

Placement Tips for Cantors

Preliminary Work/Preparation

1. Your resume should be no longer than **two pages**. This should be a professional resume, rather than a bio. It should contain a clear and succinct statement about your **goals as a congregational cantor**. Please be sure to proof it carefully before sending it to the ACC office. Amendments are very difficult to make. The end product must be in MSWord or PDF format. *No pictures, please*. The Placement Director has some sample resumes (<http://www.accantors.org/acc/node/99>) and resume tips which can be yours for the asking. *Make sure to indicate on your resume that you are a member in good standing of the ACC.*
 - *Include different categories of people in your **references**, rabbinic colleagues, lay leaders, teachers, students, parents of students, etc. You will want to keep a separate list of references, rather than including the list on your resume.*
 - *Be sure to list a **land-line** as your contact phone number, rather than a cell phone.*
 - *If you have worked at a **Jewish Summer Camp**, indicate as much on your resume.*
2. **READ ALL APPLICATIONS THOROUGHLY BEFORE DECIDING TO HAVE YOUR RESUME SENT. PAY PARTICULAR ATTENTION TO THE SALARY/BENEFITS.** It is bad form to apply and then to summarily withdraw because you've suddenly "discovered" when doing your homework for a phone interview that the salary is too low for you to consider.

3. You should prepare **clear and brief answers** about why you're leaving your current pulpit and about **why you're seeking a particular pulpit**. If you've been without a pulpit for any length of time, you will want to be prepared with an explanation emphasizing the positive or the emergency aspects of the hiatus. You may want to run your answers by the placement director in advance of an interview. Your stated interest should not be based upon the location of the synagogue, but rather on the character of the congregation.
4. Thoroughly check out any prospective **congregation's website**. See "Son of Placement Tips" below.
5. On the congregation's website, read sermons, bulletins, bios, etc. If they're not available on the website, ask to have them snail-mailed or emailed to you. Call the **URJ District Director** to ask about the particular congregation in which you are interested. She/he will have the "inside story".
6. Develop **questions** specifically related to the prospective congregation. Have more than two.
7. You will be asked about **your weaknesses**. Be prepared. Do not say, "I work too hard". That is not what any committee member wants to hear. It says nothing. NEVER ramble on about your weaknesses or become hyperbolic, saying I need to lock myself into a room this summer and come out playing the guitar! Say something along the lines of, "I used to prepare my Torah readings at the last minute until I realized that my students were noticing my hesitations. They would comment to me that I didn't seem to be totally prepared. What a wake-up call! My procrastinating led to my embarrassment. I began to prepare two verses a night before I went to bed. So putting things off until crunch time is a weakness that I have had to work hard to overcome. Now I've begun to apply that technique to other similar tasks and it's been VERY

helpful!” In other words, relate a REAL weakness and immediately follow it by the technique which you use to OVERCOME it.

8. When it comes to making a CD for placement purposes, spend the time and money to do a professional job. (Tapes are outmoded.) **YOUR RECORDINGS MUST BE CURRENT! NOTHING OLDER THAN 2 YEARS!!** Think carefully about the program. Your first piece has to grab the listeners. It must be familiar. Juxtapose zippy pieces with lyrical ones. Include participatory material and at least one weighty High Holiday piece. There should be at least four pieces. Do not include secular material. It is a good idea to include at least one guitar-accompanied song. Mark the CD itself with your name and the pieces. Don't use a sharpie!! Purchase the software needed to do this in a professional manner. It does not suffice to enclose a label in the jewel box, although you must do that, as well. That label or enclosed program must specify composer, Hebrew text and translations corresponding to the order of the recording. Make sure to listen to each CD before you send it. A blank in the hands of a search committee is a strike against you. Once the CD is sent off, it is the property of the searching congregation. DO NOT expect to see it again. Therefore do not send last copies or original materials.
9. *Remember that it takes some time for the office to process your requests. If you ask to have your resume sent to Congregations A, B and C. Allow at least 24-36 hours before expecting to have confirmation that your resumes have been received. The office may be receiving several simultaneous requests.*
10. After checking with the Placement Director, call the prospective congregation's outgoing cantor. S/he will have good information about the congregation and its programs, characteristics, personnel, strengths and challenges.

General Pointers

1. Don't change your email address in the middle of the placement season. This will mean that you will miss important communication from search chairs. Stick with the address that appears on your resume.
2. Keep a box in your office for **complimentary mail**. Throw every piece of it into the box. Note the themes of the compliments. You can regard this as your best stuff. When you are asked about your strengths, your reply can be stated in terms of the mail you receive.
3. Keep a **scrapbook** of your special programs, articles, news items, write-ups, etc. This can be helpful for evaluations (as in, "What have you accomplished during the past year?"), as well as in in-person interviews.
4. Consider **spending some time at a URJ camp**. Nothing looks better on a resume or hones your skills with young adults more efficiently or lifts your spirits more effectively or touches lives more lastingly than this expenditure of time.
5. **Cultivate other interests** than synagogue music. Exercise both your body and your mind on a daily basis. These "exercises" should come first, not last. If pressed for time, something else should be sacrificed.

The Interview/Audition

1. ***Don't take an in-person interview AT ALL unless your partner/spouse has agreed to move with you should the position be offered.***
2. **Be yourself.** Qualities such as thoughtfulness, intellectual curiosity, and humor are much admired; don't be afraid to wonder out loud about your dreams and what the future may hold. Do not assume that you must have "all

the answers" to life's big questions. Be prepared, however, to share your ideas and questions in a thoughtful and articulate fashion.

3. In a phone interview be **upbeat** in your answers. Be prepared to answer questions like, "What made you decide to become a cantor?" Do not sigh loudly when asked that question.

Phone Interview Pointers:

If your interview is going to be conducted via webcam, consult these websites.

<http://www.jobs.ac.uk/careers/articles/1252/job-interviews-by-skype>

<http://jobsearch.about.com/od/jobinterviewtypes/a/skypevideo.htm>

Minimize distractions. Conduct the call from a quiet, private setting. You won't impress search committee members if they hear loud pets, honking horns, or your clicking keyboard in the background. If possible, use a landline (which is often more reliable than cellular phones), and disable the call-waiting function.

Speak up. Because the interviewer can't read your facial reactions or body language, verbalize your thoughts. After a questioner completes a thought, say something like, "Yes, that aspect of the job sounds appealing" to keep the discussion moving. Speak with confidence and enthusiasm.

Have supplies handy. Keep your resume and cover letter at arm's length, as well as any other material you've collected. You also might prepare a bulleted list of speaking points or questions. Make sure a pen and pad are nearby for taking notes.

Guidelines for Interview Expense Sharing by Congregations

- If a cantorial candidate is approached about piggy-backing one interview trip to a searching congregation upon another, the candidate should refer the requesting search chair to the placement director to discuss the question. Likewise, if the candidate believes that two searching

congregations might benefit from sharing travel expenses, the candidate should bring this to the attention of the placement director to pursue. The candidate should not respond directly to any search chair about a combined trip.

- The placement director will respond to the requesting search chair, or will initiate contact with a search chair suggested by the candidate, and put him/her in touch with the other congregation if appropriate.
 - If both search chairs can coordinate the schedules, flights, costs, etc and can agree that both congregations' interests are being served and if the candidate agrees that the arrangement is in his/her best interests, the plan should be submitted to the placement director for approval.
 - If the placement director approves of the plan, it may go forward.
 - The responsibility to make good on any reimbursements lies with the search chairs.
 - The candidate should not be involved in the process of collecting monies on behalf of either congregation. S/he should submit receipts for expenses as directed by both search chairs separately.
 - It is not a good idea for three or more congregations to coordinate interviews. It becomes too cumbersome and too onerous for the candidate.
4. Before an in-person interview, learn the **names** of the search committee chairpeople, the committee members, and the staff. When committee members are introduced, try to remember their names and address them by name, if possible. A good trick for this is writing the names on a seating diagram when you are in the interview room. Don't worry that they see you do this; they'll appreciate your effort. (But don't get so bogged down in it that you miss the questions!)
5. Generate **energy** in an interview. Go at the answers with zest and sincerity.

6. Be **forthright** in an interview. If you have a concern, voice it (but not as the first thing they hear from you).
7. You will be asked about **congregational participation**. Prepare your answer in advance. It should not be trite and it must be honest.
8. If you sense **tension** around a certain issue, ask about it before answering directly. Don't be afraid to answer a question with a question, to enable you to find out the real question and answer it effectively.
9. Be prepared to answer questions about what you like to do in your **spare time**. Don't act like spare time is a notion from another universe.
10. Do not hesitate to ask about **personal/family time**. You can only be a good cantor if you have the time to be a good parent, partner, or healthy individual.

*Be prepared to send your CD and program notes to the address specified on the application. Send a **cover letter*** in the package. Place this (and the program notes) in an envelope so that they won't arrive crumpled. It is also a good idea to email the search chair to let her/him know when to expect the CD.*

11. The **Cover letter*** in question should be succinct and to-the-point. The placement director has a sample on file, so if you would like a copy, please ask. Remember that all communications, electronic or otherwise, represent you, the Candidate. Do not oversell yourself or engage in grandstanding.
12. Dress for your interview in a **conservative** manner. If you have a reservation about a certain article of clothing, wear something else. Your suit must fit! Remember that you do not want the search committee talking about your clothing, hair, shoes, etc. The objective of your selection of attire for the

interview is for the committee to have no idea what you wore an hour after you're done.

13. In your **audition**, sing one piece that the members of the committee will know. Encourage them to sing it or its refrain. Your first piece should be lively. If you are good at teaching, you might teach a simple (really simple) round. Don't be afraid to leave the bima to engage the congregation. **In the unlikely but conceivable event that the accompanist is inferior, have a back-up plan. This plan should consist of the availability of a very easy-to-play piece and several a capella pieces. *It goes without saying that you should send your audition pieces to the accompanist a week ahead of time.***
14. Prepare an attractive **program** for your audition pieces. It should include composer, translation of text, transliteration of refrains, etc. You should present a one or two sentence introduction or explanation of your audition pieces. These should be well-prepared in advance and delivered in an engaging manner. Look at the committee members as you speak.
15. If you are asked to deliver a *d'var torah*, don't hesitate to chant a few verses of the weekly portion for emphasis. This technique has been quite well received.
16. Send a **thank-you note** to the chair of the search committee following your in-person interview.
17. *If at any point you become frustrated because you have not heard from the search chair and time is a-wasting, call the placement director. It is never a good idea to contact the search chair asking for an update.*
18. No committee wants to hear about how taxing your trip was, how fatigued you are, what meds you are on or whether or not you are recovering from an upper respiratory infection. **No complaining.**

19. If members of the search committee would like to come to visit you for a **Shabbat service in your current pulpit**, discuss the visit with them in advance. Decide together how visible this visit ought to be. Will you be introducing these guests to your congregants, to your rabbi? Some cantors invite these representatives to their homes for Shabbat dinner or for *onget shabbat*. Some prefer a far more casual approach. Each situation is unique and requires careful preparation.

Negotiations, etc.

1. When you enter negotiations, contact the **Director of Member Support** for advice and counsel.
2. Be clear on the following: “Upon accepting an offer from a congregation, a candidate must immediately cease negotiations and **interviews** with all other congregations, and must immediately notify the Director of Placement that an offer has been accepted, identifying the congregation.”
3. **Be aware that, although you may have a letter of intent in hand and may have accepted its conditions, you may STILL be asked to return to the prospective congregation to audition before its Board of Trustees! This is often mandated by congregational by-laws, so don’t be surprised if you have two (2!) auditions!**
4. Before the final leg of negotiations, be sure to check with area colleagues and with the **URJ regional director**. They may have good insight into the dynamics of the particular congregation/community.
5. The Placement Director and the Director of Member Support have copies of a document called “**Tips for Contract Negotiations**”. Don’t hesitate to ask one of them for a copy.

6. When you call the Administrative Assistant or the Placement Director to inform one of them that you have accepted a position, be clear as to whether you are *placed* (with everything finalized) or whether you are simply *in negotiations*, as you will be listed accordingly.
7. Before signing on the dotted line, have a **lawyer** look over your contract. Once you have a signed contract, send a copy to the ACC office for filing.

Food for Thought

If you have trouble getting or keeping a job, you need to ask yourself why. You should seek **professional help** with this question. Work hard to find the answer. With therapeutic guidance, chances are far better that you will find a satisfying position or greater satisfaction in your work.

TIPS FOR INTERNATIONAL CANDIDATES

Search Committees are not inclined to see international candidates as attractive prospects. Regardless of experience and skills, such candidates are perceived as being out of touch, more expensive, harder to bring in for interview and eventual relocation, and legally harder to employ. The following tips are designed to assist you in overcoming these obstacles. Be aware that you will likely need to do everything below if you are to find a position without delay and disappointment.

1. Perhaps, the most significant deterrent to overcome as an international candidate is the reality of your geographic location. Congregations are far more likely to pursue a candidate whom they can call (without the concern of a considerable time difference), phone conference with, and easily fly in for a face to face interview. An international candidate who is living in the United States during the height of the placement season (January-April) has a significantly higher likelihood of employment than one who lives abroad or who can only commit to a few weeks in the U.S. Congregations are not always able to pursue or interested in accommodating a Cantor living abroad who will only be the US for a short time.

If you require any special visa or permit to enter the US (which may vary from one nationality to another), then obtain it ASAP (ideally before entering placement) and, if appropriate, state on your Resume that you hold all necessary travel permits.

2. If possible, use an American address on your Resume. Provide a web-based email address that is not obviously based abroad (e.g. Hotmail, Gmail, Yahoo, etc), and state "email contact preferred". Find a US-domiciled colleague or friend who is prepared to handle mail and phone calls for you if necessary, pending your arrival in the States.
3. Specify in your Resume or cover letter, the regular actions you take to keep abreast of the latest developments musically and the means by which you maintain your professional skills, despite being abroad. In other words, do you continue to attend ACC conventions annually? Do you subscribe to the TransCon new publications series? Do you continue to buy the best new CDs and to update your professional library regularly? Are you continuing to research and create new musical programming, sermons in song, etc for your current position?
4. Be prepared to explain, in your Resume or cover letter, why you have been abroad, how going abroad did not create a break in your professional activities, and how returning to the US represents a continuation of your career, rather than another change in direction.
5. ***The rule of thumb is that congregations are expected to pay only for domestic travel costs and not for international flights. Keep this in mind and do your utmost to combine several interviews so as to make one longer trip to the US for the purpose of your pulpit search.*** So expect to have higher costs associated with finding your new position, including the cost of getting to the US and accommodations while waiting for interviews (do you have friends or family who could host you for extended periods?). Search committees are smarting with the higher costs of domestic airfares since the oil price started rising. Keep receipts etc. as your search expenses may be tax deductible in the US).
6. Search committees unfortunately will eliminate a candidate based on the audition CD. They are expecting that it faithfully indicates the sound you make "live". Take whatever steps are necessary to ensure that your CD (a) faithfully represents your voice and everything you can do with it; (b) is of the highest standard of recording, even if this means arriving in the US earlier or traveling to another place where you have access to reliable, world-class facilities, accompanists, etc.

7. If you have additional skills ensure they are clearly stated on your Resume, e.g. keyboard &/or guitar proficiency etc, formal credentials as a teacher, counselor, therapist etc, or anything else that will demonstrate that you have significantly more to offer than some other candidates. Such 'extras' may help overcome some of the perceived 'negatives' of being an international candidate.

8. State on your Resume or covering letter, if you are already legally entitled to work in the States e.g., "I hold a valid Green Card." Or alternatively, a statement such as "I have previously held, and remain eligible to again receive, a Religious Workers Visa which is routinely granted upon application." Familiarize yourself thoroughly with the process for obtaining a visa, including timelines, fees, and available options for where your visa application can be filed, and be prepared to share this information with the Search Committee during interview. If possible, have an immigration attorney ready to advise.

9. Include at least some US-based references, even if they are not the most current.

10. State in your cover letter that there are no obstacles to your relocating, and that this will not delay your commencement date if offered a contract. You might also consider providing information at this early stage, as to why you wish to seek a position in the States.

11. Check out www.skype.com. Skype is a little piece of software that allows you to make free calls to other Skype users and really cheap calls to ordinary phones.

Son of Placement Tips

Search Committees want to know that you are in front of them because you are enamored of their Temple, their community, their minhag, their building (or location, or renovation plans), their rabbi, their reputation, their religious school. AND you had better know your facts about the aforementioned. If their rabbi is published, know the title(s). If there is a new wing under construction, ask about it. If there's a well-known day school near by, ask about its relationship to the synagogue.

TO THIS END:

- 1. Comb the congregational application on our website.**
 - 2. Visit the congregation's website (Find it on URJ.org). Follow all the links. Make notes.**
 - 3. Search the web for Jewish Podunk and click on anything that looks promising.**
 - 4. Make notes on everything and have them with you at the interview.**
- ALSO** when you are asked what you love most about being a cantor or why you became a cantor, use a **two-minute pitch**. Say something about **GOD, TORAH and ISRAEL**, as well as about **MUSIC**.