

Inspired by a woman's voice

A female cantor can certainly hold her own in our male-dominated tradition.

FOR my sins, I was in New York last week for Yom Kippur. And although I've experienced quite a few memorable Days of Atonement in Israel and in other countries, not to mention in different shuls, shtieblach, and temples in Melbourne and Sydney, this one stands out. It was the most deeply moving, revealing, and uplifting of all.



Shayna Postman at the Town and Village shul.

For this unexpected but welcome gift on 14th St in the East Village, I have to thank chazanit Shayna Postman. No disrespect to some truly wonderful chazanim over the years who have thrilled me – from childhood to today – she was quite the most special cantor, male or female, I have heard “live” i.e. leading Yom Kippur services in shul, as distinct from performing Machzor excerpts in concert or on record.

Not only did she inspire 500 congregants through the Kol Nidrei, Musaf and Ne'ilah services with her magnificent soaring voice, she also conducted a mixed choir of 30 on the bimah alongside her. They were

wonderful. Add the incredible richness of the religious music repertoire that American Jewry has created in the past 50 years – a treasure trove virtually unknown outside the United States – and prayer itself is illuminated.

What's more, none of it was a cantorial "performance". As it happens, chazanit Shayna has also featured in concert halls in the United States and Israel.

But on Yom Kippur at Tiffereth Israel, better known as the Town and Village shul, she was the shlichat tsibur, the congregation's voice. I was in awe of her superb command of liturgical style (nusach), the consummate phrasing, and an emotional depth which renewed even the most familiar prayers.

"Whoa," I can hear you say. "Calm down. You're gushing." So I'm gushing. Cantor Shayna deserves it. Still, I know that some readers will be bristling by now. For observantly Orthodox Jews, a female cantor is unacceptable. End of story. I don't accept that view, but I understand it.

Quite a few other readers, however, who are "traditional" but not that observant, male and female, would nevertheless balk at a female cantor. Even if they've never heard one. A chazan can't be a chazanit. To them, it's an oxymoron.

Given the overwhelming male cantorial culture and the legendary names who created it and maintain it today, perhaps that too is understandable. But it's a prejudice that ignores a changing reality in the non-Orthodox world. I believe that reality will eventually also affect the moderate Orthodox congregations. Not in 10 years perhaps. But certainly in 50.

I'm talking about another hobby-horse of mine: the slow but profoundly important impact that a high level study of halachah and Jewish texts by Orthodox women is bound to have, especially in the two great centres of Israel and the United States. Such higher education has already had a subtle, but subversive impact on the moderate Orthodox establishment. So Orthodox (not ultra-Orthodox) women rabbis and cantors are only a matter of time.

It's worth recalling that it's only 57 years ago since Betty Robbins, who had spent some time in Australia before settling in America, became the first woman to lead a Rosh Hashanah service at the Reform Temple Avodah in Oceanside, New York. It was big news, making The New York Times front page, where the report described her (almost certainly wrongly) as "the first female cantor in Judaism's 5000 years".

And even though cantor Shayna has been at the 14th St shul for 14 years, it's only since 1990 that the Conservative Cantors' Assembly has accepted women members. Today the Women Cantors' Network has over 300 members in six countries. And, having heard cantor Shayna, I can understand why: a great female voice leading Jewish prayer is a gift from heaven, but it's a different one than a man's. It brings new vision and new understanding.

Despite everything I've said, and since Yom Kippur is a day of confession, I'll admit that until I heard cantor Shayna, I too had assumed that there weren't any women cantors yet, however impressive, who could measure up against the best of their male colleagues.

Clearly I was wrong, and I'm assured that cantor Shayna is not alone. In which case those who love chazanut, and have an open mind and an open heart, can look forward to some great soul music.



Chag sameach.