

Vision Statement by Sarina Elenbogen-Siegel

Kol yerida l'tzorech aliyah, meaning, every descent is for the sake of rising, is a Chasidic teaching I hold close. I have seen firsthand how those times when we fall down can present us with an opportunity to rise up even higher than before. Therefore, our pain, and the process of moving through it, is what allows us to fully embody a sense of gratitude, which in turn can bring us deeper into the present moment and inspire creation.

This past summer, surrounded by the Mendocino Redwoods, I opened up my *siddur* to a random page, a game I like to play to inspire songwriting. The *siddur* flipped open to the prayer for gratitude, “*Modim Anachnu Lach.*” I was, at that moment, so filled with gratitude, for being blessed with nature’s bounty, and for being mentored by Cantor Marsha Attie and Cantor Arik Luck at Congregation Emanu-El of San Francisco as part of my Tisch fellowship. On the wooden bench in the Redwood forest, the melody poured out of me, and suddenly I was singing a new song, strumming on my guitar in a rich open D tuning and watching the dancing shadows of the leaves against the trees.

Judaism in its essence is about gratitude. In fact, the Hebrew word for “Jew” “*yehudi*” comes from the same root as the word for “gratitude” “*modim*”. It is a life force which enables us to come together as a community to pray and uplift one another through songs, old and new. The next Friday, I took the song to Shabbat services and shared it with the teary-eyed Emanu-El community, including 104-year-old Rita who sang along as I said farewell to my summer internship. One of the many privileges of synagogue life is getting to form intergenerational bonds and as a cantor, I had the opportunity to bring an ancient text to life and engage a room of 100 people of all ages singing together, uplifting prayers of *hoda'ah* to the Holy One. I dream of a Jewish community who believes in the healing power of many different kinds of voices joining

together. With Jewish sacred text and music, we can transform people's lives, young and old alike.

My cantorial work with people from different stages of their lives and journeys of rising and falling has extended beyond the synagogue walls. During the summer of 2023, I had the opportunity to learn pastoral care skills through Clinical Pastoral Education at New York-Presbyterian Weill Cornell Hospital. On the last day of the Clinical Pastoral Education internship, I got a request to speak with Alison, a middle-aged patient in the psychiatric unit with psychosis. We were existing in different realities and I did not know which details she told me were factual, but from looking in her eyes I could feel her pain and confusion, and I knew that her experience was very real for her. I met her exactly where she was on her path and affirmed her experience. She very much appreciated how I was able to empathize with her. We sang together and I could see her dim eyes begin to sparkle. The hope of returning to oneself is the hope that music can bring us. As the Modzitzer Rebbe says, the palace of *Teshuva*, of returning, is music itself. A great blessing is the ability to visit someone in crisis and be a presence for them when they need, accompanying them with a spiritual presence.

As a cantor, I will always seek to meet people where they are, across political spectrums, gender, age, race, class, and ability. I will strive to build bridges of song. I will use my voice and the music in my heart to help people heal. I will mourn, dance, and pray with my beloved community, both inside and outside of the sanctuary. I believe that no matter where we are on our journeys, we all have the power to rise up with grateful souls and sing a new song of joy to God.