Let's explore how this shift might have challenged or strengthened communal identity and continuity.


In this lesson, we will examine the historical context that led to the inclusion of women in the cantorate, the impact it has had on Jewish worship and community life, and the challenges and opportunities that have arisen as a result. By understanding the significance of this shift, we can appreciate the diverse ways in which women have enriched Jewish prayer and contributed to the ongoing evolution of Jewish tradition.

### SLIDE 5

To understand the journey of women in the Reform cantorate, we must begin with Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR), the first institution in North America to train and ordain Jewish clergy. The Conservative cantorate similarly trains cantors at their primary institution, The Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) and, while they are not the focus of this lesson, have their own unique and important story.

As the birthplace of Reform cantorial and rabbinic education, HUC-JIR has long been a center for innovation and inclusion. It was here that the first female cantor and the first female rabbi in North America were ordained, marking historic milestones in the movement toward equality in Jewish leadership. Today, HUC-JIR continues to be the premier institution for training cantors, rabbis, educators, and nonprofit leaders, shaping a Reform Jewish community that reflects the diverse voices and talents of all its members.



### SLIDE 6



To appreciate the musical dimension of this transformation, **LISTEN** to the following recording of Cantor Barbara Ostfeld performing “Esa Einai” by Cantor Israel Alter. 

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## The Reform Cantorate

### SLIDE 7

- ♦ The early Reform cantorate developed around the sound of choral precision, organ accompaniment, and composed liturgy. Composers such as Cantor Salomon Sulzer, Louis Lewandowski, and later Zavel Zilberts, Gershon Ephros and Lazare Saminsky helped shape a more formal, Westernized synagogue sound—rooted in classical European (and church) music,—which became central to Reform worship aesthetics. While these innovations in Jewish music were taking place, it is important to note that traditional nusach continued to form the core and inspiration of this repertoire.
- ♦ **SLIDE 8 LISTEN** to an excerpt from Louis Lewandowski's Psalm 42  or Cantor Solomon Sulzer's Psalm 111 

- ♦ Choral music was a central feature of Reform Jewish music for much of the 20th Century, if one were to walk into a synagogue, for example, in Chicago, one might hear the music of Max Janowski, a music director at Kehilath Anshe Ma'arav (KAM) in Chicago. His "Avinu Malkeinu" was made famous in the popular sphere by Barbra Streisand, though his repertoire extends far beyond the one work.
- ♦ **SLIDE 9 LISTEN** to Max Janowski's "Sim Shalom" 
- ♦ In the early to mid-20th century, in places like Borough Park, Brooklyn, cantors were local celebrities, treated with the same excitement people usually reserve for rock stars. Each Shabbat, people would travel from synagogue to synagogue to hear extraordinary cantors like the Kussevitsky brothers, who dazzled worshippers with their powerful voices. **SLIDE 10** This period was known as the **Golden Age of Chazzanut** (1880–1930), when cantorial music was the centerpiece of Jewish worship. While these cantors were not Reform, they very much helped to shape the future of the cantorate.
- ♦ **LISTEN** to an excerpt of Moshe Koussevitzky performing "Sheyibane Beit Hamikdash." 

While listening **CONSIDER** (and discuss after):

- ? **How might the sounds of works like these have shaped the spiritual atmosphere of services in the first half of the 20th Century?**

## SLIDE 11

Over time, the role of the cantor evolved, especially in America. In 1947 the Conservative cantorate established the Cantors Assembly, an organization established to professionalize the role of cantor and soon after, in the early 1950s, the Reform cantorate established the American Conference of Certified Cantors (ACCC). The organization was founded by graduates of Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) to professionalize the Reform cantorate, set standards, and support cantors' careers. In the late 1960s, the ACCC became the American Conference of Cantors (ACC) and formally affiliated with the Reform movement. The ACC helped establish standards for cantor-congregation relationships, created pension plans, and expanded educational programs.

The cantorate continued to change alongside American Jewish life. As the role of women in society changed in the 1960s and 70s, their presence in professional jobs such as doctors and lawyers became more common. While there were (and are) still systemic issues of inequality and mistreatment of women in the workplace, women were nonetheless fighting back and making gains. Similarly, a desire for change in the Jewish community was building. Women were increasingly occupying roles in the synagogue and Jewish community, from lay-leader to social activist.

It was in this context that in 1975, Cantor Barbara Ostfeld became the first woman ordained as a cantor, opening doors for women in the profession and reshaping synagogue leadership.

## Pair Share: Identity and Representation

## SLIDE 12

Think about a time when someone challenged a norm in your community—religious, musical, educational, or otherwise.

- ? **What was the reaction—supportive, resistant, mixed?**
- ? **Did it change how you thought about that community or tradition?**
- ? **Would you have made the same choice if you were in their shoes?**

Share your story with a partner (if you would like). Listen for similarities and differences in your experiences, then reflect on how individual actions can influence collective change.

In 2012, HUC-JIR began conferring **ordination** (not just investiture) to cantors, affirming their role as clergy partners. Today, Reform cantors continue to innovate—blending tradition with new musical styles, leading congregations in song and prayer, and enriching Jewish life through both heritage and creativity.

Background: State of the (Reform) Cantorate

## SLIDE 13

The chart shows trends in cantorial student enrollment at Hebrew Union College from 1976 to 2024:

- ♦ The **purple line** shows the number of women enrolled each year.
- ♦ The **blue line** shows men.
- ♦ The **dashed gray line** represents total enrollment.

## Interactive Activity: Data Interpretation Challenge

Present the enrollment chart and discuss in small groups:

- ? **What trends do you notice in the data?**
- ? **What might be some reasons for more recent trends?**
- ? **How does the gender shift reflect broader changes in Jewish communal life?**
- ? **Where else in the broader community have you seen similar trends?**

**For use in discussion...Key Trends from HUC-JIR Enrollment Data (1976–2024):**

1. **Shift from Male-Dominated to Female-Dominated Field**  
Since the late 1990s, women have significantly outnumbered men in cantorial programs.
2. **Overall Decline in Enrollment**  
Peak years in late 1980s–1990s, with a significant influx immediately following the 9/11 Terrorist Attacks; declining interest since early 2000s.
3. **Recent Stabilization at Low Numbers**  
Around 5–6 students per year in the 2020s, with near gender parity.

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## Women's Musical Roles in Jewish Life: Tradition and Transformation

SLIDE 14

In 1970, **Cantor Barbara Ostfeld** began her studies at HUC, ultimately becoming the first American woman ordained as a cantor. Since then, hundreds of women have entered the cantorate. Today, roughly 70–75% of cantorial graduates are women—a stark contrast to the male-only enrollment prior to 1975. This gender shift has led to an explosion of new repertoire and a notable shift in the musical aesthetics of the synagogue.

You will now hear a recording of **Cantor Natalie Young**. Cantor Young is a trailblazing voice in contemporary Jewish worship and one of the leading women composers in the Reform cantorate. She currently serves as the cantor at Beth Emet the Free Synagogue in Evanston, Illinois. Known for her accessible, soulful melodies, Cantor Young's music is sung in congregations around the world. As a composer and prayer leader, she uses the power of music to deepen spiritual connection and build community.

SLIDE 15

**LISTEN:** Play a recording of Natalie Young's "Holy, Holy, Holy"  or "Be the light."  If time allows, listen to both!

While a recording like this may seem commonplace in the Reform community today, for much of Jewish history, the role of the cantor—hazzan—was not a formalized profession but rather a communal function. While the cantorate as an official, paid position only became widespread in the last few centuries, Jewish women have long played musical roles in both formal and informal settings. Their contributions illustrate the ongoing interplay between tradition and innovation, as well as the expansion of women's voices in Jewish religious life.

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## Before Women Were Ordained: The Early Trailblazers

Long before official pathways to cantorial ordination were open to women, a courageous few stepped into roles that challenged long standing traditions and helped ignite a transformation in Jewish religious life. Among these early pioneers were **Julie Rosewald**, **Betty Robbins**, and **Susan Mandell**, women who broke barriers not only musically but also culturally and spiritually.

SLIDE 16

**Julie Rosewald (1847–1906)** broke barriers as America's first known woman cantor at Temple Emanu-El in San Francisco, serving from 1884 to 1893 despite the traditional prohibition of *kol isha*. Her role demonstrated the power of trailblazing leadership in opening new paths for women in Jewish spiritual life. Drawing on her family background in *chazzanut* and her professional opera career, she blended Jewish liturgical traditions with contemporary classical music, introducing new works and arranging pieces herself—an example of how innovation and tradition can coexist in religious leadership.



Rosewald's influence extended beyond the synagogue: together with her husband, she participated in Jewish musical events and charity work, and later shaped American music culture as a professor, teacher, and published author. Though her role was unique in her time, her success planted the seeds for broader acceptance of women in the cantorate, highlighting the ongoing journey toward inclusivity and the potential for future transformation in Jewish communal life.




## SLIDE 17

**Betty Robbins (1924–2004)** defied expectations from a young age. Born in Poland, she joined a boys' choir and studied in a traditional *heder*, pushing against deeply entrenched gender norms in Jewish learning and ritual life. After immigrating first to Australia and later to the United States, Robbins became active at Temple Avodah in Oceanside, New York. In 1955, in a move that made international headlines, she was unanimously appointed as the synagogue's cantor—making her one of the first women in Jewish history to hold that title officially.

Her appointment sparked conversations around the world about the role of women in Jewish religious leadership. But Robbins's legacy went far beyond that groundbreaking moment. Over her long career, she served her community in many ways: teaching in the religious school, training b'nai mitzvah students, forming choirs, and even pioneering the use of music therapy with children with disabilities. Even in retirement, she continued to lead services on cruise ships and organize Jewish music festivals in Florida. Through it all, she embodied a deep belief in the spiritual and communal power of Jewish music.

### Now, let's listen to a rare 1955 recording of Cantorial Soloist Betty Robbins.

As you listen, try to transport yourself back in time. Imagine you're a visitor at Temple Avodah in 1955, perhaps entering the sanctuary not knowing what to expect. Suddenly, you hear a woman's voice leading the congregation—maybe for the first time in your life.

-  **What emotions come up?**
-  **How does her voice shape your sense of prayer?**
-  **What might this experience have meant for the people sitting in the pews that day?**

Let the recording take you there. Then we'll reflect together.

**LISTEN** [to this early recording of Betty Robbins](#) 

## Group Reflection

## SLIDE 18



**Susan Mandell**, meanwhile, served for 14 years (1964–1978) as cantor at Congregation Emanu-El of Edison, New Jersey, long before women were formally admitted to cantorial schools. A graduate of Douglass College, Mandell carved out space for herself in synagogue leadership at a time when few women had access to formal training or official titles. Her work exemplified how female cantors were already shaping the soundscape and spirituality of Jewish life, even without institutional recognition.

Though Mandell did not receive ordination through HUC-JIR, her career adds depth and nuance to our understanding of women's participation in religious leadership in the mid-20th century. Her story

reflects the quiet but powerful ways women entered and influenced the cantorate—even before the doors to official ordination were opened.

Together, Robbins and Mandell represent the unsung foundations of change: women whose leadership, vision, and musical gifts anticipated the broader movement toward gender equity in Jewish clergy. Their contributions remind us that institutional change is often preceded by individual courage, and that history is shaped not only by those who are first ordained, but also by those who dared to lead before the system was ready.

### Group Discussion Question:

-  **Why do you think Robbins and Mandell were willing to step into these roles, even without formal pathways or full communal acceptance?**
-  **What does this tell us about grassroots leadership and change-making in religious life?**

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## Cantor Barbara Ostfeld and the First Generation of Ordained Female Cantors

**SLIDE 19**




In 1970, Cantor Barbara Ostfeld began her studies at Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR). At the time, there were no women formally ordained as cantors or rabbis in American Jewish history. Just five years later, in 1975, Cantor Ostfeld became the first woman to receive cantorial ordination in the Reform movement—marking a seismic shift in the history of Jewish liturgical leadership.

But her path wasn't easy. As a student, she sometimes had to lip-sync during choir performances because faculty were unsure how audiences might react to a woman leading sacred song. She endured inappropriate comments, questions about her competence, and institutional discomfort with her presence. Still, she persisted—fueled by her deep love for sacred music, her belief in prayerful authenticity, and her refusal to hide or conform to others' expectations.

Her influences ranged from classical Renaissance polyphony to folk singers like Joan Baez and Jewish spiritual leaders like Debbie Friedman. Cantor Ostfeld believed that music on the bimah should stir the soul and invite genuine connection—not just showcase technical brilliance.

**LISTEN** to a brief excerpt of [Cantor Ostfeld sing “Shalom Rav” by Ben Steinberg](#) 

While listening **CONSIDER**:

-  **What emotions or values come through in the music or in her voice?**
-  **How does this differ from the more formal or performance-focused style of the Golden Age of Chazzanut?**
-  **What might it feel like to be the “first” in such a visible, spiritual role?**

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## Making History—and Making Space for Others





SLIDE 20

Cantor Ostfeld's ordination opened the door for generations of women to become cantors, but it did not end the challenges they faced. Many who followed in her footsteps encountered skepticism, limited mentorship, and congregations that remained unsure how to embrace a female spiritual leader. Yet even amid these obstacles, the early years of women in the cantorate also saw the emergence of powerful role models and supportive allies who began to reshape the landscape of Jewish worship.

Cantor Ostfeld often reflected that her early champions were other women, gay men, and a handful of forward-thinking mentors. These communities helped create space for those outside the traditional mold—people for whom Jewish music and spiritual leadership were deeply meaningful but not always accessible.

SLIDE 21

### Discuss:

-  **Why do you think these specific groups—women, LGBTQIA+ Jews, progressive mentors—played such a central role in expanding the cantorate?**
-  **How might their support have shaped not just who could lead, but how prayer and music were shared?**
-  **What kinds of courage and creativity are needed to be part of a “first generation”?**
-  **What might you gain—or lose—by stepping into a role that hasn't historically included people like you?**

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## Women's Leadership and the Sound of Prayer



SLIDE 22

The inclusion of women in the cantorate has not only changed who leads Jewish prayer—it has also transformed how prayer sounds and feels in many communities. From solo liturgical compositions to collaborative musical worship, these cantors have blended innovation and tradition in ways that speak to contemporary Jewish life.

In the words of Cantor Ostfeld:

*“My goal was never to be a performer. It was to help people feel like they were praying.”*

### Discuss:

-  **How does music shape your sense of spirituality and belonging?**
-  **Do you think *who* is leading affects *how* people experience prayer?**

## The Early Wave: Women Who Followed

SLIDE 23

After 1975, other women began to follow Cantor Ostfeld's path, becoming ordained cantors in Reform and, eventually, Conservative communities. These early trailblazers included:

- ♦ Cantor Ida Rae Cahana, known for her exquisite vocal artistry and leadership at national Jewish gatherings.
- ♦ Cantor Benjie Ellen Schiller, a gifted composer and educator whose original settings of liturgy have become staples in many congregations.

These women brought new musical aesthetics, broader representation, and often a more collaborative, community-focused approach to spiritual leadership.

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## Mentorship and Institutional Support— The Heart of a Thriving Cantorate

SLIDE 24

When we imagine clergy—whether cantors or rabbis—we may first think of their public-facing roles: leading services, singing beautifully, or offering words of Torah. But the real scope of clergy leadership is far broader and demands training in pastoral care, public speaking, community building, nonprofit management, and interpersonal resilience.

Cantor Claire Franco reflects that her “ah-ha” moment came not from a classroom but from leading High Holy Day services for the first time—experiencing a spiritual fulfillment that couldn't be taught in a textbook. Still, she acknowledges that rigorous preparation at HUC-JIR equipped her not just musically, but professionally and emotionally, to serve as a full clergy partner. “All of my experiences shaped me as a person,” she says, but HUC-JIR helped her to better understand that.

We expect clergy to lead with both heart and competence. That calls for formal, holistic education—something centralized institutions like HUC-JIR are uniquely positioned to offer.

## Why HUC Matters

SLIDE 25

As the flagship seminary of the Reform Movement, HUC-JIR doesn't just teach—it forms Jewish professionals. It sets the ethical, spiritual, and academic standards for cantors and rabbis across North America and beyond. Without this institutional home, Jewish leadership might become fractured, uneven, or driven solely by local or political priorities. Instead, HUC acts as a shared wellspring for values, vision, and leadership development.

The presence of women and other marginalized voices in these halls has made the institution—and the Movement—stronger. Franco, like so many of her generation, did not grow up seeing women on the bimah. And yet by the time she was a student, her class was half women, and teachers like Rabbis Carole Balin and Nancy Wiener modeled what equity in sacred leadership could look like.

As the first woman to hold the position of Director of the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music at HUC-JIR, Cantor Jill Abramson holds a unique position in shaping the future of the Cantorate. She trains and mentors new generations of cantors through her leadership and commitment to

diverse and quality education of the cantorial arts. She has been an advocate for high-level curricular development, new repertoire, and works to identify and support each student's strengths.

Rachel Roth (Chief Operating Officer of the ACC), the first woman to lead a non-gendered Reform Movement organization, echoes the importance of this support. Early in her role at the ACC, she had to assert her authority in rooms full of men—and often had to remind them that her leadership and insight were equal. “I waited until he took a breath and reasserted my place in the conversation,” she remembers. “It was not easy... but I was doing my job.”

## The Power of Mentorship

No cantor or Jewish leader succeeds alone. Mentorship—both formal and informal—has always played a vital role in professional and spiritual growth. Claire Franco credits a male mentor, her student pulpit cantor, for teaching her the rhythms of congregational life. She also finds deep support among colleagues and teachers, noting that “supportive colleagues are the best.”

But mentoring isn't just about advice—it's about being seen, being heard, and being championed.




Roth's experience highlights how mentorship, especially among women, shaped her path when male colleagues couldn't (or wouldn't) relate. Her mentors included executive directors at synagogues who modeled confident, values-based leadership in spaces where few women were at the helm.

Yet mentorship gaps remain—particularly for non-cantors leading cantorial institutions, or for non-binary and trans professionals who don't yet see themselves reflected in senior roles. As Claire says, “Being different and not seeing oneself represented is difficult. It's not easy to be a trailblazer.” But those trailblazers matter immensely.

## What If HUC Didn't Exist?

### Consider this:

**SLIDE 26**

-  **How would a cantorial education differ without a central seminary like HUC (specific to Reform Judaism)?**
-  **Would all candidates receive equal training? Equal mentorship? Equal spiritual grounding?**
-  **Would women or marginalized groups have made such progress?**

Roth raises this point when describing the uphill battle she faced—not just as a woman, but as someone who wasn't a cantor, leading cantors. Without institutional recognition, her authority was questioned. Her title even had to be changed just to be taken seriously.

We can't separate personal success stories from the institutional scaffolding that enables them. Without centralized training and formal ordination through institutions like HUC-JIR, the progress women have made would have been fragmented, inconsistent, or simply impossible. HUC-JIR, the URJ, and professional bodies like the ACC must continue to uphold high standards while evolving with the needs of today's clergy—and tomorrow's. These institutions don't just train cantors—they provide the legitimacy, mentorship, and systemic support that make meaningful change possible.

## Discussion Prompts

SLIDE 27

- ? Why do you think it matters that clergy be trained in more than just Torah and music?
- ? What are the risks when Jewish professionals are not given formal institutional support?
- ? How does seeing yourself represented in leadership (or not) affect your relationship with Jewish life?

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## Cantor Benjie Ellen Schiller: Shaping the Sound of Modern Jewish Music

SLIDE 28

Cantor Benjie Ellen Schiller is a composer, performer, and beloved teacher whose work has shaped the spiritual and musical lives of generations. A gifted songwriter from a young age, she began composing original Jewish music in her teens, inspired by folk traditions, liturgy, and her experiences as a song leader at NFTY camps. Her early exposure to diverse Jewish musical cultures—especially while studying and living in Israel—deepened her compositional voice, blending Middle Eastern motifs with Western classical forms.

**LISTEN** to Schiller’s setting of “Halleluyah”  or “Lamdeini.”  Enjoy both if time allows!

While listening **CONSIDER**:

- ? What emotions does the music evoke?
- ? How does the blend of musical styles enhance the prayer experience?

SLIDE 29

Ordained through Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, Schiller later returned as a professor of Cantorial Arts. There, she became a pillar of cantorial education, mentoring students in liturgy, vocal performance, and sacred music composition. Her curriculum often centers on prayer as a lived, evolving experience—rooted in tradition but responsive to modern needs.

In addition to her solo work, Schiller performs with *Begeg Kefet*, a vocal ensemble supporting social justice initiatives through music. Her compositions, including *Psalm 150*, *Life Cycle Songs*, and settings of Leah Goldberg’s poetry, are widely sung in Reform congregations today.

## Discuss:

- ? What makes music both prayerful and accessible? How do composers like Schiller balance innovation with tradition?

## Singing into Leadership—How Jewish Summer Camps Helped Launch Women into the Cantorate

SLIDE 30

### Overview

In the latter half of the 20th century, Reform Jewish summer camps quietly transformed into some of the most influential training grounds for future Jewish leaders—especially for women. These camps didn't just teach campers how to make lanyards or sing by the campfire; they cultivated leadership, creativity, and confidence in young Jews, long before they stepped into pulpits or pulpits were even open to them.

This cultural shift was deeply musical in nature. It centered around trailblazing educators and musicians—Debbie Friedman, Cantor Jeff Klepper, and Rabbi Dan Freeland—whose work fundamentally reshaped the soundscape of Jewish prayer and expanded the idea of who could lead it.

### Why Camp? Why Music? Why Women?

Summer camps offered an informal, egalitarian environment where teens didn't need formal training to lead. They needed a guitar, a melody, a sense of purpose, and a circle of people ready to sing along. For girls and young women, who often faced gendered barriers in traditional synagogue life, these camps became sacred spaces where they could:

- ♦ Lead communal t'fillah and create meaningful prayer experiences
- ♦ Write or arrange Jewish music that spoke to their personal and spiritual identities
- ♦ Experiment spiritually and musically in ways that were encouraged, not constrained
- ♦ Meet mentors who modeled non-traditional and deeply authentic forms of Jewish leadership

Camps like URJ Kutz Camp and Camp Swig offered workshops in songleading, creative worship, and Jewish text study—blending passion, prayer, and performance. These experiences sparked lasting inspiration for many girls who would go on to become cantors, composers, rabbis, educators, and activists.

### Hava Nashira: A Spiritual Songleader's Summit

In the 1990s, the camp-based songleading movement found a formal home in Hava Nashira, a multiday intensive for Jewish musicians and leaders of all ages. Founded by Friedman, Freeland, and Klepper, the institute quickly became a rite of passage for aspiring songleaders and a lifeline for women looking to enter the world of Jewish liturgy and leadership.

In this inclusive and joy-filled environment:

- ♦ Women were not just participants; they were teachers, composers, and leaders
- ♦ Diversity of sound and theology was encouraged
- ♦ Communal singing became a sacred act of belonging and empowerment

## Pioneers of a New Sound



### Debbie Friedman (1951–2011)

### SLIDE 31

A composer and performer whose music touched generations, Debbie Friedman's songs embodied feminist theology, emotional accessibility, and a deep love of Jewish prayer. She created spaces where young women could see themselves as spiritual leaders, not just songleaders.

*"The more our voices are heard in song, the more we become our lyrics, our prayers, our convictions."*  
—Debbie Friedman

Though never formally ordained, her appointment to the faculty of HUC-JIR in 2007 marked a profound shift in cantorial education—placing a woman, a non-cantor, and a folk musician in the heart of cantorial formation.

**LISTEN:** "Sing Unto God"  and/or "Shalom Aleichem"  Debbie Friedman wrote this setting of "Shalom Aleichem" as her final song, but she never recorded it.

### Cantor Jeff Klepper and Rabbi Dan Frelander (Kol B'Seder)

### SLIDE 32

With roots in both traditional liturgy and American folk music, Frelander and Klepper's duo Kol B'Seder helped create a new "common songbook" for Reform Jews across North America. They treated musical leadership as a serious and sacred task—and in doing so, they opened space for women to lead through music even before congregations were fully ready to embrace female clergy.

**LISTEN:** "Shalom Rav"  and/or "Haporeis Sukkat" 

## Voices from the Field: Case Studies

### Cantor Ellen Dreskin

### SLIDE 33

A respected educator, liturgist, part of the ensemble Beged Kefet, and spiritual director, Cantor Dreskin entered Jewish professional life through the URJ Kutz Camp, where she first led worship as a teen. Though she had little formal training when she entered HUC, her years of songleading made her ready for the cantorate. Today she is a national leader in Jewish spirituality and education.

*"It's not about fitting into a role. It's about letting spirit, learning, and love flow uniquely through you."*

Musical influences: Debbie Friedman, Kol B'Seder, opera, folk, and musical theater

Themes in her work: Embodied spirituality, mindfulness, inclusive prayer

**LISTEN:** "Aleinu L'Shabei'ach"  (Collaboration with Dan Nichols)








A deeply innovative voice in the cantorate, Cantor Levine draws from a broad musical palette—chant, gospel, Ladino, Yiddish, folk—to create prayer experiences that are healing, participatory, and empowering. As one of the first women many congregants encountered on the bimah, she has long championed gender equity, musical diversity, and inclusive liturgy.

Her early songleading experiences gave her the tools to step into professional leadership—even when few female cantors existed to model the way. She continues to teach, compose, and advocate globally.

**LISTEN:** “Sing a New Song” 

### Discussion Questions

**SLIDE 35**

-  **What is it about camp—especially music at camp—that made it a uniquely powerful space for spiritual leadership to emerge?**
-  **How did songleading help normalize women’s voices in Jewish prayer long before synagogues officially welcomed them?**
-  **In what ways can today’s congregations replicate the openness, experimentation, and mentorship culture of summer camps?**
-  **Whose voices are still missing in Jewish worship—and how might music open the door for them, too?**
-  **Which songs shaped your connection to Jewish identity or spirituality? Who led them—and what made it meaningful?**

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### Looking Forward: The Future of the Cantorate

**SLIDE 36**

The cantorate today reflects a Jewish world in motion—more inclusive, more creative, and more diverse than ever before. Women now serve in all areas of cantorial leadership, and their presence has helped reshape the very structure and sound of Jewish worship. In recent years, the bimah has opened further to welcome non-binary, trans, and gender-expansive clergy, bringing fresh insights, expansive liturgical language, and a deep commitment to belonging.

Still, challenges remain. Pay equity, institutional bias, and resistance to change continue to affect many cantors—especially those who don’t fit traditional expectations. Yet, the trajectory is one of growth. Today’s cantorate is not only about music, but also about pastoral care, innovation, community healing, and prophetic presence.

As new generations step into leadership, they are composing a future grounded in authenticity, accessibility, and sacred creativity.

**LISTEN:** “Y’hi Ratzon Shet’chadeish” by Cantor Zevi Tovlev 

A prayer for renewal written and composed by Cantor Zevi Tovsky, a non-binary cantor whose work centers inclusive theology and gender-expansive language. This setting reimagines traditional liturgy with compassion and clarity—an offering of hope for a cantorate that is as diverse and sacred as the people it serves.

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## Coda/Conclusion:

## SLIDE 37

We have taken a great journey that spans far more than 50 years and encompasses an ongoing struggle for gender equality. In this lesson, we have:

- ♦ Explored the general history of the cantorate
- ♦ Learned about current trends in the cantorate
- ♦ Learned about early trailblazer Betty Robbins and Susan Mandell
- ♦ Explored the incredible contributions of Cantor Ostfeld
- ♦ Examined the importance of central institutions and the mentorship provided
- ♦ Discussed the importance of composer/performers within the field
- ♦ Appreciated the role of music from summer camps as a new creative space
- ♦ And offered an optimistic view for the future of the cantorate as one of even greater inclusion.

The journey of women in the cantorate represents a powerful narrative of transformation, resilience, and progress within Jewish religious life. From the early pioneers who faced significant barriers to the contemporary leaders shaping the future of Jewish music and liturgy, their stories illustrate the profound impact of mentorship, innovation, and inclusivity on tradition. By breaking barriers and broadening the scope of the cantorate, women have not only enriched Jewish worship but also deepened the cultural and spiritual life of Jewish communities.

## SLIDE 38

As we reflect on this evolution, we recognize that the inclusion of women in the cantorate is more than a historical milestone—it is an ongoing journey. It challenges us to embrace a dynamic interplay between preserving tradition and fostering innovation, ensuring that Jewish leadership continues to reflect and inspire the diverse voices within our communities. Moving forward, the lessons learned from this transformative movement offer hope and guidance for building an even more inclusive and vibrant Jewish future. We will now close our session with a unique recording of Cantor Benjie Schiller's "Shema b'kola" featuring Cantor Rebecca Moses as a soloist and as you listen, consider what the cantorate may look like in another 50 years.