



שִׁיר לַי  
שִׁיר חֲדָשׁ

*Sing a New Song to God...*  
**The Cantor Search Committee**

- Long-range planning
- The best match for your synagogue
- The covenant between you and the congregation

Director of Placement  
Cantor Kay Greenwald  
650-963-9722  
[kgreenwald@accantors.org](mailto:kgreenwald@accantors.org)

The Joint Cantorial Placement Commission (JCPC) is made up of  
representatives from:  
American Conference of Cantors (ACC)  
Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR)  
Union for Reform Judaism (URJ)

The JCPC establishes policies and procedures while overseeing the placement  
process for congregations

The Search Process

- Your president appoints a search committee chair and committee
- Your president or search chair downloads a placement application from the ACC  
website: [www.accantors.org](http://www.accantors.org)  
(All Search Committee members should be encouraged to visit the ACC website in  
order to review our mission statement, to peruse our governing documents, to learn  
about the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music, and to orient themselves about  
the Reform cantorate)
- Your search chair reviews all Joint Cantorial Placement Commission (JCPC)  
documents
- Develop job description and send to the ACC, along with the completed  
application for placement
- The Placement Commission lists your synagogue on the ACC website
- Interested and eligible Cantors contact the Placement Office



## The Tier System

- Tier One—Open to all ACC Cantors—Up to 699 Member Units
- Tier Two—Open to those who have been full ACC Members for 3 or more years—700 Member Units or more

## Qualities to Consider

- Vocal and musical excellence
- Knowledge of Judaism
- Spiritual and personal character
- Teaching abilities
- Compatibility with other clergy, professional staff, etc.
- General warmth/demeanor

The most frequent mistake search committees make is to focus too much on the perceived *weaknesses* of the previous clergyperson.

The second most frequent mistake search committees make is to focus too much on the perceived *strengths* of the previous clergyperson.

## The Committee's First Tasks

- Voting: What kind of vote will it take to recommend someone? Unanimous? Three-fourths?
- Budget: How much may the Committee spend? How many visits can be accommodated?
- Contracts: Who talks about contracts? The Search Committee chair? The Temple President?



Note:

- ON THE TIMELINE: The height of the cantorial placement season is from January through March of any given year, but significant opportunities for placement continue through May.
- On the “exclusivity clause”:
  - The Joint Cantorial Placement Commission (JCPC) has put this clause into the application because of its desire to provide you with an ACC Cantor
  - In your search for a cantor, you have entered into a covenantal relationship with the URJ and ACC (a URJ affiliate). In signing the application, you have pledged to hire a Cantor, trained by our movement’s seminary, the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music; or a graduate of an accredited seminary who has passed the requisite examinations and auditions in order to become a member of the ACC
  - If simultaneous listing of the cantorial position in newspapers, on websites, and in other publications were permitted, it would mean that your search committee would be comparing soloists, who are not clergy, to cantors, who are.

### The Telephone/Skype Interview

Goals

- To obtain enough information to select the strongest possible candidates to bring in for interviews
- To communicate who you are as a congregation
- To make the candidates feel as comfortable as possible
- To give you a sense of the person behind the resume

Questions

- What is your Jewish background?
- What made you decide to become a Cantor?
- Why are you a Reform Jew?
- Why would you like to make a change at this time?
- How do you make lifecycle events meaningful?
- Would you describe your current congregation?
- Do you wear a kippah? Tallit?
- How do you see the role of the Cantor in relation to the staff? The Rabbi? The Board?
- What is a meaningful worship experience for you?



### Telephone/Skype Interview Tips

- Make an appointment with the candidate; no cold calls
- Begin each call with an introduction of all the people on the call
- Explain the length of the interview and the ground rules
- Select only one person to ask the questions, though others may ask follow-up questions
- Keep the interview to about 45 minutes
- Create a warm, friendly but professional tone
- Ask all the candidates the same questions
- Evaluate the candidate immediately afterwards
- Only the chairperson may speak to the congregation and board about the search
- The Committee's proceedings (minutes, letters) must be kept confidential
- Names of candidates **must not** be revealed outside of the committee's proceedings
- Members of the Committee may not contact candidates or their references on their own unless requested by the Committee
- Disagreements stay within the Committee
- Write the candidates who were not selected to move forward

### After Phone/Skype Interviews

- Request MP3 files from those candidates who emerge as promising
- If you have written permission, you may consult references
- If reference-checking is to be delayed due to confidentiality, then it should be done after the first on-site interview

### The Sound Files

- Many search committees request that the candidates send MP3 files for consideration. This step can be helpful in narrowing your search
- A caution: Do not listen to sound files before the first interview - search committees can be swayed by a Cantor's sound or presentation such that the committee then fails to interview critically
- A Cantor on the bimah conveys liturgical meaning with more than voice: Presence, *Kavanah* (religious focus), *Ahavat Elohim* (love of God), and chemistry cannot be conveyed electronically
- The ACC Office does not store or send recordings. Candidates are instructed to send their MP3 files directly to congregations, at the request of the search chair, after the phone/Skype interviews. If you do request MP3 files, be sure to inquire about when they were recorded
- Please note that it is not possible to showcase the total variety of a Cantor's liturgical styles in a few MP3 files



### The First On-Site Interview

- Schedule meetings with the Search Committee
- Show the candidate around the synagogue
- Inform the incumbent Cantor of the visit and let the candidate meet with the Cantor
- Arrange for a private meeting with the Rabbi and other members of the professional staff (It is crucial to lay the groundwork for the foundation of healthy partnerships even in this initial stage)
- First on-site interview typically includes an audition, and perhaps a "pretend" service
- During a Cantor's on-site visit, s/he should not be asked to participate in a Shabbat or Festival service
- Plan the visit carefully, adding personal touches like housing the Cantor in a hotel instead of a home, placing a fruit bowl in the hotel room, meeting the Cantor at the airport, and building down-time into the schedule
- When initiating that all-important discussion of worship style, be clear about how you define "congregational participation" (Your committee should have had a chance to work this through, as that phrase can mean many different things to different people)
- Ask the Cantor about her/his preferred definition of "congregational participation"
- Ask each interviewee some version of this question: Is there anything in your record which would give a congregational search committee pause when considering your candidacy?
- As with any interview, the asking and answering of such questions – and manner in which the committee handles the candidate's response – should be done in accordance with national and local law, as well as Temple policy

### The Audition

- Be sure to arrange for a competent accompanist. An unskilled instrumentalist will put the Cantor at a disadvantage and will distort the audition
- Provide all candidates with the accompanist's phone number, email address and mailing address so that conversations may take place and sheet music may be exchanged
- Schedule ample, pre-arranged rehearsal time with the accompanist
- Provide water
- Who is invited to the audition? Members of the professional staff, Cantorial Search Committee, and, at the discretion of the Search Committee, members of the Board of Trustees
- Ask the candidate to prepare something from High Holidays, Shabbat, lifecycles, children's services, etc., but don't ask for too many specific composers
- Don't script the entire audition; allow the Cantor to demonstrate what is meaningful to him/her



- What the Cantor chooses will teach you about him or her
- Kol Nidre is not an audition piece; you cannot replicate the milieu
- Don't ask the Cantor to chant Torah without advance preparation
- If you want the Cantor to teach, tell him/her in advance what age group, the topic, and for how many people

#### After the On-Site Visit

- The Search Committee should meet immediately after the personal interview to discuss the candidate
- Let the candidate know quickly whether you are interested in him or her
- Before narrowing the field, do "due diligence"; with the candidate's permission, talk to references

#### Checking References

- The candidates should provide references, including three to five from his or her current synagogue
- Be sure you have the Cantor's written permission before calling
- Ask the reference if he or she has ten minutes for you or ask if you should call back later
- Be candid in your conversation; if you sense hesitancy, ask for clarification
- Emphasize to the reference that everything is strictly confidential
- Prepare a short list of questions

#### Sample Reference Questions

- How long have you known Cantor Goldstein?
- In what capacities have you known Cantor Goldstein? Congregant? Board member? Student?
- Please describe Cantor Goldstein's strengths and weaknesses
- What other information about Cantor Goldstein would be helpful to us that my prior questions did not elicit?
- May I call you back with further questions?



### A Visit to the Cantor's Synagogue

- During a Cantor's first on-site visit, s/he should not be asked to participate in a Shabbat or Festival service
  - Why not? Because asking someone to audition on Shabbat or during a Festival may give that person a false (negative) understanding of your congregation's values; moreover, the Cantor's candidacy may still be confidential
- Better: With the Cantor's permission and knowledge, visit the Cantor at his or her own synagogue to get a natural sense of the Cantor's 'pulpit personality' and the congregants' reaction to him or her

### Final Interviews and Negotiations

- When you have decided on one or two finalists, invite them back for a second on-site visit – with their spouses/partners
- A final round of interviews should take place, and the candidate and partner should be given a tour of the community
- Set up meetings with the entire staff
- Provide more time for Rabbi and Cantor to meet in order to determine compatibility (for liturgical exercises, contact ACC Placement Director)
- After final interviews the Search Committee should make its recommendation to the Board
- Appropriate people, e.g., the president or financial vice-president, should begin negotiations and should send a letter of intent
- In preparing a contract, the Guidelines for Cantorial-Congregational Relationships will be helpful to you. You may download a copy from the ACC's website
- Keep the Director of Placement and the URJ Consulting and Transition Rabbi informed

### The Cantorial Transition

- Establish a Transition Committee separate from the Search Committee
- Transitions are times both of sadness and celebration
- The way the synagogue says goodbye to a Cantor affects the way it welcomes the new Cantor
- As the relationship with the Cantor changes, it is important to maintain communication and to cooperate on shared tasks for the good of the synagogue
- Organize small-group appreciations and farewells for committees, faculty, and Board
- Create an opportunity for the staff and Cantor to say goodbye to one another
- Provide opportunities for the community and the congregation to mark the Cantor's departure, e.g., a special Shabbat service or a dinner



### Welcoming the New Cantor

- Make announcements first to congregation and then to the community through press releases
- Make sure that the Cantor's office is properly set up, with computer and other pertinent materials
- Keep the Cantor abreast of scheduling, congregational matters etc. from the time an offer is accepted until the Cantor begins his/her new position
- Maintain regular phone/email communication between the Cantor/Rabbi/lay leadership until the Cantor begins his/her new position
- Assist in coordinating the Cantor's relocation
- Ask the Cantor and spouse/partner for the information and assistance they need
- Arrange for an installation service