

FROM OUR LIPS ... TO GOD'S EARS

Recognising and valuing the role of a trained and inspirational Prayer-Leader in bringing people back to synagogue



Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis:

'The Chazzan represents the Jew in the Pew. We must never compromise on Nusach!'

He said: *'Nusach is so important that we have to guarantee that the traditional melodies and ways of leading a service will be preserved, please God, for generations to come.'*

Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis (left) spoke at the 2013 European Cantors Convention about his support for ECA and for the cantor. You can see a video of him making this speech here: [Chief Rabbi Elect Speech](#)



Michael Goldstein, President of the United Synagogue:

'The person who leads the services must know what they are doing'

He said: *'It is very important to me that the person who leads the services, understands and appreciates t'filah and can interpret the prayers using our wonderful nusach and knows what they are doing.'*

The podcast is [here](#) and the video is [here](#) **Michael Goldstein**, (left) spoke at the ECA The Voice of the Cantor (VOC) series on 14 April 2021 in a programme called: **The Challenge of Modern Orthodoxy for the Cantorate.**



Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth 1991 - 2013.

"How do we make Judaism live for a new generation – the answer is, we have to make it sing! ... if there is no music – you can't hand it on!"

He said: *'To me music is the most spiritual form of expression that exists. Music is absolutely essential to Jewish spirituality. Words are the language of the mind – but music is the language of the soul. You know exactly when and what kind of literature you are listening to, simply from listening to the music. How do we make Judaism live for a new generation – the answer is, we have to make it sing! If it has no music, no emotional contact, if there is no music – you can't hand it on.'*

The video is [here](#). Lord Sacks was speaking on the 25th Anniversary of the Jewish Music Institute at a reception at his home in 2010.



Rabbi Dr Raphael Zarum, Dean of the London School of Jewish Studies

'We need to sing in shul to reach God'

He said: 'The Psalms weren't said, they weren't recited, they weren't mumbled – they were sung by Priests and Levites in the Temple in Jerusalem. They are meant to be sung. Imagine having somebody reading you a Beatles song without the music – it's not the same experience. You need the full music to appreciate what it is all about. And that is why mizmorim (songs or psalms) are so fundamental to the

way we get involved. When the chazan begins to sing it transforms us – and we can move even higher.'

Rabbi Dr Raphael Zarum was speaking in October 2021 at the launch of the Michael Jolles' Encyclopaedia of British Jewish Cantors, Chazzanim and Synagogue Musicians. You can hear Rabbi Zarum's words here: [Zarum on The Music of Jewish Prayer](#)

The Current Situation, February 2022

The leaders of the United Synagogue in the UK have expressed the view that nusach is crucial and should never be sacrificed, yet nothing seems to be in place to ensure that this will be the case. There is no centrally organised training for orthodox prayer-leaders in the UK, nor is there any agreed standard which prayer leaders are required to meet in order to fulfil that role. There are no more than a handful of trained chazanim left working in the United Synagogue today, none of them in a full-time capacity.

Is change possible? This is a watershed moment

To reverse the tide and halt the loss of traditional nusach hat'filah will be a daunting but clearly needed task. We know that many successful synagogues around the country and the world have (or have had) a respected cantor at their heart. In the wake of the Pandemic, our traditional sacred music may be one of the elements that restores faith in the synagogue service. This is a 'watershed moment', where the leadership of the United Synagogue can create a plan that will signal a change of direction and counteract the current trend which has resulted in the music of Jewish prayer disappearing.

Five simple and inexpensive steps that can signal a change of attitude to music (with timescales and desired outcomes):

Step 1: The United Synagogue appoints a 'Music Officer' (USMO)

Desired Outcome: To signal to all US synagogues that the US takes music seriously and is interested in the quality of service-leading throughout the movement.

Job Description: A part-time position at a high level in the hierarchy of the United Synagogue with access to the President, Chief Rabbi and strategy team. The position could be honorary at first, but facilities and secretarial help should be made available and out of pocket expenses paid. The aim should be for it to become a paid position.

Personal requirements: Somebody knowledgeable about nusach hat'filah and the special role of the prayer-leader in representing the congregation to the Almighty in the service. They should care about and see that appropriate standards of knowledge and delivery are maintained. It should be a personality that can persuade stakeholders to collaborate for best results. Timescale: February 22

The Role of the USMO would include:

- to invite each constituent synagogue to appoint a 'Synagogue Music Officer' (SMO)
- to liaise with these SMOs on a regular basis
- to understand the current situation of who leads services in each synagogue
- to liaise with the Chief Rabbi and President of the United Synagogue to discuss their findings and decide what practical measures can be put in place to address them
- to communicate regularly with the SMO and the prayer leaders with questions, ideas and encouragement
- to provide appropriate approved resources if and when required
- to meet with synagogue musicians as required alone or together with hon officers and rabbis as appropriate to talk about what is best for the prayer leader and the congregants
- to create a section on the United Synagogue website dealing with the music of traditional Jewish prayer (and to encourage each synagogue to create a page on their own site about their prayer leaders and their music).
- to create an official United Synagogue WhatsApp group for existing prayer leaders for ease of communication

Step 2: Each synagogue appoints a 'Synagogue Music Officer' (SMO)

The United Synagogue Music Officer invites all constituent synagogues to appoint a Music Officer
Desired Outcome: to signal to rabbis, cantors, lay leaders and congregants in each synagogue that the United Synagogue (and the individual synagogue itself) takes music seriously and is interested in the quality of service-delivery in the synagogue and throughout the movement.

Job Description: The Synagogue Music Officer: should take note of who delivers and what is delivered in the 'davening' in the services for sabbaths, festivals and weekdays. To make notes about the music used in the services. To find out about and document the musical history of the synagogue services and to find any musical manuscripts and books that may be lying around. These can then be catalogued and stored safely.

Personal requirements: The SMO could be a man or woman, the cantor or other professional or lay leader, or a congregant with an interest in the music of the synagogue (or who is willing to learn about it). Honorary, part-time position with access to the synagogue leadership. It should be a person who has time to deal with all music matters and to liaise with the USMO.

Timescale: March 2022 (to be initiated by the USMO as soon as the USMO is appointed by the United Synagogue).

The Role of the SMO would include:

- To observe and document the music of the synagogue services
- To compile a history and the traditions of synagogue services in that particular synagogue
- To liaise with the USMO, sharing what is currently happening in the synagogue as far as prayer leading is concerned.
- To request (or offer) any assistance and resources that are deemed by the synagogue to be needed
- To find and preserve any musical material that may be tucked away in parts of the synagogue such as manuals for services, printed and handwritten scores, to catalogue these and see that this material is safely stored
- To arrange meetings as necessary with the prayer leader, rabbi and lay leaders and any other stakeholders regarding music in the synagogue

- To create a section on the synagogue website to deal with the music of prayer-leading in the synagogue.

Step 3: Standards of davening to be agreed

A small team be appointed under the chairmanship of the USMO to decide on the desired standard to be achieved by a prayer leader in the US. (This team could include cantor/ministers for example David Rome, Yossi Binstock and Alby Chait, with an advisory group of US leaders, experts in nusach etc)

Outcome desired: Attention is paid to the standards and practices in the movement as a whole and in individual synagogues and consideration given as to how to improve them.

Timescale: Starting in March or April 2022 to complete their proposals by December 2022

Step 4: Training courses to be provided in the UK, or chosen from existing courses abroad, and trainees supported to study

Considering and deciding how prayer-leaders should be trained and supported to achieve the standards outlined in Step 3. Required training to start at the latest by January 2023

Step 5: Career prospects considered for trained prayer leaders

Trained prayer-leaders starting to be employed by September 2025 (possibly employing a trained cantor in the synagogue leadership team as an alternative to an additional rabbi)

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## **The inspirational way ahead ....**

This is a watershed moment when the United Synagogue can bring people back to the synagogue to be emotionally enthused and stirred by the music of prayer. The pandemic has shown us, that it is the music of prayer that gives the spiritual uplift and glues a community together. People have tuned in from far and wide to be inspired by the melodies of Jewish prayer judging by the large following of cantors online.

The United Synagogue can embrace the opportunity to make certain that each synagogue within its remit has an inspiring member of its top team who can invigorate the community with song ancient and modern that penetrates the heart.

In the light of what the Chief Rabbi and President have said, it may be time to consider that the second minister in the synagogue leadership team is the trained person who can stand on the bimah and inspire the congregation in musical prayer. It would be somebody who, sharing communal duties with the rabbi, can stir and support the congregation from the cradle to the grave; bless the babies, educate children about the melodies and nusach of prayer, and support congregants in times of illness and bereavement. Moreover, the US can make sure that rabbis and lay leaders also understand the importance of nusach hat'filah to the meaningfulness of prayer.

Today there is a new generation of potential prayer-leaders – young men who are already steeped in (or who are ready to enhance) their Jewish knowledge and who want to devote themselves to serving the community in song. This may be the last opportunity to promote our sacrosanct musical heritage of prayer and save it from being lost from orthodox shuls.

(15 February 2022)