

Voices stir the heart and soul

Year-round, Jewish cantors do much more than sing, but their greatest challenge — and privilege — arrives about now.

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ST. PETERSBURG — The High Holy Days begin Friday at sundown, but for Tampa Bay area cantors, preparation for this most sacred period in Jewish life has been going on for months.

They've been rehearsing chants and songs, ancient and modern, all particular to the 10-day observance that begins on Rosh Hashana and ends on Yom Kippur. They've assembled choirs, hired musicians, consulted their rabbis and made time to build their own physical and spiritual stamina.

But attention to service music is not the cantor's only job. Unlike in Christianity, the responsibility of Jewish cantors is more extensive. They are clergy who have gone through years of rigorous education. They work side by side with rabbis and perform weddings, bury the dead, teach, give sermons, consult and console. Most professional cantors serve as the primary backup for their rabbis.

"Modern cantors are educators and pastors," said David B. Sisen, the hazzan, or cantor, of Congregation B'nai Israel in St. Petersburg.

During the High Holy Days, the intensity of the job increases. Cantors must sing and chant through back-to-back services, including the 25-hour Yom Kippur fast, when neither food nor drink is allowed.

The High Holidays, also known as the High Holy Days or Days of Awe, draw large crowds to synagogues and temples. It's a time of introspection, penitence, forgiveness and renewal when it is believed God judges his people and writes their fate for the new year in the Book of Life. The book is closed at the end of Yom Kippur, the most sacred day of the Jewish year. Worshipers, most of them fasting, will attend services that day wearing white garments and canvas sneakers.

Cantors and their music must help to evoke the season's awe. "The music for the High Holidays is absolutely unique. What it creates is a mood of, wow, this is special," Sisen said.

"There's a pleading quality to many of the chants and songs, because we beg for God's mercy in judging our deeds. God is presented as creator, judge and ruler over all," said Deborah Jacobson, the cantor at Temple Ahavat Shalom in Palm Harbor.

Besides preparing for what Sisen describes as "an enormously physically taxing endeavor," cantors must be



Times photo — LARA CERRI

Tampa Bay cantors and cantorial vocalists pose in the sanctuary of Congregation B'nai Israel. David Sisen stands behind a row that includes, from left, Joy Katzen-Guthrie, Jodi Sered-Lever, Deborah Jacobson, Marci Vitkus, Riselle Bain and Marla Goldberg. Sisen calls the High Holy Days "an enormously physically taxing endeavor," but also a spiritually challenging one. "If a cantor ... is not 100 percent genuine, then the congregation senses that."

spiritually ready. "If a cantor is up on the bima (pulpit) and is not 100 percent genuine, then the congregation senses that. What will move a congregation during the High Holidays is the verisimilitude of the praying that is coming from the bima," he said.

Sisen, 39, who has been singing at High Holiday services since he was 15, said he prepares by reading the service in the prayer book, thinking deeply about it and trying to find new inspiration in it.

One of the elements that increases the high emotional quotient of this period is that Yom Kippur is one of four times a year set aside for the recitation of the Yizkor prayer of remembrance for the dead. For new cantor Marla Goldberg at Temple Beth-El in St. Petersburg, these High Holidays could be challenging. It will be her first since graduation as a cantor and her first since her father's death. Mike Goldberg died of lung cancer a few weeks ago. He was 69.

"I just know that this year's memorial service will be a little more meaningful for me," she said Friday.

Goldberg said she is trying to refocus. "I'm trying to keep myself healthy and sleeping as much as possible," she said. The holiday services at Temple Beth-El will include the congregation's volunteer choir, a professional quartet and music

from a new organ, she said. Goldberg will introduce only one new piece of music this year, one by the late Isaac Offenbach, a cantor and the father of composer Jacques Offenbach.

"It's just a piece that I've done for years and I just think it's too beautiful not to share," she said.

Sharing is what Goldberg and her colleagues of the Bay Area Cantorial Association did recently when they met to exchange ideas and talk about their vocations and the High Holy Days.

"It's a privilege to be able to get together and meet with others who are doing similar sacred work and talk," said Jodi Sered-Lever of Congregation Kol Ami in Tampa during the lunchtime meeting at Congregation B'nai Israel.

Joy Katzen-Guthrie, who is not an invested cantor, but a cantorial vocalist, travels to temples and synagogues that hire her. During the meeting, she talked about her role in congregation life.

"We're all trying to connect people to their faith," she said.

Marci Vitkus of the Jewish Center of Venice said, "My role is to keep people coming to services. I take that very seriously."

This year Katzen-Guthrie will travel to Temple Shir Shalom in Gainesville for services. "It's a real handful to take on physically," she said of the High Holy

days. "It is being completely comfortable with the material, but it is also being up to the physical part of it. ... Before I sing, I ask that my music serves all of those who will hear me. It's a personal prayer I pray."

Riselle Bain, who has been at Congregation Schaarai Zedek for almost five years, has been preparing for the High Holy Days since July. "I have a choir of about 19 people, all volunteers," she said. Rehearsals include talking about the prayers they are chanting, their history and the music.

"Personally, I try as much as I can to go in rested vocally," she said. It's about being very focused, she said.

"I love the High Holidays," said Jacobson of Temple Ahavat Shalom in Palm Harbor, adding that she appreciates the tradition, unity of the Jewish people and intense spirituality that are particularly evident during this time.

For Sisen, the High Holidays, which conclude with the 25-hour-long Yom Kippur fast, leave him on a spiritual high.

"If the prayer is genuine and it's coming from deep within, I've always found that over the course of the day, I gain strength rather than lose it," he said. "As the day goes on, the spiritual immediacy of what you're doing and why you're doing it grows."