

A High Holiday Memoir

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I.

"YOU'LL BE IN THE CHOIR." I WAS ONLY ABOUT seven years old and didn't really understand what the old man was talking about; but with those words he sent me down the path that led, six decades later, to where I am this day.

The pronouncement was made at the far end of our synagogue's assembly hall. Mr. Russikov (I don't know how his last name is spelled and no one is left to ask) had told us three boys — me, Harry Blumberg, and Max Bliss — that he wanted to talk to us after kiddush. While the handful of old people who made up the congregation were still gathered around the tiny table in front of the dais having a second schnapps with herring on Tam Tams and chattering in Yiddish, Mr. Russikov took us aside and told us each to sing "Áden Oilem," the hymn that comes at the end of the service. I don't remember which of us went first, but when it was over, I was the chosen one — for this had turned out to be an audition to sing in the choir during the High Holiday services in the fall.

At age seven, I didn't know what the High Holidays even were, much less that they involved such a thing as a choir. It wasn't that I didn't have a Jewish upbringing. My father was born in the old country, and all four of my grandparents spoke Yiddish more easily than English. Jewish life-cycle rituals and the annual cycle of festivals were taken for granted, as were the two sets of dishes, dish towels, and dish soaps in the kitchen. As the son of the neighborhood pharmacist, I stood out uncomfortably as Jewish and bourgeois in a neighborhood inhabited overwhelmingly by Irish and Italian factory workers and their dangerous children. I was sent to Hebrew school three times a week,

and even to synagogue on Saturday mornings. But no one in my nearby family was a shul-goer, not even my maternal grandparents (who belonged to the same shul), much less my myriad aunts, uncles, and cousins.

So why was I dressed up in my itchy brown suit and tie and sent to shul every Saturday morning? My parents weren't actively concerned about the future of the Jewish tradition, nor were they poor working people compelled to work on Saturdays (though they were hard workers and not yet affluent, as they would be a decade later); they lived the Jewish life that came naturally to people whose primary concern was upward social mobility. The only reason consistent with the rest of my upbringing that I can see for their packing me off to shul every Saturday morning was to get me out of the house on the one day of the week when neither public school nor Sunday school would tend to me.

I assume the same was true for my Hebrew-school friends Harry (whose father owned a candy store with a lunch counter) and Max (whose father, I think, had an electrical supply shop), whose parents I saw in shul only on the High Holidays. At a time in my life when a year was too long a period to grasp as being cyclical, I was not yet conscious of the High Holidays as an annual gala family, social, and ritual event. But in the course of the next few years, one of the things that would strike me most forcibly was how different the congregation was on the High Holidays from the way it was on Saturdays. This difference wasn't only due to the greater numbers; it was due to the presence of the middle generation. On a normal Saturday morning the only worshipers not my grandparents' age were Harry, Max, and I. Mr. Russikov, perhaps in his mid-seventies in those days — still tall, redheaded, and powerful, though his hands shook and the hair that stuck out from under his pillbox-shaped black yarmulke was wispy — was the leader absolute, with tiny, round, sadly childless Mrs. Russikov at his side. Though I knew the old people's names, and spent hours over a period of years listening to their Yiddish chatter while we waited for a minyan to assemble, they were obscure to me. Hardly ever was anyone of my parents' generation present, though the memory floats to mind of Mr. Pearlstein, who, like my father, had a drugstore, standing at the *bimah* rail to say Kaddish once or twice. Except for the anomaly of the childless Russikovs, it was a shul of grandparents and a sprinkling of grandsons.

My being in the choir turned me into a shul-goer on my own initiative, and into many other things besides.

My parents were instructed to purchase a copy of the “uniform” *mahzor* of Brith Sholom Community Center. This was the High Holiday prayer book compiled by British chief rabbi Hermann Adler, a two-volume set with Hebrew and English on facing pages, accompanied by a copy of the Selichot service, a ratty pamphlet densely packed from end to end with all-Hebrew print. My parents authorized Mr. Russikov to procure the books, and when they arrived, my mother inscribed my name and address on the inside cover of the Adler *mahzor* and on the first page of the Selichot pamphlet. Inside Mr. Russikov had marked certain passages in ink: one in the Selichot service, two in the Rosh Hashanah service, and one in the service for Yom Kippur. The meaning of these markings became clear on Saturday after services, when Mr. Russikov instructed me (but not Harry or Max) to meet with him during kiddush. The markings indicated my solos, which Mr. Russikov proceeded to teach me. Each Saturday, he and I would return from the assembly hall to the now-empty sanctuary, where he would sing my solos to me and make me repeat them until I knew them. I had to do more than get the notes and words right — with the shriveled, cigarette-stained, yet translucent index fingers of both hands, he would conduct me as I sang, enforcing what I now know to call phrasing — matching the tunes to the meaning of the words.

In summer, choir rehearsals began. Once a week, my mother would drive me to the cantor’s house in the immigrant neighborhood and take her place with the ladies — the wives of the cantor and of the adult choir members — on the porch, where they would sit and gossip, while we, the singers, would gather around the square steel table covered with oilcloth that occupied the space between the sink and the stove in the center of the cantor’s kitchen. At the sink end sat Cantor Pavalow, a bony, gray-haired elderly man, before him a huge *mahzor* with big black lettering and pages greasy and crumpled in the lower corners from decades of being pinched between the fingers for turning. Facing him at the stove end sat the choir leader, a round-faced middle-aged man with black hair. On one side sat the tenor and the bass, and facing them sat I and Harvey, the cantor’s son. We sang in four parts, with the choir leader conducting us, cuing us, and giving our pitches. In my case, the cues were absolutely essential, as I had no idea of the order or contents of the service, and probably couldn’t even read Hebrew very fluently at that stage.

Most of the choir’s work consisted in humming chords as background to the cantor’s singing. Typically, when he would come to the end of a phrase,

we would hit a chord that harmonized it, and he would sing the next phrase against the background of that chord until his melody forced a change of harmony, and we would oblige by shifting to another chord. Sometimes we would start the chord by repeating the last word of the phrase after the cantor. There were a few composed four-part pieces, the only one of which I can remember was a setting of the first paragraph of the Unetaneh Tokef, of which more later. There was a duet for me and Harvey. And there were my four solos.

Philadelphia is always hot and humid in the summer, and ordinary people did not yet have air conditioning; I did not even hear of it until a few years later, when we moved to the suburbs. There were nights when I would lie awake dripping in my bed, the hot pillow shoved aside and my head pressed against the bit of wall under the open window, waiting for the air to stir, listening to a rustling leaf and hoping that the puff of air that moved it would reach me. In the cantor's kitchen, the air was close, with the four sweating men and the two boys crowded around the table with its sticky oilcloth surface. From the cooler porch, the women could be heard chatting in a mixture of Yiddish and English as we worked.

Harvey and I hated each other. Perhaps the heat made us short-tempered, or perhaps it was having to keep still for so long at the end of the day. I found him revolting, for his hands holding the *mahzor* as he sat on my left had warts on the backs and his fingernails were chewed to the quick. But perhaps the real reason I was angry was that he knew what was going on and I didn't, or perhaps it was an early case of singerly competitiveness. The rancor was mutual, and it grew to the point that at one rehearsal we ended up fighting, really fighting, with fists, and somehow he came out of it with a bloody nose. How this could possibly have happened is a mystery to me, because I was the softest boy who ever lived, and don't remember there being any free time in which such a fight could have occurred. Maybe there was a break in the rehearsal, and we went outside to cool off and got into a wrangle. Bloodying his nose made me feel good, though I couldn't escape the feeling that it had happened by accident so that I didn't really deserve to pat myself on the back. I don't remember getting into trouble over it. Since I was a goody-goody and he was a rough kid, he probably got blamed.

Summer passed. One night my mother woke me around 11 PM and got me dressed in my itchy suit, and the three of us trundled off in our prewar Chevy to the shul. It was the night of Selichot, the Saturday night before Rosh

Hashanah, the beginning of the liturgical season of the High Holidays. Selichot begins with the psalm Ashrei, and one of my solos occurred toward the end of the psalm, so mine must have been the first voice heard after the cantor's that holiday season. I can only imagine the *nachas* this must have caused my parents and the old folks who were the shul regulars, and the envy and anger it must have caused any of the other young parents — like two of my aunts and my uncle — who happened to be present.

The services of the High Holidays are long and our shul did not have a choir loft. Despite the imposing name of Brith Sho'olom Community Center, our shul was a tiny, makeshift operation in a partly renovated nineteenth-century brick schoolhouse beside a train track. It had no staff but a rabbi and a janitor, and of course it did not have a permanent cantor or a choir, but only a hired freelance cantor and his choir for the High Holidays. What had been the school yard was an untended no-man's land overgrown with weeds that had almost become trees. On the second floor were classrooms (separated by ancient movable walls called "sashes" covered with blackboard on each side) and a tiny rabbi's office piled with Hebrew-school textbooks and old *World Over* magazines; and on the third, a tiny kitchen with neat stacks of glass dishes. The ground floor consisted of a central hall flanked by two large rooms — the assembly hall with a portrait of the late President Roosevelt over the dais, and the sanctuary. The railroad tracks ran alongside the sanctuary wall, right outside the window, probably close enough to take your hand off if you reached out while a train was passing. Trains didn't pass often, but from time to time they did, obliterating the service.

The sanctuary couldn't have seated more than a hundred in its rows of movie-theater-type seats. The *bimah* was a dais occupying one end of the room and separated from it by a wooden railing, furnished with a large reading table in the center facing the ark, a lectern to the left facing the congregation, and the flags of the United States and of Palestine (since May, Israel), at the extreme right and left. We singers stood as we had sat in the cantor's kitchen: the cantor, in the narrow space between the railing and the reading table facing the ark; the leader, facing him, with his back to the ark; and the rest of us around the reading table.

It was hard to stand still for so long, especially since, unlike the other members of the choir, I didn't know how to participate in the praying part of the service. For long stretches I would shift my weight from one leg to the

other, fidget with the fringes of my tallit, and occupy myself by rubbing the nap of fuzzy white cloth that covered the reading table, waiting for the choir's turn to hum a chord, sing a tune, or deliver one of its set pieces. Now and then the leader would point to me, and I would perform one of my solos or do the duet with the hated Harvey, then to sink back into boredom and daydreaming. During the stretches when I wasn't needed, the leader took pity on me and whispered that I might sit down for a while on one of the two thrones that stood beside the ark and relieve my aching legs.

I spent a lot of the time watching the cantor. He wore a white gown and a huge crown-shaped white satin headdress (somewhat frayed) with a tassel, and carried a tuning fork and a handkerchief. It was shocking to see him throw himself to the floor during *Aleinu*, deflating to see him looking up at us from the floor, supporting himself with one hand and waving at us with the tuning fork in the other to keep us all chanting together. I wish I could remember what happened to that white satin crown during *Aleinu* and the other prostrations that occur in the course of the High Holiday services; I don't see how it could have stayed on as he fell, but I also don't remember him removing it in preparation for the prostration.

At one point in the service the cantor disappeared from the *bimah*, and when I looked up, he was standing at the sanctuary's rear entrance beginning the prayer I now know as *Hineni*. This is the emotional moment when the cantor proclaims, "Here am I, worthless, terrified, and panic-stricken for fear of the God of Israel." His face was contorted — with the emotion described in the text? from concentrating on the complicated music? out of pious awe? stage fright? — as he moved down the center aisle chanting the prayer in fantastic minor-key melismas against the sustained chords that we were holding over from each cadence. The congregation, which had been restless, now listened, rapt. But, though this prayer was intended to be the cantor's alone, they did not listen in silence, for the tension generated by the chant had to be released. Each time he would reach the end of a phrase and we would hit a chord, the congregation would chime in, too, especially the old men, who knew and probably understood the words, singing the last word of the phrase along with him and with us. He reached the *bimah* dabbing his face with the handkerchief as the congregation stood for the majestic *Kaddish* introducing the next part of the service. When the moment in the *Kaddish* came for them to sing the response, all the energy pent up during

the Hineni was released, and the sanctuary itself seemed to sing with them. It was a moment that impressed itself on me for the rest of my life. Luckily, no train happened to pass by during that moment.

II.

No one in my family ever asked why the choir had boys instead of grown women singing the soprano and alto voices. No one ever thought to ask why women didn't have a role on the *bimah* any more than they thought to ask why a grandmother would light two candles on Friday night instead of one or why we had a seder on Passover instead of Rosh Hashanah. This was not a matter of orthodoxy, for our Judaism wasn't an ideology; it was just the way we were and the way we had always been. Only much later, when I acquired an advanced Jewish education, did I grasp how Americanized our ways were compared with those of our ancestors in the old country.

The most traditional people we knew were my four grandparents, and we thought of them all as religious, especially my paternal grandparents, who barely spoke English. My father's father went to synagogue in his distant neighborhood every Saturday and earned a little money by reading the Torah there. He may even have recited the daily morning prayers, to judge from an anecdote my uncle once told me, but he had no compunctions about accepting a ride home from the synagogue on the first night of Rosh Hashanah and the second night of Passover, which my family always spent with them. My mother's parents, whom I knew much better, kept their grocery store open on Saturdays and did not go to synagogue, though my grandmother didn't cook or clean on Saturday, and her otherwise ever-clicking knitting needles scrupulously observed the Sabbath rest. These were the most traditional people we knew; our own Jewish ways were even more watered down, compared with those of the old country; but whatever was left that was Jewish in our lives was done in the way it had always been done.

Our synagogue was, by affiliation, Conservative, but the three rabbis who served it in my time were Orthodox and the prayer books were the ones used by Orthodox congregations. Yet, there was no separate seating for men and women. Old men led the all-Hebrew service on the Sabbath — I can still hear Mr. Schuster's steel-edged voice as he led the morning service in his Ukrainian-accented Hebrew and Mr. Russikov's more mellow voice as he read the Torah portion from the scroll. There was no sermon except on the High

Holidays, and a good part of that was in Yiddish, though part was in English, too. On the night of Yom Kippur, when pledges were solicited from the congregation, *gabbaim* walked up and down the center aisle, and congregants would whisper their pledges to them and the *gabbai* would call out in Yiddish to the president of the congregation on the *bimah*, “Mr. X, *chai*” or “Mr. Y, *tzvaymol chai*” and the president would call out in English “Mr. X, \$18” or “Mr. Y, \$36” (contributions were made in multiples of 18, the numerical value of the Hebrew word meaning “life”) for the benefit of Bob, the janitor, who was hidden in the cloakroom adjacent to the *bimah*, out of sight of the congregation, keeping a record of the pledges.

This was not an Orthodox congregation; it was simply a congregation of aged immigrants carrying on the traditions they had brought with them from the old country as best they could and to the extent it felt natural; and of their children, the people of my parents’ generation, whose lives were devoted to making a living from their retail businesses so that their own children could grow up to be doctors and lawyers and who sent their children to Hebrew school and kept the shul going financially but who were not otherwise active participants in synagogue life. The members of the older two generations did not think of themselves as Orthodox or Conservative (Reform Judaism was unknown in the world I grew up in); they were simply Jewish, without being what they called “fanatics,” observing what rituals they did in the old-fashioned way — more or less. The old-timers did the same in their domain, and so, for example, when they sprang for a choir on the High Holidays, it was an all-male choir, with the two high parts sung by boys, as in the choirs of the wealthier old-country synagogues (and of the Russian Orthodox churches there; years later, when I visited Russia, the sound of the church choirs on Sunday mornings would smite me with nostalgia). But the old-timers were hardly more “fanatical” about the traditions of which they were the guardians than were my parents’ generation. On Saturday mornings, the minyan was often slow to gather, and the old men had no compunctions about sending me or one of the other boys upstairs to phone an absent member and ask him to come to shul and make the minyan; they themselves wouldn’t touch the phone on the Sabbath — in the synagogue.

In the early 1950s, when I was in junior high, we moved to the suburbs, and the Jewish life around me was suddenly completely different. In our new affluent community, there was no homey shul filled with old people, but only

department-store-size synagogues and temples, where polished rabbis, cantors, and mixed choirs performed the service every Saturday, sometimes to organ accompaniment, in the presence of theater-size audiences consisting mostly of bar mitzvah guests and regular congregants who did not hum along with the cantor or mumble the prayers, could not follow the service, and who, indeed, hardly opened their prayer books during its course. I could not understand how my parents could tolerate this alien environment, but of course, they only attended services on the High Holidays, so it did not weigh as heavily on them as it did on me. In school, it turned out that I was the only one who took synagogue seriously and had any idea of how it worked. After a while, I found my way back to the old shul, sometimes getting a ride with my father (who continued to operate his old drugstore for a time before moving his business to the suburbs), sometimes taking the long, nostalgic bus ride back to the old neighborhood.

Being Jewish no longer came so naturally. Now, I had to explain to myself why I was doing things that no one else I knew was doing and I had to explain to my Jewish friends the quaint customs and religious practices that came so naturally to me and that were completely unfamiliar to them. I wasn't all that observant, as that term is understood today, and I certainly wasn't religious in the inner meaning of that word. I was just so at home with some of the practices of the immigrant generation and identified so strongly with that generation that a part of me almost didn't belong to my own.

Yet the actual immigrants in my family — the obscure ancient Yiddish speakers — were dying off, and the immigrant closest to me — my father — had good reasons for wanting to put his shtetl childhood behind him. Not at all sentimental about the wretched poverty and disease that he and his mother had barely escaped, he was not hostile to the religious tradition, but he was hostile to its determining the course of my life. For the important project of his life was to achieve a solid bourgeois status, and his dream for his sons was for them to be prosperous and respected. In my childhood he encouraged my Jewish education. He seemed to want me to get more than what was offered by the afternoon Hebrew school, for he had the rabbi buy for me a copy of Magill's interlinear Bible, in which the Hebrew text of the Torah was printed phrase by phrase together with the English translation in parallel columns, and a book titled *Songs of Palestine*, containing Hebrew folk songs and patriotic songs with musical notation. In my early teens, he approved that I was

acquiring synagogue skills and was impressed, for example, to discover that I knew the chant for Kol Nidre and could sing it from memory. But to choose to observe the Sabbath meant to him willfully to choose economic failure and embarrassing eccentricity. To his father — who seems to have had a solid but not rabbinical education in the old country — to aspire to be a Hebrew scholar was to aspire to be a *melamed*, an impoverished and embittered teacher of rote knowledge to children, that is, something not so different from himself.

But conflict over these things could wait until my middle teens. In my childhood, my father seemed very Jewish indeed. When he would occasionally burst into song, it would often as not be a shul tune. Having come to the United States at age thirteen, soon after becoming bar mitzvah in Vilna, he had the basic Jewish education of an ordinary Lithuanian Jew, an education that later came to me to seem merely rudimentary, but that went far beyond anything imaginable today outside the Orthodox community. Like most of the old-timers, he knew the basic synagogue rituals, how to conduct the weekday prayers, and how to chant the haftarah in the synagogue. He had learned the Torah with Rashi's commentary and had progressed to the Talmud; when, in my late teens, I first brought home a volume of the Talmud, he was still able to recite a few lines that he had learned as a boy. When my parents visited me in Israel in 1960, he could amuse himself by trying to read the signs in Hebrew, though by then he needed my help.

And in those early days, my father, though not religiously observant, was actively associated with the synagogue. For a time, he was president of the synagogue men's club, presumably a fund-raising group, thereby earning the right to sit on the *bimah* on certain occasions. And at some time before my memories begin, he had donated a white Torah cover to the shul in memory of his mother with her name embroidered in Hebrew letters just above the cover's fringe. He occasionally spoke of her short and hard life; and since her story is so much a part of his story and therefore mine, it deserves to be told.

My grandmother, Rachel Chidekel, lived with my grandfather, Moshe Boruch Scheindlin, in her hometown of Sharkovshchina, in the vicinity of Vilna; he was from a larger nearby town, Globukoye. They had four children, whose names and order were, as far as I can make out, Sonya, Hayyim-Yizhak (my father), David, and one other. Unable to support his family, my grandfather left for America when my father was too young to retain a clear memory of how he looked but old enough to remember his smell, so he said. The plan

was for my grandfather to make money in America and send most of it to my grandmother via a bank account in Russia so that eventually he would be able to return to the shtetl and support his family in comfort. My grandfather must have left the shtetl around 1910–11. When World War I broke out, my grandfather could not return — perhaps he was not even ready to do so — nor, for some reason, did he return after the war — and several more years passed before the family was reunited in Philadelphia. In the meanwhile, my father lived with his mother and siblings until about 1920 in a wood shack that did not have electricity or even a floor. The shack was lighted by a kerosene lamp; my father had a scar on his chin as a reminder of a childhood accident with one of these. During this time, World War I passed through the region; my father remembered evacuating the burning town along with the retreating German troops. Three of the children died while my grandfather was in America; only my father survived. My father remembered the illness of one, whom he called “the baby,” and his mother taking them to a doctor in a bigger town, perhaps Globukoye. But although he remembered his older sister, Sonya, well, he never told me how she died.

Eventually, my grandmother took my father and set out for the United States. They stayed in Vilna for about a year — there, my father attended the Hebraist Mefitzei Haskala school, because, my father said, his mother preferred that he receive the hot lunches provided there rather than the cold ones provided by the competing Yiddishist school — and there he became bar mitzvah. At last they set out by train for Antwerp and by the *SS Lapland* for New York. They were detained on Ellis Island while my father was treated for an eye infection. They found my grandfather eking out a living buying and selling rags from a cart drawn by a horse that was rented for fifty cents a day, and supplementing his meager income by performing ritual functions in various synagogues. One of my earliest memories of him is watching him roll up the Torah in preparation for one or another holiday in a small synagogue in South Philadelphia.

My grandmother did not survive the reunion long, for she died in 1924, three years after reaching the United States. When she was first ill, she was thought to be pregnant, and this was thought confirmed when her belly became swollen. Too late, it was determined that she had cancer. She was in her forties at her death. My father, a good student, was rapidly working his way through the public school grades; he spent the week of shiva reading

David Copperfield and taking methodical notes on the book's vocabulary, which I still have. In school, his name was Anglicized to Hyman Irving; later, he gave it as H. Irving; and by the time I knew him, it was simply Irving.

My grandfather had a child to raise and a living to earn, so he naturally remarried, apparently quite soon. This caused hard feelings between him and my father; I was told that my father was rude to his stepmother for many years; but by my time, that rift must have healed, for I was nearly ten when I learned that she was not my biological grandmother, and the news was a shock to me.

When my father had grown up and married and established his own business and had two small children, he donated a Torah cover to the synagogue. During most of the year, the Torah covers and the curtain covering the ark where the Torahs were kept were maroon, but on the High Holidays they were changed to white. Then "our" Torah cover would appear and I could proudly see our family name walking by when the Torahs were carried in procession up the center aisle and back.

During those early years, my father had the *hazakah* — a permanent right — of reading the haftarah on the first day of Rosh Hashanah. This reading from the book of Samuel tells the beautiful story of Hannah, the birth of her son Samuel, and her prayer of thanksgiving. Hannah prays for a son; when he is born, she dedicates him to the service of the Temple; she brings him to Shiloh, leaves him with the priests, and returns to her home in the north country, leaving the boy to be raised by strangers in the Temple, where he rises to greatness. I now wonder whether my father did not see his own story as a secular version of the story of Hannah and Samuel, for he had been brought as a boy to a place of opportunity by his beloved mother, was separated from her, and grew up to be, if not a prophet and a leader of Israel, at least a reasonably prosperous businessman and a pillar of this tiny congregation; perhaps Hannah's song of Thanksgiving was to him his dead mother's hymn of *nachas* for his success and his prospects. But these thoughts are my own, floating into my mind out of decades of experience of midrashic thinking; I have no certain knowledge they were in my father's head as he chanted the ancient Hebrew words at the reading desk on the *bimah* of our shul. Perhaps when he was called to the Torah prior to his chanting the haftarah, the Torah that was read from was the one whose cover bore his mother's name.

III.

Some twenty-five years later, I moved with my young family to Cobble Hill, Brooklyn, and took up a position as professor of Hebrew literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary in Manhattan. We attended services every Saturday together at Congregation Baith Israel Anshei Emet, known as the Kane Street Shul. Once a grand and important congregation, the shul had been in a decades-long decline that began to reverse itself in the early seventies thanks to an influx of young professionals who rediscovered city life and revived the shul when it was on the point of closing.

Most of the congregants at that time had only a rudimentary Jewish education, but I was at home with them; I preferred their lay enthusiasm and relaxed religious ways to the more self-conscious and ideologically driven atmosphere of the Seminary. I was glad to contribute my skills to the congregation by reading the Torah — the whole *parashah* — week after week, thereby saving the congregation what it had been paying an Orthodox student to walk all the way from Williamsburg to Cobble Hill every Saturday for this purpose. On Sabbaths, I shared the leading of the services with one or two other congregants, and on the High Holidays, I took over the role of the cantor, thereby saving the congregation another major budget item.

Eventually I became the shul's part-time rabbi. This was a completely unexpected turn in my life, for although I was ordained, I had never intended to be a practicing rabbi; as it turned out, I learned a great deal from the experience and derived great satisfaction from this new relationship with the congregation, which lasted three years. But while acting as rabbi, I did not give up being the High Holiday cantor; each year, after delivering the sermon, I would retire to the rear of the synagogue to begin the *Hineni*, changing roles from rabbi to cantor, and a congregant would take over the traditional rabbi's responsibilities until near the end of the service. About ten years after joining the shul, I moved away from the neighborhood and relocated in Manhattan, but I continued to return to Kane Street to be the High Holiday cantor, and do so to this day.

Each of the functions I performed at Kane Street — even the role of ex-rabbi — suited me in one way or another, but the role of the cantor on the High Holidays was the fulfillment of an enormous nostalgic fantasy. Brith Sholom Community Center had long ago disbanded, and its decrepit schoolhouse building had been reduced to a weedy concrete lot littered with brick. But beginning in 1975, when I began to serve as cantor at Kane Street, I could revive and relive

my childhood memory of the old shul, this time not as a boy bored and awed and too ignorant of the old-timers' ways to follow the service, but as the central figure of the entire liturgical drama, as the reincarnation of Cantor Pavalow himself. It was no trouble to recover the tunes I had learned as a choirboy, for I had been humming them to myself for two and a half decades; within a few years, I had my friends and fellow congregants singing all of them with me, so that tunes and chants that had originated somewhere in Eastern Europe and had been transmitted to me in an obscure immigrants' synagogue in southwest Philadelphia became the traditional chants of a booming brownstoners' synagogue in an up-and-coming Brooklyn neighborhood.

True, I was not really a cantor, not having the vocal gifts or the musical knowledge to perform true cantorial music, nor did I have a tuning fork or a crown-shaped, tasseled white satin headdress. But I was a pretty fair lay cantor, what is known in Hebrew as a *baal tefillah*: my command of the traditional High Holiday chants was solid, I had a repertoire of appropriate tunes that the congregaton could sing along with, and my knowledge of the liturgy and the liturgical poetry was authoritative, since these are among the subjects of my academic expertise that I teach to rabbinical and cantorial students at the Seminary. The shul provided me with a *kittel*, the traditional white gown worn by officiants on the High Holidays, and instead of a tuning fork, I acquired a pitch pipe, which is much easier to use.

For several years, I led the services alone, singing both the cantor's chants and the choir's responses as best I could, and hoping that the congregation would eventually pick up the choir's responses and sing them along with me. To a great extent, this has been a success. All Kane Street regulars know, for example, the special tune for Adon Olam (the hymn that was once my audition piece for Cantor Pavalow's choir) that we use on the High Holidays. This is a tune I have heard nowhere else; I learned it as a boy in the choir, and it definitely goes back to the old country, for an ancient and delightful congregant, Mr. Antonovsky, remembered it from his childhood in the Ukraine and even berated me for singing it incorrectly! (His memory was perfect; I had altered the tune intentionally because I thought it too repetitive and lengthy for modern use in its original form.) I doubt that the Kane Street regulars of my generation and their now-grown children have heard this tune anywhere else, and I feel sure that it gives them all a shiver of white-robed solemnity and nostalgia, as it does me, and that it will haunt them forever.

The process of reconstructing my old shul's High Holiday services of my childhood reached its climax around 1978, when, together with some fellow congregants, I helped to organize a choir. I had a free hand, and would have liked to reproduce the old services exactly, but there was a limit to what I had absorbed at age eight and nine and, of that, to what I could remember. I lacked the musical training to devise the chords for the choir to hum against my chanting, and I was too busy with my career and with my young family to try to track down the set pieces we used to do. Of course, there was no thought of using boys for the high voices; my solos were given to women.

One of the singers had a knowledge of basic musical composition; one day, I sat him down and sang for him the bits and snatches I could remember of the Unetaneh Tokef — including, of course, my solo, *Kevakarat ro'eh edro* — or *kevakóras róye édro*, as I originally sang it — and he worked it up into a respectable choral piece that cannot be too different from the one that was once sung by Cantor Pavałow and his choir. It became one of the central pieces in our repertoire; we assigned my childhood solo to the soprano and added a few new fancy scale passages for me to sing solo.

I have now been the High Holiday cantor at the Kane Street Shul for over thirty years. A whole generation of Kane Street children, including my own, have grown up, gone away to college, and settled elsewhere, but eventually many of them show up at the High Holiday services, sometimes with wives and husbands; one such young couple recently showed up with a baby. They seek me out during kiddush and tell me how they missed the music of our High Holiday services during the years since they left their parents' home, when they went to services elsewhere or didn't go at all, how happy it made them to be back and to hear the old tunes again. I am flattered, of course, when they tell me that they don't want to hear any other cantor on the High Holidays; but beyond that, it gratifies me to see them making their own nostalgia out of mine and so carrying it on into the next generation. At the Kane Street Shul I have built a monument of liturgy to my childhood, to my old shul, and to my grandparents' generation.

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