

From a Conversation with Joseph Goldfarb

When my father came here, and almost the entire time he was here, he served in two capacities, one was rabbi and one was cantor. In those years it was more common to find people who could do both, serve well as both a rabbi and as a cantor. And there became fewer and fewer over the generations, and now there are extremely few. When he came here, he was hired to be the rabbi, yes, and to speak on public occasions, and also to lead the musical service, the *davenning*.

When he was a young man, my father came here from Europe at the age of fourteen, he had learned music from an uncle who was a cantor. He was able to read music, and later on, when he went to college, he took music lessons when he was at Columbia with one of the foremost musicologists that they had there. When he came here, he led the service without a choir because they didn't have a choir then. But before then, when he was a young man, he used to lead professional choirs for the cantors on the lower East Side. There was a big tradition of big-name cantors in the lower East Side Synagogues ... and from time to time, he used to lead choirs with them. When he came here, he was without a choir for some time. And then they wanted more music in the service, so they organized a children's choir. It was two-part singing for boys, and one of the things I liked about this shul is that they had a choir loft in the back. That [pointing upward] was originally an organ loft. I remember at one point seeing the organ pipes, they were never electrified, which meant that you had to have somebody on the side pumping the bellows.

The first few years of the Congregational Singers the caps [captains] sat in the front row and they could turn around and lead. And the others sat in the second, third and fourth rows. There were boys singing two-parts. The choir sat in the front pews on the left aisle. When girls were added to the choir, some of the men objected to the mixed voices, and as a compromise, the choir was moved to the balcony. The choir, girls and boys, stood in front of the silent organ and faced the congregation.

When they wanted to have singing with a choir as part of the service, my father suggested that a brother of his conduct the choir. I had an uncle whose name was Samuel Goldfarb and he lived in the neighborhood. He organized a children's choir, no girls, a boys choir. And they performed here for Saturday morning services. I don't know if they did it Friday night services usually, and they also performed on the High Holy Days. For the High Holy Days they would enlarge the choir by bringing in professional singers, a professional bass and a professional tenor to fill out four parts so they had better harmonies. That continued for a while, my Uncle Sam Goldfarb was the leader. At other times, they had different leaders. They had Meyer Machtenberg who was one of the foremost Jewish choir leaders. He was here some period of time. And then they had a man by the name of Abraham I. Kalb. He came here and he was the conductor for a number of years.

Along about the year 1928, possibly 1929, some of the members came to him and said, "You know Rabbi Goldfarb, we like your *davenning*, we enjoy your service very much, but we've heard it year after year and maybe we could have something new for a change. You can go out, you'll still be the rabbi, you'll still be the cantor year round. But for the Holy Days we'd like to bring in someone else, just for a change." So, my father said, "OK, if you want to do that, he'd still have his job to do as rabbi and be the cantor." So, they hired a cantor and he has a choir with four voices. He came and they *davenned* for Schlichos night and then he started to *daven* for Rosh Hashanah. And at the end of one service in the morning the first day of Rosh Hashanah, they came to him and said, "Rabbi Goldfarb, we don't like this man at all. We don't want him to continue. We will take care of our obligation to him, but will you please take over and continue this service that way we are accustomed to hearing it all the time?" So of course my father said, "No, he would not do something like that. They made a promise and how would it appear to the public, It's a public rebuke not to have him continue." So he finished it off, and he finished all the Yom Tov. And after that, they never called for another man to substitute. They never had the choir anymore, because Mr. Kalb was not available then and none of the other choir leaders who had been here before were available.

So, he *davenned* by himself without a choir. After a year or two of that, everyone agreed that the service was too empty and hollow, just a solo voice, and it became too monotonous after a while. Besides being very much more difficult for the singer, a cantor likes to have a choir because it fills in spaces. It gives him a chance to catch his breath and to relax in between things. My father called Kalb back and suggested they form a group called the BIAE Congregational Singers. These would be young people so there was a social element to the thing, and they would sing those melodies that many of them remembered from earlier years. About that time, my father published a publication called Synagogue Melodies for High Holy Days, which contained the stuff that most of the people here knew. They won't be upstairs, they won't be a formal choir. They'll sit down in the congregation. And during services they sat in the front left hand section, not against the wall, but in the center on the left side. They had a goodly number of people. They used to have, 15, 18 people come around to sing. They would have rehearsals year round, like a social group. They would come together on Thursday nights, and Kalb would train them. He came once each week. When yontif came, they were trained, ready to perform and they went ahead.

After singing two-parts for a while, they decided to do some songs with four-part arrangements. Of course, it sounded much better and they had the voices for it because it was all adults. The only thing that was in question, was the fact that

it was women singing in the choir, mixed singing. My father didn't like the idea too much of having mixed voices. In the Orthodox tradition it's verboten, you're not allowed to have women's voices. So what do you do for a compromise? They moved the singers upstairs, up in the back. The reason is, that nobody sees them. Nobody has to look at them. And when you listen to the voices, it's very hard sometimes to distinguish between a child's soprano and a woman's soprano. Sometimes they sound so much alike that it's hard to tell the difference. They had the singers and they went back up to the organ loft, which became a choir loft, at the head of those winding stairs.

All the inner workings (of the organ) were taken out of it, the keyboard removed, everything else, and it's a closet up there to this day, unless it's been changed. They moved that whole thing away a little distance so there was enough room in front of the base of the organ, enough room for a choir to fit. And we had chairs up there. They were visible and everyone turned around to look at them.

I sang in that choir for many years. I sang with them when they still were a children's choir, for about a year or two. I must have been very young at that time. And then, I didn't sing with them at first when they were downstairs here, but I did join them later on after my voice changed, and we were up there for many years. They probably went upstairs in 1931 or '32. Then, more and more of the pieces were sung to four-part harmony. And we had a whole book, a copy of everything that the group performs for their leader to have. It's got a lot of songs that are standards. It's got a lot of things that had special arrangements. It's got a lot of original compositions.

At the point where they were developing, they had some pretty good-sized groups. But then, some of the members moved out of the neighborhood, the young people started families of their own and the active participation varied from occasion to occasion. But since we sang mostly the same things year after year, they developed a practice of drop-ins, those who had been with us one year and been away two or three years, on *yontif*, these are people who drove and rode on the holidays anyway, this was no barrier to them. So they would stop off, come upstairs and all of a sudden in the middle of something, there was a new voice here, a new voice there. It varied. I would say the maximum they had was twenty voices.

Kalb had the kind of voice that was just enough in range and in quality to be able to substitute for any part. He could be a soprano; he could be a bass; he could be anything in between. When the ranks were weak, he was able to supplement it with his own voice.

The choir wore black robes with white collars. Somebody took care of them, laundered them and brought them back.

Those were very happy years for me.

Carol Levin conducted a series of oral histories for the synagogue. This excerpt is from a May 2, 2002 conversation held in the sanctuary. Joseph Goldfarb is the son of Rabbi Israel Goldfarb, who served this Congregation from 1905 to 1965.