Women Cantors and Dollars in 1976

*Barbara J. Ostfeld*

Gretchen the administrator calls me to her office. Her office is smack in the middle of the temple administration area. It has windows on three sides. Her sharp eyes see all, and there is much to see: There is a secretary at the copy machine pushing buttons, with another waiting behind her. Several volunteers are collating flyers at a long table. A young woman is sitting at the reception desk, comparing two lists and making check marks on one of them. In the rear to the left sits the bookkeeper, bejeweled glasses low on her nose and tethered to a bejeweled chain. Her ledgers are pale blue with smudgy edges and thick as phone books. The clergy secretary is typing loudly under the fluorescents, head swiveling from copy to carriage.

“Here are some sample letters,” Gretchen states without introduction. “What you’ve been writing isn’t quite our style. So here are sample thank-yous and condolence notes. Here are birth, engagement, wedding, and acknowledging an honorarium. Please be less flowery in your letters. Here’s what you do: You get a memo from the office about a death. You respond briefly. Now, you may rewrite these in your own words, but keep to the style and length. Our secretaries have enough to do as it is. Of course in special cases, handwritten is best.”

I ask how I am to know when a case is special.

Gretchen explains that if I’m invited to lunch or for dinner, a personal touch will be welcome. If an honorarium is unusually generous, I should put pen to paper.

I ask how much “generous” would be.

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BARBARA J. OSTFELD (DFSSM75) is the first ordained woman Cantor.
She sits back in her chair and answers with a question. “How much do you usually get?”
I’m not following. I tell her I don’t know what she means.
Seeing that I am perplexed, Gretchen snaps her chair forward and rubs the sides of her nose with both hands.
She says, “You’ll never get as much as the senior rabbi, as Jacob, no matter how much effort you put in.”
Seeing my blank face, she continues.
“You know, how, after every bar mitzvah, you get some cash?”
When I do not nod, she continues further.
“You probably already know that Jacob gets the most. You and the assistant rabbi, well, it depends on how much time you’ve put in with the kid, how good the kid’s speech is, how good the kid is on the bimah. Let me know if you get a check made out to the temple. Has that happened yet? We’ll cash it for you and give you a check. Oh, if it’s made out to a temple fund, like the music fund, you’re sunk. It’s ours. If . . .”
“Wait . . . , I, uh, got a $100 bill from the son of a member after his father’s unveiling. He kind of palmed it to me all folded up. He stuck his hand out from the limo window as he was leaving the cemetery. But I’m not getting any other, um, money.”
Gretchen thrusts her chair back even farther and laces her fingers behind her head. She thinks for a long moment, then she spells it out: my cantorial predecessors were family men, raising children, sending them to college.
I think of Barry, who was let go shortly before I took the position. (He threw a music stand at a soprano.) Barry wasn’t even married!
“Did Barry get, uh, honoraria?”
“Barry sang for his.”
Something clicks, and I remember my initial meeting with Jacob and the temple president, when they offered me the cantorial position. The meeting wasn’t much of a negotiation. The president simply named my salary in stentorian tones that did not allow for conversation: $15,500.
The congregation was located on a main street of a wealthy New York suburb. It boasted fifteen hundred family members and about ninety b’nei mitzvah per year.
Even back then, fresh from HUC, I knew that cantors of large congregations were earning higher salaries than this. The president could see that I was taken aback by the low number.
“We know it’s not high,” he said, “but you’ll be able to pay your rent. The fathers of the bar mitzvah and bat mitzvah students will give you gifts.”

He was brief in the telling and less than explicit. I hadn’t really understood; so when the “gifts” were not forthcoming, I wasn’t disappointed.

Later I learned from choir members, and from the organist, that my cantorial predecessors received $50 or $100 per student. Envelopes containing cash appeared in their temple mailboxes. These would turn up during the week following the service. Ninety students times either $50 or $100. It would have meant an additional $4,500 to $9,000 in salary.

I was afraid to say anything, so I said nothing.

Jacob and the president were not lying to me. They didn’t anticipate that b’nei mitzvah fathers would simply fail to see me as their cantor. They saw me as a girl wearing a long black robe.

Note

A version of this article will appear in the author’s memoir, *Catbird: The Ballad of Barbi Prim*, scheduled for publication in August 2018.