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Op-Ed: Ordaining cantors is mostly good for congregations

By Dana Evan Kaplan - May 7, 2012 6:03pm

KINGSTON, Jamaica (JTA) — Six graduates of the cantorial program of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion were ordained Sunday at Temple Emanu-El in New York. The key word here is “ordained.”

Since the cantorial school was established at HUC in 1948, cantors have been invested rather than ordained. The difference, [as JTA put it](#), was more than “a word.” It is a declaration of independence, a certification of equality.

In preparation for the change, the HUC cantorial program already had been expanded from four years to five, thus matching the rabbinic program. A concerted effort was made to argue that cantors are full members of the clergy, with diverse and challenging duties, and not just “singers” who show up on Friday nights and Saturday mornings and disappear until the following week. The seriousness and intensity of the cantorial program was stressed.

The change was inevitable, so there is little point in arguing that it should not have been made. The Academy for Jewish Religion, a nondenominational seminary in New York City, already ordains cantors; HUC needed to stay competitive. While the change is going to make professional life more difficult for rabbis and deprive them of certain job opportunities in smaller communities, it may help to bring new life to certain moribund synagogues, allowing them to choose from a broader pool of spiritual leaders.

Synagogues are struggling to explain to congregants why they are worth thousands of dollars a year in dues at a time when there are so many other ways to be Jewish. I just completed a CLAL-sponsored fellowship program called Rabbis Without Borders in which one of my colleagues started an online congregation that now interacts with more than 10,000 people a year from all over the world. And I just finished a manuscript on Reform Judaism for the Jewish Publication Society in which I wrote about rabbis who train the children of unaffiliated Jews for their bar and bat mitzvahs over Skype and take them to the Grand Canyon or the Colorado Rockies or even Alaska to mark their entry into adulthood.

With society changing so rapidly, synagogues are desperate to find formulas that will keep them functioning. They want as many options as possible and don’t want rabbinical organizations — effectively labor unions — to dictate to them.

I’ve seen the breakdown of the rabbinic placement structure from a rigid protocol to a very loose

situation in which congregational profiles are posted on password-protected websites and CVs are forwarded to search committees with few restrictions, limitations or stipulations. For these committees, what matters is whether candidates can motivate their congregants and draw in unaffiliated Jews and potential converts. Where they studied and what their connection might be to the Reform movement is of less importance — a triviality, if we are to be blunt.

For a small congregation, it makes good sense to hire a cantor instead of a rabbi. I know of a small congregation in Florida that engaged in a lengthy search for a Reform rabbi but found that nobody reasonably competent was interested. With limited resources, and located in a less attractive part of the state, the congregation eventually hired a cantor to become its spiritual leader. He later was ordained privately and served with distinction until his untimely death.

In contrast, I led Congregation B'nai Israel in Albany, Ga., for 10 years before my move to a historic synagogue in the Carribean. Not being blessed with a good voice, I was reliant on a classically oriented choir. When the temple decided to modernize the music and make it more participatory, the choir was resistant. If I had been a cantor, I could have stepped in and helped to create a dynamic musical experience that could have enriched the spiritual experience of our services. All of my scholarship in the world could not compensate for sounding like a frog.

The change to ordaining cantors is not all good. Congregations will have two types of clergy with the same level of authority. In an egalitarian era this is bound to lead to a tremendous increase in conflict between rabbis and cantors. While I see institutions where rabbis and cantors get along fabulously, even before ordination I witnessed a tremendous amount of dissension.

Two examples of major turf battles between rabbis and cantors: In one congregation, a new rabbi is appointed to find the cantor has so much charisma that he feels overshadowed. People love listening to her voice and gravitate to her after services, bypassing the new and now marginal rabbinical appointee. In another, the senior rabbi departs suddenly and the associate rabbi is promoted. The cantor refuses to accept his authority, arguing that she contributed more to the synagogue both professionally and organizationally and should have been made the effective CEO rather than the associate rabbi.

Neither conflict ended well, either for the individuals or the institutions.

As revolutionary changes go, this is relatively minor. It is, however, one more indication that the American Jewish religious marketplace is becoming a more competitive environment. Under such circumstances, neither denominational labels nor professional credentials are going to mean all that much.

From one perspective, this is a long overdue shaking-out of the deadwood. From another viewpoint, we are entering into a Darwinian phase that may see increasing numbers of rabbis — and possibly also cantors — fighting for their professional positions under increasingly adverse conditions.

Let us hope and pray that the consequences will be a more vital and dynamic Jewish religious experience. The odds of that happening, unfortunately, are no more than 50-50.

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