Roslyn Jhunever Barak

*Roslyn Jhunever Barak: Song and Spirit: A Cantor’s Life*  
*Congregation Emanu-El, San Francisco, 1987-2015*

Interviews conducted by Basya Petnick  
2014-2015

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Roslyn Jhunever Barak served Congregation Emanu-El in San Francisco, California in the position of senior cantor from 1987 to 2015. She earned a BA in music (vocal performance) from the Manhattan School of Music. As an opera singer, she appeared with the Santa Fe Opera, as well as other companies, and was the recipient of several prestigious awards and honors. From 1974 to 1977, Barak lived in Israel, where she married and had a son. During those years, she performed with the Israel National Opera, the Israel Philharmonic, the Jerusalem Symphony, as well as performing regularly in solo recitals and with other orchestras throughout the country. After returning to New York, she made the decision to pursue a career in the Reform Jewish cantorate. She earned an MSM (master of sacred music) at Hebrew Union College in New York and was ordained as cantor upon her graduation in 1986. She has toured Germany multiple times in conjunction with the release of her CD, The Jewish Soul.

Cantor Barak has served on the faculty of the Academy of Jewish Religion in Los Angeles, on the boards of the American Conference of Cantors and the Cantors Assembly, and on the editorial committee for Mishkan Tefillah, the current Reform prayerbook. Her recording of Samuel Adler’s liturgical music is part of the Milken Archive of Jewish music. Her other recordings include Libi B’Ma’arav, A Sho’o in Gan Eden, and Hallel v’Zimrah. She received a master’s degree in clinical psychology in 1996, and was awarded an honorary doctorate from Hebrew Union College in 2011. She teaches and coaches cantorial students in the United States, Israel, and Germany. In Spring 2017 her new recording, My Spirit Sings, was released.
To my mother, Anne, who gave me the music,
and to my father, Harry, who gave me the voice.
To Music

You dear, sweet Art, in many dismal hours
Where I’ve been bound by life’s unruly course
Then in my heart, a warmer love you have
ignited.
You’ve carried me to a better, better world,
Yes, to a better, better world!

Oft comes a sigh, a holy chord from your harp
strings
That sparks in me a vision, one I clearly see,
A glimpse of heaven, and the sight of better
times before me.
I thank you for these things, you dear sweet
Art,
For these things, my thanks to you.

By Franz von Schober
Tom Potter, translator
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INTRODUCTION

by Stephen S. Pearce, PhD, Senior Rabbi Emeritus
Congregation Emanu-El, San Francisco

When sacred music is refracted through the voice of the cantor, it elevates and exalts the proclamations of the prophets and the sages with new and richer meaning.
--Ernest Bloch, composer

Present in my Hebrew Union College pastoral counseling class for cantorial students in the early 1980s was the beautiful and bright Roslyn Barak. She had great knowledge of music, Hebrew, and Judaism and she had an angelic voice. She could sing anything. Furthermore, she demonstrated a *gute neshome* and a *lev shomayah*—a beautiful soul and a discerning heart. In recognition of those great qualities, I awarded her the prize for excellence in human relations that was established at the Hebrew Union College in my name to honor the most outstanding cantorial student.

I was awestruck by her talent and never imagined I would have the privilege of serving with her as a partner in worship. But as it came to pass, as cantor and rabbi we shared the *bimah* of Congregation Emanu-El in San Francisco for almost a quarter of a century, leading services together.

During her tenure at Congregation Emanu-El (1987-2015), Cantor Barak provided the congregation with what theologian Rudolph Otto termed “numinosity,” the irresistible, undeniable, unforgettable feeling of being in the presence of the Divine. Barak has led me, and so many others, to connect with what is most holy and sacred, enabling us to feel close to God during the prayer services she led. Over the years, many congregation members, visitors, and friends were touched by the magic and mastery of her music. She is an extraordinary and brilliant cantor who not only holds a place as a peer among her distinguished immediate predecessors, Joseph Portnoy and Reuben Rinder, two beloved Emanu-El cantors, but is internationally regarded by many to have a place among the all-time greatest of the greats: Moshe Koussevitsky and Zavel Kwartin, to name just two.

Although we had a few minor disagreements, Roz and I agreed completely on the most important thing between us: we viewed the role of worship leaders as a partnership. Unlike previous generations in which the rabbi made all the worship decisions, including the selection of the music, we worked in tandem. While I love music and have strong preferences, Cantor Barak is the expert. Therefore, I always deferred to her impeccable taste and was never disappointed.

Cantor Barak and I share a love of great cantors, great synagogue music, *chazzanut*, professional choirs, pipe organs, and all that has long characterized Reform worship. We favor the compositions of Binder, Freed, Schalit, Lewandowski, Bloch, and other liturgical composers who defined “grand congregational worship” in a Reform temple. Consequently, we spared no reasonable effort or expense to bring such music to Congregation Emanu-El, a more than 150-year old congregation that nourished young musicians such as Yehudi Menhuin and Isaac Stern and that commissioned and premiered great liturgical works such as Ernest Bloch’s *Avodath Hakodesh (Sacred Service).*
During the twenty years Cantor Barak and I served together as senior Congregation Emanu-El clergy, a great change emerged in synagogue music. Throughout the country, liberal Jews who had grown up on rock and folk acquired an attraction to simpler, more repetitive melodies. Strongly favoring participatory-style music and events, many young Jews are no longer drawn to a worship service in which the rabbi preaches and the cantor sings to the congregation. What they want is to be engaged as participants—no matter how much or how little they know about Torah and synagogue music. This demand for participation and the easy, repetitive songs that were learned in the summer camps of their youth, along with other cultural factors, have ushered in the contemporary worship service. This more simplistic Jewish synagogue music now attracts some of the newer, younger members of the congregation, as well as some longtime members who formerly preferred the “traditional” classic worship service. This group of “contemporary service” congregants now finds the great, majestic synagogue music with grand organ accompaniment to be nothing less than alien.

The changes in the music for worship, and the style of worship, have been a challenge for both Cantor Barak and me. To be quite blunt, sometimes this trend was more than a challenge; sometimes it was downright disheartening. These feelings, however, do not imply a total resistance to change. For example, Cantor Barak’s innovative once-a-month jazz service gained a loyal following of worshippers who thoroughly enjoyed her jazz riffs on traditional melodies. I was once present at a convention of cantors when Cantor Barak led that august gathering in jazz worship, and I noted that the sanctuary was abuzz with positive reactions to its beauty and simplicity.

The congregational demand for change, and for more participation and less performance, has overtaken liberal congregations nationwide. As the knowledgeable Eastern European Jews with their fluency in Hebrew and wonderful Yiddishkeit aged out of the congregations, an opening presented itself for those seeking an easier entry to the synagogue. With good intentions, new and often younger members of the congregation, having little or no knowledge of Hebrew, replace the complex liturgy and music of the past with strains of “bah-bim-bams” and the singing of the same word over and over in a service in which they can completely participate. This is exactly what has occurred at Congregation Emanu-El. It may be satisfying to an increasing number, but as one listens to the simple chants, our complex prayers and music, with their ability to convey exquisitely nuanced meanings, silently take leave of the bright sanctuary and are soon on their way to becoming faded memories in a dim, untraveled temple corridor.

But to return to Cantor Barak, her life as a cantor must be strong and flexible enough to encompass many changes. I note by way of a slightly complicated metaphor that touches the depths of our tradition, that each word in a voweled copy of the Torah is marked with ancient musical notations. These accent marks, written above or below the Hebrew, are called a trope in English or te’am in Hebrew. They are more than just musical notes, because they also punctuate the text by setting off sentences, clauses, and phrases as well as emotional tone. The richness of te’amim (plural for te’am) comes from how they enhance a Torah reading by adding nuance and interpretation. However, only a great voice can add such interpretation, and Cantor Barak is such a voice.

To express something significant about Cantor Barak’s unparalleled career, I am drawn to one of the te’amim called shalshelet or “chain,” a wiggle-shaped trope above a word that only appears
seven times in the entire Torah. Its extended sound, longer than any other te’am, wavers up and down the scale twice before finishing on a third ascent. It connotes emotional turmoil. For example, it is used in the rescue of the divine messengers by Lot; it is employed in the phrase “but he refused” in the failed seduction of Joseph by Potiphar’s wife; and when Eliezer, Abraham’s steward, despairs that he may fail in his mission to find a wife for Isaac, his trepidation and angst are conveyed by the shalshelet trope that appears over the word, vayomar (and he said).

I liken the rare shalshelet trop to Cantor Barak for two reasons. First, her exceptional voice skillfully conveys the emotional overtones of the text and the intention of the composer. Second, the Hebrew word shalshelet is commonly linked to the Hebrew kabbalah tradition. Cantor Barak is a powerful connection to the shalshelet hakabbalah—the chain of musical tradition that goes back to the psalmists, Temple singers, and great musical composers of the millennia. She is the embodiment of great synagogue music that continues to be heard by those who willingly seek a divine connection. She has carried forward these beloved melodies that speak to heart and mind. When I hear her golden voice, I have been and continue to be—to quote her oft-humorous use of the Yiddish—farklempt (speechless). And when we are speechless, we sit up and pay attention. As the Sh’m’a prompts: “Listen Israel.”
INTRODUCTION

by Mark Kligman, PhD
Professor of Ethnomusicology and Musicology
Mickey Katz Endowed Chair in Jewish Music
University of California, Los Angeles

Synagogue music and the cantors that create the music reflect Jewish culture. From Europe to America the cantor is the musical leader that negotiates the musical styles of the non-Jewish surrounding world with the t’filah [prayers] to elevate the musical experience of the synagogue.

For the more than two million Jewish immigrants that came to the America from 1880 to 1920, the transition of the European style of prayer met with many changes. Although the European style was carried across the ocean, the late nineteenth century American musical styles continually influenced synagogue music.

By the 1970s a new challenge appeared. Folk music traditions, which during the 60s and 70s were closely connected to human and civil rights issues, became embedded in the baby-boomer culture. In the 1970s, this means of expression prevailed in Jewish summer camps, with young American Jews closely identifying their folk music with newly-written music for the synagogue. Cantors struggled with the problem of maintaining tradition while incorporating the profound changes that were developing in synagogue music. Concurrently, women entered the clergy: in the Reform movement, Rabbi Sally Priesand was ordained in 1972, and the investiture/ordination of Cantor Barbara Ostfeld followed in 1975. Erica Lippitz and Marla Rosenfeld Barugel were ordained as cantors in the Conservative movement in 1987. Cantor Roslyn Barak was invested as a Reform cantor after graduating from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, School of Sacred Music in a predominantly female cohort in 1986.

The present musical traditions of the synagogue, seen as both a continuation of their European legacy and a reaction to influences from America culture, have important precedents. While the seventeenth-century settlers in America were Sephardic, their influence was overshadowed by the European immigration in the nineteenth century of German Jews who were the first to arrive after 1820. But it was the mass migration of Eastern European Jews that began in 1880 that dominated American Judaism at the turn of the century. The predominant liturgical music during this immigrant period was known as the Golden Age of the Cantorate (1880-1930. The cantors associated with the Golden Age, born and trained in Eastern Europe, came to America around the turn of the century and gained prominence through the 1930s. Some had regular pulpits for the entire year, and others were only engaged for the High Holy Days, for which they commanded large salaries. Radio broadcasts, in addition to 78 rpm recordings and concerts, proliferated this musical liturgical artistry. The recordings provide a lasting record, freezing the sound of the Golden Age for future generations. Great cantors of this period include Yossele Rosenblatt (1882-1933), Leib Glantz (1898-1964), Mordecai Hershman (1888-1940), Leibele Waldman (1907-1969), Pierre Pinchik (1900-1971), and Moshe Koussevitzky (1899-1966) and his brother David (1891-1985). Their admirers came from great distances and stood in long lines to hear them sing at concerts and services. The Golden Age of Cantors was a brief but significant period in the history of Jewish liturgical music that uniquely fused vocal artistry and impassioned prayer in a distinctive style that has become the definitive form of chazzanut.
In the nineteenth century, the Reform movement, which began in Central Europe, came to America and spread throughout the country, carrying the music of Salomon Sulzer and Louis Lewandowski from Europe to these shores. In the second quarter of the twentieth century, composers sought to adapt synagogue music to the musical styles of the twentieth century. Composers such as Abraham Binder (1895-1966), Isadore Freed (1900-1960), and Lazar Weiner (1897-1982) sought to take the traditional European tunes and uniquely harmonize these melodies in accordance with the Jewish prayer modes, producing harmonies not typically found in Western music. Binder and Freed were motivated by the same desires as Sulzer and Lewandowski of the nineteenth century, to innovate artistically known melodies for cantor, choir, and organ in a dignified and tasteful manner according to the music of the surrounding culture. Toward the middle of the twentieth century two composers, Max Helfman (1901-1963) and Max Janowski (1912-1991), wrote compositions that have become standards for the High Holy Days: Helfman's "Sh'ma Koleinu" and Janowski's "Avinu Malkenu." During the second half of the twentieth century musical tastes inclined toward more accessible music. Contemporary composers such as Michael Isaacson draw from a variety of musical styles, both classical and contemporary, for their synagogue compositions. Isaacson and others also draw from folk, popular, and Israeli style songs. Reform cantors today draw from diverse musical compositions composed over the last two centuries to provide interest and variety to their congregations.

All three major denominations of American Judaism: Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox, deal with similar concerns with respect to new music in the synagogue. At issue is the role of the cantor as prayer facilitator as balanced in respect to congregational involvement. The European history of the rhythmically precise Central European and the rhythmically free Eastern European traditions have been combined in varying practices in American congregations. Where Reform synagogues were once the source of artistic innovations, the trend has diminished in favor of participatory services. However, in some synagogues, trained cantors and some congregants desire to utilize music that draws from the rich musical history of the Jewish tradition. Other congregants desire a more accessible musical service that facilitates their participation in an idiom they prefer. Music within the participatory sphere may draw from the Jewish tradition, including the use of Chasidic and Israeli melodies, although folk and popular styles are predominant. Debbie Friedman, whose popularity increased in the 1980s and 1990s, represented the accessible folk and popular styles.

While some are critical of the lack of artistry in the popular participatory liturgical music, others embrace it as means to encourage synagogue attendance. Today’s popular trends and changes reflect the influences and the gradual adaptation of the cultural surroundings that in this case are that of the American culture. However, the process of adapting contemporary and local musical influences has long been a part of the history of Jewish synagogue music.

Religious and secular summer camps and programs throughout the year make use of a wide variety of music to educate children and teenagers in Jewish concepts and religious practices. For nearly sixty years, new music has been composed in Israel, including children’s songs, popular music, and folk songs associated with Zionistic themes. Folk singer Naomi Shemer has captivated the feeling of solidarity in the country and the enduring importance of Israel as the
home of the Jewish people with her songs "Al Kol Eleh" (All These Things) and "Yerushalayim Shel Zahav" (Jerusalem of Gold).

The synthesis of traditional Jewish musical styles and forms in both sacred and secular contexts, combined with a contemporary classical idiom, has been the trend from the 1970s until today. Finding cantors to sing this wide array of diverse musical styles is also a challenge.

Roslyn Barak’s life and career as a cantor and musician truly reflects the development of synagogue music and the Jewish community of the late twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries. Born in Brooklyn and raised mostly in Queens, Cantor Roz Barak’s upbringing was influenced by Orthodox Jewish cultural and religious elements. While her immediate family was not observant, her grounding in a traditional Orthodox community through her dedicated synagogue and Hebrew school attendance provided her a framework to experience Jewish life. At the same time, she was raised in a musical home that embraced a variety of musical styles, including classical music, folk songs, and popular music. She pursued her studies at the Manhattan School of Music as a singer, with the goal to focus on the repertoire of art songs. Life experiences guided her to sing in synagogue choirs in New York and then to study at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, School of Sacred Music (now named the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music). With women still newly accepted into the cantorate, Barak’s career is a model of success as a synagogue musician, singer, and member of the clergy. From 1987 until 2015, she served as Senior Cantor at Congregation Emanu-El in San Francisco, as a highly-trained cantor in full command of the artistic repertoire deemed suitable for a large and distinguished synagogue, and musical director of an organist and professional choir performing complex compositions. She easily combines her passion to sing with the variety of styles in Jewish music and expresses her creativity in Yiddish, Ladino, and Israeli music as well Classical Reform music.

Beyond the synagogue, Roz Barak sings to appreciative audiences in Europe and Israel in a variety of musical settings. In the pages to follow, her life and career unfold in a profound story of commitment to Judaism and the singing of Jewish music with love, humor, and unquestioned devotion.
INTRODUCTION

by Robert L. Denebeim

Roslyn Barak is a preeminent cantor whose vocal and intellectual powers today are undiminished, whose national and international reputation continues to grow, and whose musicianship continues to flourish. While some oral histories are recorded too late, this one—recorded in Cantor Barak’s sixty-fifth year—comes right on time.

For more than thirty years, Roslyn Barak has served as a cantor in Reform Judaism, primarily at Congregation Emanu-El in San Francisco. It is easy to anticipate that this record of her cantorial career will be of interest to those studying Jewish musicology in the Bay Area and to anyone who wishes to better understand how music is selected and utilized to enhance religious and spiritual experience.

The cantor’s repertoire is ancient and modern, traditional and innovative, multi-lingual and geographically diverse. She is responsible for presenting appropriate and inspiring music to the congregation, directing the choir, organist, and other musicians and unifying and leading the congregation in the music of prayer. She must teach Hebrew and prepare children and adults to chant from the Torah and haftarah. She must teach cantillation, with emphasis on singing scripture in a resonant head tone with the same careful enunciation that she herself brings to each and every vocal performance. Religiously, the role of cantor requires total devotion to service, especially the ability to unify the congregation and lead worship. In terms of secular learning, the role involves mastery of music theory and technique, as well as refinement of the skills of vocal performance and musical direction.

Cantor Barak excels in all these areas and more. Her voice is clear, sweet, and strong. Clergy and musicians relish their opportunities to collaborate with her. The regulars adore her. Those who are less religiously inclined find new appreciation from the wide spectrum of her work. A brilliant woman, she knows Hebrew, Yiddish, and Ladino, and outside the synagogue can also sing well in French, German, and other European languages.

The medium of a cantor is sound waves—the making of beautiful vibrations in praise of the Holy One. Within the vibrations our prayers, blessings, and scriptures are transmitted. Her voice is transcendent.

High emotions of love, peace, joy, and awe are evoked together with the stimulation of imagination and wonder, contemplation, and reverence. Prayer is intended to be performed with concentration and devotion; therefore, the cantor must be a spiritual guide—a facilitator of kavanah (deep intention)—through melodies and rhythms, tropes, psalms, and hymns that connect the individual with God, and the Jewish community, with its history and identity. Cantor Barak has devoted her life to spiritually uplifting the congregations she serves. Hers is a great, an ecstatic gift in service of God.
INTERVIEW HISTORY

by Basya Petnick, Interviewer

An interview history is a little piece of meta-historiography—a history of a history—intended to help the reader understand the interviews more completely. Typically, this piece discloses the purpose of the interviews, the relationship between the participants, and any special circumstances that developed during the interviewing, transcription, and editing processes.

Twenty-five years ago I came to the field of oral history from the worlds of literature, journalism, and creative writing, along with a lifelong interest in religious and spiritual matters. No doubt these interests affected the questions I asked and did not ask in the interviews. Mostly, however, my attention was focused on the task that oral history does so well, and that is to add to the existing record of a subject area, either through topical interviews with a number of people, or through the lens of one person’s full-life history.

Preparation

Research for this project was fairly extensive, and yet I barely scratched the surface of topics of significance and importance to Cantor Roslyn Barak: cantorial music, opera, art song, Broadway musicals, vocal training, performance art, and more. The works of authors Judah M. Cohen and Jeffrey Summit, along with the interviews of cantors generously posted online by ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin for his *Chosen Voices* project, were particularly informative. Background interviews with Rabbi Jonathan Slater of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, and talks and secondary interviews with Rabbi Stephen Pearce, Rabbi Helen Cohn, and many former and present Emanu-El congregants, especially Barbara J. Rolph and Robert Denebeim, were helpful and inspiring.

My questions ranged from the informed to the naïve. In addition to keeping in my mind the need to add to existing historical records, I tried to keep in mind the many types of people—Jewish and non-Jewish, Congregation Emanu-El members and non-members, and relatives and non-relatives—who might read this oral history and to anticipate their interests and concerns.

Relationship

Like an ethnographer, the oral historian “occupies a position of structural location and observes with a particular angle of vision.” Age, gender, race, insider/outsider position, social status, and other factors are well known to affect the conduct and outcomes of oral history interviews.

Prior to the start of this project, I knew Cantor Barak only in a formal way, as “my cantor,” the senior cantor of Congregation Emanu-El in San Francisco, where I had been a member for twenty years.

We had at once no prior relationship and yet at the same time an extremely important relationship. Hers was the voice that called me to prayer on Shabbat morning and evening and on the High Days. Hers was the voice that chanted the *Kaddish* for my family members on their yahrzeit year after year; hers was the voice by the bed and gravesides of ill and grief-stricken
friends. Hers was the voice on my _anshei mitzvah_ (adult bat mitzvah) study tapes from which I learned the prayers and blessings and, of course, my Torah portion: I knew well Cantor Barak’s every breath and phrasing of our basic Reform Jewish liturgy, which I had learned not just for my _ansheit mitzvah_ but for a lifetime. Her prayers literally had become my prayers and, without specifically intending it, we had entered into a unique relationship that only a cantor/teacher and congregant/student may have: that of praying the liturgy together syllable-by-syllable, breath-by-breath. I was in awe of her vocal ability and had great respect for her as a senior member of the Emanu-El clergy, but because of her congenial personality I felt at home and comfortable with her during the interviews and enjoyed talking together in our profession roles of oral historian and cantor.

Over the years, I had attended many services led by Cantor Barak, and while seated in one or another of Emanu-El’s three sanctuaries, I watched the world around her change. As the decades passed, the popularity of organs, choirs, complex music, and a cantor-dominated service declined, while the contemporary, guitar-led, arms-around-my-neighbor, clapping and communal singing of all the prayers by everyone gained popularity and momentum. In time it became clear that camp-style participatory singing was _a fait accompli_. Naturally I did what all oral historians must do: take digital recorder in hand, research and write questions, and begin to document significant change.

In the spring of 2013, I invited Cantor to discuss the prospect of recording her oral history. During our luncheon, I talked with her about why I thought her oral history would be valuable to researchers, congregants, Jewish music enthusiasts, and other cantors now and in the years to come. She seemed comfortable with the idea of being interviewed extensively; she asked key questions and attentively listened to responses.

**Interviewing**

To interview Cantor Barak repeatedly is to be included in the soft whirl of friendly chaos that gently surrounds her life. In her world, there is always someone coming in or going out, someone calling on the house phone or cell phone, or someone at the door. There may be an old New York friend or a temple in Texas calling, but regardless, all Barak household activities are punctuated by barking, or by someone telling the dog to please stop barking. And there are always dogs. In the course of about a year—the time it took to complete the twelve interviews—Figaro, a disturbed Jack Russell terrier mix, and a psycho poodle named Elmo came and went, until finally, Schatzy, a little schnauzer, came to stay.

There was a continual stream of repairs and repairmen that joined our quiet time together. First it was a serious water leak, and then something that involved the garage, and then a crew with chain saws arrived to limb the trees right outside her house. At some point, jackhammers became included in the interviews, as well as tree branches of varying sizes, and pieces of the neighbors’ concrete that had to be removed in an enormous truck with the loudest backup warning sounds I have ever heard. During the interviews, there were instructions to be given, cautions to be issued, and dog walkers and friends to be greeted. There were potential renters and their agents to see the house before Cantor’s impending temporary move to Dallas. There were doorbells ringing and someone stopping by for just a minute. There was often something lost … often something that is “here … someplace.” There was David Olick, her partner, a lawyer working at home.
There were iPads and iPhones and a 50” TV screen and laughter and apologies for all of it, and generous offerings of fruit and tea and other lovely gifts. If all this were happening in my quiet, almost monastic life, I might go nuts, but at Cantor’s, I enjoyed it. To her it was normal, and it became normal to me, too. I especially enjoyed her dogs and missed them when they were returned to the dog rescue because they were quirky and refused to be trained.

A curious thing about the interviews I conducted in her home is that she didn’t face me. During the recording sessions, she would sit in her leather recliner, stare into space and talk, while I sat on a nearby couch to the side of her. This meant that no nonverbal clues were possible: I couldn’t see her face and she couldn’t see mine. I couldn’t see her eyes to know the effects of my questions or learn if there were any disconnects between her facial expression and her verbal responses. Further, to redirect the flow of her narrative from that position required that I make a serious verbal incursion into the swift tide of thoughts and memories that formed her responses. I did not try to change this arrangement, however, because she seemed so utterly comfortable with it, and I deeply knew that the interviews would be more fruitful if she were completely comfortable. I report this simply as a description of “what the body did” during the interviews; it goes to the somatic side of the story, the part the reader cannot see.

To continue recounting factors that influenced the interviews: we are both Jews, and therefore, an important influence in our interviews was the prohibition in Jewish life against lashon hara, which might be understood as harmful speech. More than just avoiding gossip, this practice requires not speaking in a harmful way on any occasion. But talking and not talking about people is tricky, because from the start, one’s life is full of people—we cannot even live without being connected to people—but, when mindful of lashon hara, there is often little that can be said about others, as much as we might like to say more. It’s similar to how we use or do not use humor: one wants to tell a joke because it expresses a truth and seems funny, but it might be hurtful to in-laws or the elderly or a certain ethnic group, so we don’t do it: on a good day we resist the impulse.

Another inhibition that slightly constrained the interviews was the “gag order” that had been imposed on Emanu-El clergy by their board of directors during the days when Rabbi Robert Kirschner was stepping down from his position as senior rabbi. While Cantor Barak was deeply affected by his demise, she spoke cautiously about that incident, and I did not probe for more.

Also missing from the interviews are questions about what is like to be a female cantor. Not many women like to be asked what it is like to be a female this or a female that. The question can be unintentionally diminishing, and I could not bring myself to ask it. I had learned at the outset of my research that soon after Cantor Barak began her training at Hebrew Union College, the program filled with female cantorial candidates. As it has been said, “Female cantors are so ubiquitous now that some people are even surprised to see males in the role!” I also knew that during her many years at Emanu-El, she had served on a staff of clergy that included several female rabbis, a female lay cantorial singer, and strong women on the board of a temple where women are notably powerful and gender not a major issue. Of course, it was not always this way. Long before women were invested as cantors, Julie Rosewald, a lay cantorial soloist with a beautiful, classically trained voice, led the prayers and directed the music at Congregation Emanu-El for nine years. Sadly, she has been left out of important histories written about Emanu-El and is not included in the photo history posted on the wall outside of two of the three
sanctuaries. From the start, Cantor Barak reminded me to be sure to include Julie Rosewald in this oral history; subsequently, we discussed Rosewald’s contribution in the interviews below.

What I wanted to know and could not find out through either my interviews or research is: what is the effect on the hearer of the female voice as opposed to the male voice? What is the difference in the impact of the sound of the liturgy sung by a female in the soprano/alto range from the impact of the liturgy sung in the male tenor/baritone range? This question is difficult both to formulate and to answer.

**Technology and Editing**

The interviews were recorded on a studio-quality digital recorder in WAV format and then converted to MP3. Some of the one-hour or longer interview sessions created several shorter recordings that were then combined by me to form one continuous interview recording to represent the session. Nothing was deleted in the process of combining the recordings, and nothing of substance was spoken in the interim between one recording and another.

Many Yiddish and Hebrew words appear in the text. I mostly used Leo Rosten’s *Joys of Yiddish* for Yiddish spellings and the *URJ* [Union of Reform Judaism] Transliteration Guidelines for Hebrew words, except for words also found in an English dictionary. *The Chicago Manual of Style* was used to edit the text, and the Name Authority of the US Library of Congress was used as the final authority for the spelling of many foreign names.

In sum, my role as an oral historian was to provide a safe and comfortable platform to discuss some of the changes in Reform Jewish music and worship, to contribute another chapter to the ongoing history of Congregation Emanu-El, founded more than one hundred and fifty years ago, and to record and preserve the many textures and colors of the rich fabric of the life of Roslyn Barak, Emanu-El cantor, singer, teacher, counselor, mother, daughter, partner, friend, and mensch. It was a task I thoroughly enjoyed.
Interview 1: November 3, 2014

Basya Petnick: Why not start at the beginning and tell us how you came into this world and what was going on.

Roslyn Barak: I was born in March 1950, just after midnight, a caesarean-section baby, at Brooklyn Jewish Hospital. We lived in a fourth-floor walk-up in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, which is now a neighborhood that is a rather odd mixture of Caribbean, West Indian, and Chasidic populations, but it was a very Jewish neighborhood when I was growing up. It was just one of those not-many-trees-on-the-street neighborhoods, a sort of brick and concrete kind of atmosphere. There were some row houses down the block, and I had some friends who lived in a detached townhouse; mostly these were my two friends, Ann and Nora Elkind. We played together a lot. I had a couple of friends in the building where we lived, but I was not as close to them. My father’s parents, Leah and Zelig Yanower, lived across the street. I was often there with them.

I went to public school. When I was five, I went to kindergarten a few blocks down.

We lived on Empire Boulevard, which was parallel to, but about a half mile from Eastern Parkway, which was the famous boulevard in Brooklyn. Eastern Parkway had a lot of synagogues and, again, rows of very old brownstone houses.

If I remember correctly, the original Loehmann’s department store was on Eastern Parkway. I could be wrong, but I remember my mom taking me there as a kid and it was all art deco. My mother was a Loehmann’s fanatic—she was a clothing fanatic. And I, too, loved going to Loehmann’s. The bathrooms were all black marble and gilt. There were gilded lions outside the store, and I used to sit on top of them. It was very exciting, actually. It was an interesting environment.

We lived not far from Ebbets Field. My dad [Harry Jhunever] was a big Dodgers fan.

I was fairly confined to my little world in the building, which I thought was massive.

Petnick: How big was the building where you lived?

Barak: (Laughs) It was quite small. I went back to see it a couple of years ago and I went, “What happened?” It used to look huge to me. Huge! I was surprised.

Petnick: How many apartments, would you say?
Barak: As I recall, there were about six apartments on each floor. We were on the fourth floor, which was the top floor, so we had the roof access. It was like our balcony. We would go up to the roof—the fourth-floor people always were up on the roof, sunning themselves. The fourth-floor people were considered the most eccentric people in the building because we were the musical people. On our floor everyone had a piano, and everyone was a little crazy. I mean, I remember having fun with the neighbors and all that.

There were a few kids in the building, but I don’t remember being particularly close to them. My mom was not very friendly with their parents. She played mahjongg here and there with them, but that was about it; it was not a real good relationship. My mother must have gone to work part-time, because I remember she hired somebody to pick me up at lunchtime and bring me to the luncheonette across the street from our house. I would always order a BLT (bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich). That was what I had for lunch, and to this day if you say the word “lunch,” all I think of is a BLT, which is not an easy thing for a cantor to be proud of or admit, but there you have it: that’s what I ate. Then the kid would bring me back to school.

My mother must have worked from morning until the early afternoon, and then she was home again by the time I came home from school. My mother always worked. She was a working person. That was it.

Petnick: What was your mother’s name?

Barak: Anne. She had several last names. Her birth certificate has the last name of her birth father, whom she did not know well, so she adopted one of my grandmother’s names and Americanized it. After she married my dad, her name became Jhunever. She had been married once before my father, but I did not know that until I was fifteen—all these little family secret kinds of things.

Petnick: What are some of the stories told about you when you were little?

The stories that were mostly told about me were about things I would say and the kind of words I made up. I always remember them talking about when I saw an airplane for the first time: I looked up in the sky and said, “zotflit.” I have no idea where that came from, but that is what I called an airplane. I think maybe I was a reincarnated German or something, I don’t know. I know I used to say “telefifi” and “telefofo” for “television” and “telephone.” I know that my aunt Marion [Pierce] was “Mary Mimi.” The first word I ever uttered was “pretty,” because my mom would comb my hair and say “pretty,” when she was combing my hair. So the first word I said was “pretty, pretty, pretty, pretty.” She was upset that I did not say “mommy.”

I know that once when I was a little kid, one of my neighbors said, “Rozie, you are very boisterous,” and I said, “No, I’m ‘girlstrous’.” I know also that I
once looked at one of my neighbors and said, “You’re obnoxious.” I know I was very verbal. My mom said I started talking at eight months old. She also said there was one day that she got up, and I was in my crib, and she went out for a while, and when she came back I was out of my crib. She yelled at my dad and said, “Why did you take her out of the crib?” And my dad said, “I did not take her out of the crib.” To this day she has no idea of how I got out of the crib. Obviously, I was dying to get out of there, and I was trying to escape. I only know what people have said. I don’t remember a lot of this, but I know the stories.

The stories I always heard growing up were about how my great-grandmother immigrated to this country in the early 1900s after World War I, and that she had had a nice life in Istanbul. Her husband was a ship’s chandler.

Petnick: What is a chandler?

Barak: He used to outfit ships with all kinds of equipment and other things. He made a nice living.

My great-grandmother was a typical Sephardic woman. She had a lovely life. During World War I my great-grandfather [Jack Surojon] was conscripted into the Turkish Army or went with the ships … I don’t know what … but anyway, my great-grandmother wanted to get some protection for him, to get him out of the war. This is a crazy story. I don’t know if it is true, but she was waiting in line at the employment office—I don’t know if she was looking for a job to make some money; I don’t know what that was about—and she had my grandmother with her. Now don’t forget, she had like nine or ten kids. My grandmother—I called her Nana—her name was Lucy [Feld]—was a beautiful child and much more mature looking than her years. She might have been eight or nine years old at the time. She was blonde and blue-eyed, and she was [noticed]. They offered my great-grandmother to take her daughter to the palace where an exiled sultan’s son was forming his harem, or something like that … I don’t know what. My great-grandmother thought this would help her get my grandfather back from the war. She figured it was temporary, and she shipped Nana off to a palace, and Nana became the favorite of a prince.

Nana remembered it, and she told me about it. She said the prince had her in his room every night. He would put her on his lap, and stroke her hair, and tell her stories, and show her all his wives and all the jewels in the palace. I said, “Nana, how did you deal with that?” She said, “I did not stop crying from the moment I went there until the moment, two weeks later, when they sent me home, or I ran home.”

I don’t know what she experienced as a child—I don’t know what the real story was— but she did remember that vividly, so it did happen. If the guy was a pervert … I don’t know. He did have adult wives, as well. Nana once
mentioned the Dolmabahçe Palace. I have been to that palace, and it is incredible, but I don’t know if that is the palace where my grandmother was taken as a child or not. She might have been taken to a different palace. But being taken away to a palace was part of her childhood memories.

When my uncle Victor [Surojon] moved to the United States he sent back a picture of himself wearing a uniform with epaulettes. He said, “The streets are paved with gold. You need to come here.” My great-grandmother gushed, “Oh, he’s a general in the army. We’re moving!” My other uncles and my aunts and my grandmother all went with my great-grandmother to the States. When my great-grandmother got to the States, she found out that my uncle was a doorman. Surprise, surprise! This was right after World War I … maybe 1918 … or 1919 … sometime around then.

Uncle Victor was a doorman in a hotel. She [my great-grandmother] had left Turkey and schlepped the whole family to the States, and she was miserable. They lived down on the Lower East Side in a cold-water flat on Rivington Street. My great-grandmother expressed great distress at having left Turkey and wanted to go back, but my grandmother—who was now about twelve or thirteen—ran off with a seventeen-year-old boy and got married so that she would not have to leave the United States. She married this Sam Knippel and got pregnant, and my mom was born a year later. All this happened down in lower Manhattan, probably the Lower East Side.

Petnick: Your mother grew up in all that Jewish Lower East Side tumult?

Barak: Now, this is crazy: my mother thought that Nana, who was her mother, was her sister. And she thought that her grandmother (my great-grandmother Rebecca) was her mother. She told me that when she was five years old she found out who her real mother was from a kid on the street. I have since learned that this story may not be totally true, that she actually found out from someone else earlier … or whatever … I don’t know because my mom had a way of changing the facts.

Petnick: Tell me more about the character and personality of your mom.

Barak: My mom was, I think, a person with some rage issues and some narcissistic issues.

Petnick: What do you mean?

Barak: I think she was basically focused on herself and what she wanted to do. My aunt said to me once that my mother should not have been a mom—she should have just been a career gal. She loved to work. She was very smart, and had circumstances been better—had there not been world wars and the Great Depression—she might have gone to a real college and really been a
force. She had to go to Central Commercial High School. She had to become a secretary. She was a great secretary, and she did work her way up but—

Petnick: Was she bitter about that, or did she take it in stride? What would you say?

Barak: I think she was just very frustrated all her life, but I would not say “bitter.” I think if there was any bitterness it was probably that she never really fulfilled a lot of things, especially in her personal life, as well as her professional life. I think she was just a product of her time. I always sensed anger and frustration. But there was always a lot of liveliness in her and passion and indignation and all sorts of things. I mean, I really think she would have been a very effective lawyer or judge or something—maybe not, maybe too emotional for that—but she would have been something really—some kind of activist person or something—if she had had the education. She was self-educated; she read a lot and she was very, very savvy.

Petnick: You were an only child?

Barak: I am an only child.

Petnick: Describe your home—in terms of objects and things that were in your home.

Barak: There were books … and there was a piano. My mom went to work for Fisher Radio, so she collected all sorts of stereo equipment. She researched it thoroughly: we had AR-2A speakers and a Tandberg tape deck, and we had a Thorens turntable. She had the Fisher receiver. She would read Hi-Fi magazine and then go out and buy scads of recordings, LPs, and all different kinds of music.

I would say I was around eleven or twelve when she started in on this big collection of recordings. She started playing them all weekend long, and we would listen to every type of music you could possibly imagine: symphonies, operas, Broadway musicals, folk songs, popular songs, everything. Everything. The house was constantly, constantly, constantly filled with music. She got into electronic music. We were listening to Edgard Varèse, Ionisation—I mean crazy stuff that I was like, “What the heck did you buy here?” But we had fun. We had a lot of fun.

Petnick: What a wonderful palate of musical experience she created for you.

Barak: It was amazing, yes. I just heard from an old friend, Ann Barbara Fern, who told me that I was very musical from a very young age. My next-door neighbor had a piano, and this friend was their daughter. She started taking piano lessons and said she would teach me the melodies on the piano. I picked them up right away. I once went to a piano studio with her. She was auditioning for a school to take piano lessons. I played for them, and they
wanted me—they were interested in training me. I mean, I love to sing, and I remember singing as a kid.

Petnick: When did you first become aware that you were a musical person and that you had a good singing voice?

Barak: I was shy, but when I sang to myself, I knew I had a little vibrato and that I had a little voice. I had the two friends down the block I mentioned earlier, Ann and Nora Elkind, whose father could make records. He had a little machine, and he made a record of us singing “Faith, Hope and Charity.” At first I was kind of shy about it, but because it was not in front of a lot of people, I let loose, and I had a voice.

Petnick: That’s great. You made your first record when you were—

Barak: Five. (Laughter) But I don’t know where that recording is. I have no idea where that is. I found Ann and Nora on Facebook and we communicated a little. I did not keep up with them, but they were my first little friends.

Petnick: You talked to me once before about your father, and you said that he was a very quiet man. Tell us your father’s full name and the name of his father and so on going back as far as you know.

Barak: My dad, Harry Jhunever, was not well educated. He was born in 1915 and grew up during the Depression. He went to work in the garment district. I don’t know that much about [his] relatives beyond my grandparents. I have a cousin in Florida who knows more about that side of the family. My paternal grandmother, Leah Yanower, came from a little shtetl called Ciechanóv in Poland, and my grandfather’s family came from Makov, slightly north of Warsaw. I always heard they were cousins. My grandmother had eight or nine brothers who all went to England. I know nothing about my grandfather’s family. I have never heard any stories. My father had two sisters—one older, one younger.

Petnick: So these were your aunts—were you close with them? What were their first names?

Barak: Mamie was the younger one. She lived in Queens, in a different section than we did. She had two children and was divorced. She had a husband I never liked much. He was strange. They got divorced, and she came to live with us for a while, and that was a disaster. It was. My mom did not take to my father’s family much. My other aunt, Rosie [Rose Glauberman], was a lovely lady and married to a man who owned a garment factory. He made suede and leather coats. They were well-heeled, and they lived in the Five Towns, Hewlett Harbor area. We would go out there and pay homage to the rich folks. They had a large house and two kids, my cousins, Lloyd and Carol.
Glauberman. Lloyd tortured me. He was very, very bullying. I still have trouble even acknowledging that he exists. His sister, Carol, is a doll—she is wonderful. I clung to her when I visited their house because my cousin Lloyd was so nasty to me—he was just so awful to me—taunting me about my weight. They had issues in that family about weight, and I was always uncomfortable going there. Still, we had to go once a month and visit the wealthy family.

My dad always felt like he was a failure. We had wealthy relatives—one on his side and then my mom had a brother-in-law who was president of ABC TV—so that was another vehicle for my dad’s admiration. When we went there he would be all excited. He just kind of transferred, I guess, a lot of his wishes and desires on people who had more than he did. He was very conscious that he could not be a great material provider.

The spelling of my father’s name, Jhunever … the “Jh” came from Ellis Island. I have no idea where that spelling came from. I do not know why my grandparents are Yanower and my dad is Jhunever. It was all very strange.

When my grandparents first came here they lived in Willimantic, Connecticut for a while, and my grandfather was a tailor or something. Then they came to New York. I don’t really know the whole story. I never sat down with them to learn all of this. My mom said that she thinks my grandfather won a bet or something and got passage to America from England, and that he and my grandmother first were in England and then left. There is still family in England and all the brothers …

**Petnick:** Where?

As far as I know, [in the greater London area called] Golders Green. And my grandmother’s brothers became butchers in Whitechapel. I can’t find them, though, because the whole family changed their names from Rubutkin to Roberts. I don’t know how to find these people unless I put an ad in the paper or something.

**Petnick:** “Roberts” in England would be hard to find. Tell me about you and your dad, and what kind of relationship you had together and some memories of him.

**Barak:** My dad reminded me a little of Jack Benny. He sort of looked like Benny, and he had a great—kind of a goofy—sense of humor. He would say things like, “You eat this—a hundred years—you live long.” Things like that. He liked the Yogi Berra stuff, and he had an easy laugh. He could have been a happy guy, I think, if he had more in life.

**Petnick:** What did he do? What was his job?
Barak: I remember a place called Bellco Fabrics, where he would cut and match taffeta. It was a taffeta house, and they would take orders for taffeta from the dress houses. He could match colors and would fill the orders and cut the yardage and all that. That was what he did. I think he made a decent living.

We were not rich, for sure. We were not even that comfortable, but we had a car; we had an apartment. I did not have my own room. We lived in one-bedroom apartments until I was fifteen.

Petnick: Where did you sleep?

Barak: I slept in the living room until I was fifteen. I did not have my own room, except in Brooklyn when I was a baby.

Petnick: How old were you when you moved from Brooklyn to Queens?

Barak: Six.

Petnick: I want to hear more about Brooklyn, if you will. When you say a “Jewish neighborhood,” what were the elements of the neighborhood that made it “Jewish,” other than being close to relatives?

Barak: I wish I could tell you that, but all I know is my grandparents were very Jewish and kosher. Except for the BLTs, everything I knew there was Jewish. I didn’t know anybody who was not Jewish in the neighborhood. That’s all I know.

Petnick: So they kept kosher?

Barak: My grandparents, not my mom. My mom stopped keeping kosher after I was born.

Petnick: And around you—I think we talked about this once before—about the stores closing on the High Holidays and—

Barak: Oh, yes. That was part of growing up. That was it. That was just a fact of life.

Petnick: That’s what I would like for you to describe. Think back, because so much of it is gone today. Would you please describe what you remember of the Jewishness of your neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Queens?

Barak: It was a very natural, organic thing. Everybody around me was Jewish. Yet, when you went out into the wider city you mingled with all the other people who came from their neighborhoods. You always knew your identity in New York because you lived in a little ghetto with your people. And then you would go out during the day and work with all other kinds of people and
absorb their culture. I remember African Americans working in the garment center who could speak Yiddish, because they were elevator operators and they were taught Yiddish. They knew more Yiddish than I did. Everybody sort of absorbed everything from one another. Yet, you knew who you were. You had your identity. It was really solid. I knew I was a Jew. We were not religious.

My grandparents, though, were quintessential Polish Jews, with accents. Complete. Everything. I would walk into the house, the first thing out of my grandmother’s mouth is, “You want to eat something? What have I got? I got chicken soup. I got chicken soup. Chicken soup. And I have strawberries with cream. What do you want to eat?” [Spoken with accent] And my father would say, “Luza—luza—luza,” which means, “Leave her alone.” But never mind, the food would start coming out of the refrigerator, and I would be sitting at the table, and I would have the chicken soup, the strawberries … you know, I had to have everything.

Petnick: Was she the person who was most responsible for overfeeding you?

Barak: No, everybody was overfeeding me. I was always overfed. Everybody was always eating. And if it was not the chicken soup on the Ashkenazi side, it was my other grandmother who was always with the stuffed tomatoes and the string beans in tomato sauce. That was the Sephardic side. And always Spanish rice. I was not deprived of any [food] experience, including Chinese food, Italian food, everything. We did it all. Food was … it was all about food.

Petnick: Why do you think that was?

Barak: (Sigh) I don’t know. Everybody talks about how the generation that grew up during the Depression compensated for it later. If you did not have a tendency to gain weight, you were lucky, but unfortunately, I did.

Petnick: When did you start to gain extra weight?

Barak: I was a chubby child from the time I was maybe five or six. I was keenly aware that I had a “chubbiness.” It became a problem. When I was eleven and in the fifth grade, the school nurse called me out of class every week for half an hour or so. My teacher wanted to know why I was being called out of class and he had to be told that I was getting a lecture on not being fat. I was the one kid called out of class once a week to be told, “You don’t want to be a fat child.”

But nobody gave me any tools. Nobody told me how not to be a fat child. I was always being fed, and I loved food. By then my proclivities were well solidified: I was a sugar and carb addict, and no one tried to train me differently.
We had doctors in the neighborhood with which you did not have to make an appointment. They had diet pills they were giving out, and you could just walk in, take a number, and sit down. They were little pink pills. Who knew what I was taking? I did not know I was taking amphetamines. I was climbing the walls. I started losing a little bit of weight, but then they reduced the dosage because I was so hyper. I was thirteen when my mom took me to those doctors. I was in junior high. But my weight was always kind of creeping up again, and by age fifteen I had put the weight back on. I always just felt big even though I was not a big person. I was a short person, but I felt big.

The one thing that gave me confidence and kept me going in school was that I became very funny. I was always making jokes and cutting up. And my music—I was heavily involved with music and a music teacher and singing in the choirs and singing solos and everything and learning a lot. That just really gave me a passion.

Petnick: What was your music teacher’s name?

Barak: Mr. Williams [Hampton S.]. In seventh grade I was put in the advanced placement class. They had two types of advanced: they had one where you would skip a grade and go from seventh to ninth grade, and they also had a program in which you could take advanced studies in grades seven, eight, and nine. Luckily, I had the three-year program, so I was able to spend a lot of time in Mr. Williams’ music class.

I had already skipped third grade. I was a good reader. I was good at language skills. I was bad at math. I have no spatial abilities, no real visual abilities. My strengths lie in language and music. On the basis of my reading tests, they let me pass through to the fourth grade from second grade. I had a second-grade teacher, who really loved me. And my mother was always fighting for me—always running to school and saying, “What do you mean you are not going to skip my daughter? Give her another test.”

She was always going in and fighting. I guess my mother was living through me in some ways—making sure I would have everything she did not have. But she was also abusive. I grew up with a lot of mixed stuff.

Petnick: Do you want to say more about that, or you don’t want to say more about that? It is up to you.

Barak: I don’t remember it. I do remember some of it, but not the really, really bad stuff. She was out of control a lot.

Petnick: Would she become angry or … when you say “out of control” …

Barak: Yes. She would fly off the handle, and she would get physical.
Petnick: She would hit you?

Barak: A friend of mine wrote to me this morning, “Your mom would beat the shit out of you.” I don’t remember it. However, my aunt also told me the same thing. I did not necessarily believe my aunt, and now I do. It was a problem. Yes, it was a problem. And my dad was too scared of her to come to my defense. Apparently, he would just stand in the corner crying, which is what has been described to me. He would just go in the corner and cry. He did not know how to handle it. Yes. For all I know (laughs), she had her problems.

Petnick: So your grandmother’s house must have been a safe place from your—

Barak: Yes. I went to my Nana’s house a lot. She lived in the building, as did my other aunt, my mother’s half-sister. It was great. I went there almost every day after school because my mom was not home yet. I would spend a lot of time with my Nana all the time. She was sunshine. She was the—

Petnick: Did she have pet names for you? What did she call you?

Barak: It is funny—I think she called me “Bijou.” And I think that’s why I named my previous dog “Bijou.” I was trying to find a name for the dog and on the way to Sacramento to pick the dog up, I remember thinking repeatedly, “What am I going to name this dog?” All of a sudden this voice came into my head going, “Hello! Bijou.” and I went, “Nana, thanks.” The dog’s name was Bijou [“jewel”] because of that.

I studied French in junior high school, and she used to like to speak some French with me. She was great. She could speak—

Petnick: I’ve heard you sing in French. You have a nice accent.

Barak: Oh, thank you. She spoke eight languages. She was amazing. She had studied at the French School in Turkey. That’s where the Jewish kids studied.

Petnick: Eight languages!

Barak: Yes, she spoke a lot of languages, which saved her life at one point. She got into a little bit of a scuffle with an auto accident, and they were going to kill her, but then she spoke Italian, and it was an Italian neighborhood, so she got out of it. (Laughter) That was an odd story, too. Oh, I’ve got crazy stories in my family.

Petnick: What would you say were some of the closely held values of your family?
Barak: Aside from just really strong emphasis on Jewish identity and Jewish peoplehood, and calling everybody anti-Semites, I don’t remember much about values—except there was a lot of value on loyalty.

Petnick: Family loyalty?

Barak: Loyalty. Yes, absolutely. Sticking up for everybody in your family and making sure you never talk against anybody to anybody else. I don’t really remember much of that. Everybody was too busy making a living.

Petnick: Do you remember some expressions that either your mother and/or your father used repeatedly? Those are often indicators of values.

Barak: I remember a couple of Ladino things like “Guai de mi! My grandmother would say whenever she would be upset. It means, like, “Woe is me,” and like, “Oy vey.” She would go, “Guai de mi” meaning, “What a pity,” sort of. Then she would say “hija de la madre, hija de la madre,” whenever she wanted to express some sort of affection. In Ladino that means “daughter of your mother,” and it is like an affectionate term. Nana would call me “khanumeh,” which meant “princess.” Khanumeh. Those words I remember in Ladino. From my other side of the family all I remember is “luza—luza—luza”—“Leave her alone.” I don’t remember a whole lot.

My grandfather was a sweet, sweet man and my grandmother was a nice housewife, a good woman. My cousin Corey [Breier] was insanely in love with my grandmother. He adored her because she took care of his mother. To this day, he blesses my grandparents. He knew more of their story than I did.

Petnick: Except for your weight issue, did you feel comfortable with yourself in other ways? Give us a feeling for your inner development.

Barak: I was insecure. I was frightened of answering a question in class. I would never raise my hand, and I wanted to because I was kind of competitive.

Petnick: And smart?

Barak: I was a competitive person. I think I was smart, but I did not know that. I was in a classroom with a bunch of Jewish kids, especially boys, and they took over. I was a romantic type. I was always into boys from the time I was five years old. All I wanted was a boyfriend.

Petnick: How old were you when you had your first boyfriend?

Barak: There was a boy that lived in my building named Eric [Jacobs], and I had a crush on Eric. His father died when he was about four. He died right in the street. He had a heart attack. Then Eric’s mom moved away with her two kids,
and I never saw him again. But-but-but-when I was at the High School of Music and Art, in my senior year, a kid came into the cafeteria selling Christmas cards that he had designed. He said, “Do you want to buy some Christmas cards?” I went, “I’m Jewish.” He said, “Don’t you have any Christian friends?” I said, “No, I only have Jewish friends.” He said, “All right.” So he went off. Then the next day I saw him standing outside the school, and I said, “Did you sell your cards?” and he said, “Yes, I did pretty well.” I said, “Good, are you going home—where do you live?” He said, “Brooklyn.” I said, “Oh, I used to live in Brooklyn. Which part of Brooklyn do you live in?” He said, “Don’t laugh, it’s Flatbush.” I said, “Oh, I’m not laughing—I used to live in Crown Heights.” He said, “I used to live in Crown Heights.” I said, “Yeah, me too.” I said, “I lived on Empire Boulevard.” He said, “Me, too.” I said, “I used to live at 672 Empire Boulevard.” He said, “That was my old address.”

He was Eric! And I was Rozie!

And we are still close, close friends. In fact, every time I go to New York, I see him. We were the ones who went to the building together two years ago with [my current partner] David [Olick]. I said, “Eric, this building is so small.” He said, “I know.”

We thought it was such a big building, but it was tiny.

Petnick: That is the most wonderful story!

Barak: It was incredible. He became a well-known celebrity photographer in New York for several years. He took that photo of me that is up on the wall in the temple, where there is a photo history of the clergy and presidents of Emanu-El. He took my Facebook photo, too. Not only does he take the photo, but he does your makeup and your hair and everything. He is amazing. He is a wonderful guy.

Petnick: I want to ask you again about Music and Art, the famous high school. But before we go on to high school, is there anything else from your childhood—think for a minute—that you want to include in your verbal portrait of that early time?

Barak: I went to junior high for those three years, and I started to develop more of my personality. At that point, I definitely began knowing that music was my path. Mr. Williams nurtured me and prepared me for music at our high school.

Petnick: How did you get accepted to the High School of Music and Art?
Barak: I had to take an audition. I had only studied piano with Mr. Williams for six months, and I was already playing a Mozart sonata. In order for him to teach me piano, he first needed me to play, so I learned the first movement of the Moonlight Sonata on my own. I had taken lessons when I was about six, but they had not worked out, so I had taught myself.

Petnick: When did you start reading music?

Barak: I don’t remember. I just knew I could read music. I think I could read music because I was singing in the choir at school, so I could read music. I don’t remember where I first learned how to read music. I think it was from junior high.

Petnick: It was almost second nature?

Barak: I might have known some stuff from when I was six, or whenever my mom gave me some lessons, but that did not work out. We always had a piano in the house so—

Petnick: You took your audition in piano, not vocal performance, at Music and Art?

No. I wanted to be in the vocal program, but as part of that audition they would have you sing, they would have you do rhythm exercises, they might have you sight read a little, possibly.

I played a little Mozart sonata and they asked, “How long have you been playing?” I said, “Six months,” and they were floored, completely floored. My rhythm was completely correct, at least for the exam. I sang a little Italian aria for them, which I studied with Mr. Williams, and I blew them away. I remember being called down to the office at my junior high school and being told that I got into Music and Art. I was flying. I was in heaven.

Petnick: Tell me more about your school.

Barak: New York had a system of specialized high schools, and there were two schools in Manhattan that specialized in performing arts: one was called Music and Art and the other was called Performing Arts. Other specialized schools were The Bronx High School of Science and Stuyvesant and Brooklyn Tech, and [there was] a school for any kind of specific path you wanted to follow. Each school provided a full range of academics, but you focused in one special area in which you were particularly talented. There was also Art and Design, which was only an arts school; there was Fashion Industries High School, etc.

My school, Music and Art, was one of the oldest. It was up on a hill in Harlem, 135th Street and Convent Avenue, which was not considered the best
neighborhood in the world at the time. There was a lot of opposition from my family to my going, but my mother fought and said, “She’s going.” This was because she wanted to go, and she never got to go. I started there in 1964 and graduated in 1967.

I took four subway trains each way back and forth. It was quite a schlep. I took every academic subject: math, science, and the whole deal … French … but the whole first half of the day was devoted to music subjects. I took vocal music classes. There were electives, and I could take conducting or composing or any instrument. I took violin for one year, and I took composing another year. There was chorus, there was sight singing, dictation, and all that sort of thing. We had all those classes first thing in the morning, and then in the afternoon we would have academics.

Each year we had two big concerts called the semi-annuals. Each year we would have big choir and orchestra concerts; it was amazing. We had an art exhibition because the students in the other half of the school were artists. My school was both music and art, so there was also a visual arts component of the school. I saw things in that school I did not think were possible—just the creativity and the talent and the happiness in that school. The joy was amazing! We still get together from my class. We love each other. We are so bonded from the experience of that school. It was the best three years of my life.

The other school, Performing Arts, is where they had dancers and actors and also instrumentalists. Academically, it was not held as high. That is the high school that the movie *Fame* was based on. These two schools—Music and Art and Performing Arts—are now combined and are called the LaGuardia High School of the Arts. When we have our reunions both schools attend and have their reunions.

Petnick: You once mentioned to me that you went to school with Janis Ian—

Barak: Yes, Janis Ian used to sit in front of me in senior chorus. I never spoke a word to her. I wrote her a little thing on Facebook. She did not answer me back. I guess she did not get it, or whatever. But, yes, I sat behind her. She had just recorded “Society’s Child,” and she was a celebrity at the school, but nobody bothered her. She did not look too interested in anybody, so we didn’t talk to her.

Petnick: It sounds like you had a fabulous time there, all the creative energy and—

Barak: Oh, god, yes. Yes. It was a complete dream.

We received a message a few weeks ago that the principal now wants to sign on to all this core curriculum crap and reduce the emphasis on the arts. And I’m saying, “You do that, and you don’t get my money anymore.” That’s it. I
have been supporting that school regularly. I pay my dues to the alumni association, and I give them a lot of money because I really believe in that place. That’s it—that’s where my heart is. I don’t give anything to my conservatory because I’m still pissed at them for some things. (Laughter)

But high school was an amazing memory, an amazing time. Even with the four trains. I also sang in the All-City High School Chorus during that time.

Petnick: You had to take four trains—

Barak: From where I lived I had to get the GG train to Roosevelt Avenue, the E train—right, the E train—I don’t remember where I took that to. And then I had to take an A train, and then I had to take a local train. You had to change trains four times. It took about an hour to get to school. I would leave at seven in the morning and get there by eight and then would not leave until about five in the afternoon. I spent the whole day there and it was heaven. Heaven!

Petnick: How would you say that it changed you or helped you grow up and begin to realize your life as an artist?

Barak: The experience was one of being with smart, happy, talented kids … and everybody was kind of an oddball in their own way, and everybody accepted everybody. You were not going through that usual high school trauma of being in a clique or not being accepted or feeling like an outsider or anything. I never felt like that. I felt like we were all in this little special soup together. We were all special and we felt it.

Petnick: And you had something positive and creative to focus on.

Barak: Yes. And the teachers were so classy, and they were kind—they were kind and giving and joyful. Even the ones who had a little cynical thing about them had some kind of passion. They were urbane. They were smart. For instance, Ira Marienhoff was a history teacher. History was one of my worst subjects, but I wanted to be in his classroom because it was just so delightful to be in his presence. Then, of course, Hunter High School snapped him up because he was such a great teacher. My violin teacher, Isidore Russ, was the sweetest man. I mean just sweet, sweet, sweet, just sugar. I adored him. And my vocal music teachers? They were wonderful. There was a little lady named Mrs. Landecker—Mildred Landecker—and she was about four feet tall. She could not sit at the piano; she had to stand at the piano and play. She had little tiny fingers, and she would play Schubert “Die Post.” (Singing) She would leave out half the notes but she played it fabulously. (Laughter) She could play anything. It was amazing. And we would sing … (laughter and singing) … we would be singing Schubert lieder. From age fourteen I was singing material from the Italian songs and arias book, the Schubert lieder, the French
chansons, everything. We would move up in the scale; every year we would get another composer that we would study, like Brahms or …

By the time I got to conservatory my voice teacher said, “Let’s do this song,” and I said, “I’ve sung through that whole book already.” He said, “How do you know this stuff?” I said, “I went to Music and Art.” [We] learned all the repertoire.

Petnick: The conservatory is where you went to college after—

Barak: Yes, that was for more formal musical training—to really fashion you as a diva.

(Laughter)

Petnick: They did a good job on you, and that’s what we will talk about some interview soon. From the High School of Music and Art you went to—

Barak: Manhattan School of Music. I had auditioned for Mannes College of Music in Manhattan, and Mannes accepted me but did not offer me a scholarship. Manhattan School of Music offered a half scholarship, so I went with it and found my voice teacher. That was what happened.
Interview 2: December 15, 2014

Petnick: Let’s start today with your particular way of seeing things. You told me in our preliminary discussions that your feelings are often prominent in your perceptions and memories. Tell us about how you experience things.

Barak: I have often felt that I have this wealth of knowledge that comes from … where I don’t know. I do read a lot of headlines and [spend a lot of time on the] Internet. I skim when I have the New York Times. I don’t know if it is just that I absorb a lot of stuff, or I just seem to know a lot of stuff. There is this intuitiveness I have always felt I have had. A lot of my opinions are based on that intuitive stuff, but then when I talk to people, I find that they actually listen to me and often agree with me. There seems to be stuff that I just know.

I remember having a strange feeling sometimes about certain people, and I could not tell why. But I kind of avoided them, and I think in the end I was proven right. I can’t really go into specific names, but I think the people I felt odd about, I was right about. There is a feeling I always had that I know stuff, and I don’t know where I know it comes from.

Petnick: Does this go back to when you were a kid?

Barak: Yes.

Petnick: Was this ability with you all your life?

Barak: Yes. I think it is quite funny because I see it in my son, Danny. He seems to have inherited whatever that is, or he has got it on his own. He has an intuitive sensitivity about things and he says things sometimes that just wipe me out because he just knows: he knows.

My smartness, or my brightness, did not manifest itself in school. I was not a good student. There were things I just was good at—like English or languages or music—but there were things that I could not handle. I could not handle memorizing dates in history. I could not handle math, and I had to get tutors. I just was not great at really applying myself. I don’t even remember doing a lot of homework … I just was sort of an average student, and yet I got through everything. But for some reason I always perceived things and understood things, which is why I think I kind of glommed on to psychology at some point. I could intuitively sense relationships between people even though they were trying to keep them a secret. I knew who was dating whom. I could totally sense subtle things that people would do. I could read the subtle looks, the subtle body movements. It was just something I had—just this weird talent—and I never really paid much attention to it as a kid, but as I grew older, I came to realize that it was acute.
Petnick: Sometimes you are speaking of this in the past tense, so I wonder if this is something that you used to have or something that you still do have?

Barak: No, I still have it. It is a sensitivity thing—it is a sensitivity. I don’t have visual and spatial abilities at all, but I have aural abilities. I can hear, and I can perceive, and I can tell in a person’s voice what is going on. I can see in their movements what is going on. I can understand relationships. I don’t always do it right at the beginning, but I read people really well once I know them a little bit better.

My mother was a mistrusting person. She tried to instill mistrust in me but I resisted. There are people I think I automatically react to, and I shy away from [them] because I perceive them as overbearing and as users. And then there are people that I don’t see their bad qualities right away. It takes me time—it takes me a long time. I might have to get slapped on the wrist a few times to understand what is going on, but I resist mistrust. Maybe that makes me naïve, but I prefer to live that way. I prefer to see the good in people first.

Petnick: Recently you told me about an IQ test you once were given, and you used it as an example of how you see things compared to the way that other people may see things or how certain things are measured.

Barak: Right. Again, it is a sensitivity issue. Once … I was once given a test in second grade… and my mother went to school to fight for me. There was a program to skip kids from the second to the fourth grade, and in second grade we were tested. Honestly, I probably should not have been skipped to the fourth grade because I missed a whole year of long division, and I never quite got that right. (Laughs) My teacher was this a sweetheart of a lady, Miss Sullivan. She was very Irish, and all the kids in the class were Jewish. On March 17th the whole class [room] was decorated in green with “Erin go Bragh” [Ireland Forever] all over the place and Irish jigs on the phonograph. It was hysterical. I loved her. I adored her. I just thought she was the most wonderful person. And she loved me. I think she tapped into my sensitivity, and I tapped into her just sunny, wonderful nature. She was so positive and upbeat, and I was not used to that.

Petnick: Coming from a Jewish family. (Laughter)

Barak: We kind of hit it off. She had to test me when my mother went to school and told her, “You are going to re-test my daughter: she should be skipped to the fourth grade.” My mother was always fighting. Miss Sullivan gave me another test (I’ll never forget this), and I’m taking the test, and I’m going along, and she is kind of looking over and seeing my answers and things. Then we get to this one question. The question was “Which of these goes the fastest?” There were three pictures: one picture was an airplane, one picture was a car, and the other picture was a bicycle. So I start circling the bicycle because in my world
you are riding a bicycle, and the wind is whipping in your face, and it is going very, very fast, and you control it. And she looked at me with this horror on her face, and she kind of nodded like “no, no,” and I looked at her and … So I pointed to the car, and she said, (imitating sound), you know, “no,” and so I circled the airplane, and she kind of sighed. I said to myself, “Boy, that’s weird. You look up into the sky, and you see an airplane, and it is going really slow. You ride in a car and it does not go that fast all the time—sometimes it is going slow, sometimes it goes a little faster but you are not in control, you are asleep in the back seat. But a bicycle … you are on a bicycle, and you are whizzing, whizzing, whizzing so fast.” So that is how I perceived things. I probably should not have skipped to the fourth grade, but I guess it was meant to be. Miss Sullivan was my little angel. I do understand the cultural bias of IQ tests because of that one question; I felt like there was a bias here. How would you know about airplanes unless you had either been told about them or read about them or knew about them by flying in one? How would you know that they go five hundred miles an hour? As a seven-year-old kid who had never been in an airplane, you would not know that. I thought that was a really dumb question, and, when I think about it, not appropriate.

Petnick: It is so interesting to me how you look at it. I can completely understand each thing that you said—what your experience was of the speed of each one of these vehicles, and how the bicycle you whizzed around on seemed so fast.

Barak: Yes, and the academic world does not seem to have any use for people like me. (Laughs) It is not in the curriculum to take kids’ feelings, sensitivities, intuitive stuff, and kinetic experiences into account. It is just not built into the curriculum.

Petnick: No, the body is left out, and it is all very left-brain, whereas you seem more right-brain—

Barak: I am right-brain, yes.

Petnick: We are a left-brained culture where science, math, and logic rule.

Barak: Yes, kids are being totally pigeonholed into that, and whole aspects of their gestalt are being left out. There is no sensitivity to what kids feel. I think nowadays it is better—better than what it used to be. But certainly without junior high, my music teacher, and without Music and Art, the wonderful high school I attended, I think I would have been not a very successful person today.

Petnick: Because the High School of Music and Art supported who you actually were?

Barak: Whenever I’m in New York I try to contact my Music and Art friends, and we all say the same thing all the time: it was the happiest place on earth. It was a
place where when you are a high school kid, and you are fourteen years old, and you are going through all these … hormonal things and everything else. To feel that kind of uplift … that you are with kids who are like you … who are odd, strange, creative, vulnerable … and [to feel] you are in a safe place. Even the teachers were like that. The teachers were so amazingly kind and generous. You never felt unsafe. Unbelievable. We are still all getting together online, and we get together in person and have dinner and go out and do things.

Petnick: But now let’s go back to your childhood in Brooklyn and Queens and to when you were a little younger and to your early experiences of going to shul with your father. I would like to ask you to describe impressionistically, in your own way, what you remember about your religious experiences.

Barak: I did not go to shul with my father often. He went to Orthodox synagogues that were boring. They just sat around davenning, and really there was no place for me. I would pop in at a High Holy Day service. I went to my own synagogue.

Petnick: I want to know more about that, but first, for people who might read this and don’t know what davenning is, let’s stop right here so you can tell us about it.

Barak: Davenning is praying, but it is praying in Hebrew. It is more or less just sort of a running murmuring … a chanting-murmuring thing. (Imitating sounds) It sounds like that, and if you don’t know what is going on, you are kind of bored. You are bored, and you are alienated. It is not a pleasant experience for people who do not grow up in that tradition and have that in their background. At least where my father went—a Young Israel kind of situation—it was extremely uninteresting.

I was sent to an Orthodox Hebrew school in my neighborhood. At the age of eleven—I had been a Brownie Scout for a while, which was kind of stupid, we did not do anything—my mother sat me down and said, “Do you want to be a Girl Scout now, or do you want to go to Hebrew school?” And, honestly, I was so bored with the Brownies, and I did not like green, so I did not want to become a Girl Scout. (Laughter) I did not want to wear a green uniform after a brown uniform, so I said, “Okay, Hebrew school.” The Orthodox synagogue in my neighborhood was modern Orthodox. It was tolerable. They got me a private tutor for a while, because I had to learn to read Hebrew. The kids already knew [how] to read Hebrew, and I was going to go into the fifth grade or something of Hebrew school. So, they hired this Israeli guy. He came to my house once a week, and he gave me Hebrew lessons. I picked it up fairly quickly. I learned how to write. I learned block letters, and I learned script. Because he was Israeli he taught me Sephardic pronunciation, which was unusual then. But then I would go to the synagogue and class, and they would
all be reading with an Ashkenazi pronunciation, so I had to kind of switch my brain to that.

Petnick: What are some of the outstanding differences?

Barak: There are really only two little quirks: one letter which is a (vocalizing sound “t”) in Sephardic pronunciation can often become a (vocalizing sound soft “s”) in Ashkenazi. When you recite the Kaddish, the prayer for the dead, in Sephardic pronunciation you say “yitgadal,” and in Ashkenazi it would be “yisgadol.” Also, there is one vowel that in Sephardi is always a short “ah” sound, and in Ashkenazi it is always an “aw” sound. Really there are only two little quirks, and it was not hard to adjust. Again, since I am half-Ashkenazi, half-Sephardi, I feel like here I am on the fence looking at both sides.

Petnick: So you celebrated Shabbat and Shabbes?

Barak: Yes, Shabbes and Shabbat. And I had Yiddish, and I had Ladino, and I had all these things. I felt like Judy Collins, (sings) “I’ve looked at life from both sides now.” I always had these two things going on—always something—one thing and the other thing. That may be one reason why I was so sensitive … I don’t know, but perhaps because I was always observing differences.

Petnick: Okay, first tell us more about your Hebrew school, and then we will talk about Yiddish and Ladino.

Barak: I was put in a class with pubescent boys who were soon to have their bar mitzvahs—and they were bored silly and were throwing airplanes—and with girls who were pretty good girls. It was not an unpleasant experience at all. I enjoyed it. I enjoyed sitting and reading Chumash, which is the biblical text written with vowels so that you can actually read and learn the biblical text. But I did not really know very much, and it seemed dry.

Rabbi Feifer [full name not known] was our teacher, and he was so sweet. The people were very sweet, but I don’t think they had a real handle on education—on how to really teach—how to make things come alive. It was a little dry—it was a little boring—but I enjoyed the company; it was nice being with other Jewish kids and schmoozing with them.

I would go to services, and I would sit up in the women’s section because that is what you did. I did not mind—it seemed natural. It is not like I had any feminist rage going on during all of this; I was just sitting in the balcony.

Petnick: So these years were pre-feminist rage.

Barak: Very pre-feminist.
Petnick: You did not know that you had rage?

Barak: I did have one occurrence. I did have one experience that I will tell you about. It was the sixties. The kids could tell that I was not being raised in an Orthodox house, and they kind of ribbed me once or twice, but the rabbi always came to my defense; he was kind.

We had a lovely music teacher named Albert Weisser. He recognized I could sing and gave me a nice solo to sing at the graduation ceremony. My black music teacher, Mr. Williams, came to my graduation ceremony with a big yarmulke on his head. It was all very sweet. My whole family came. We never had bat mitzvah—girls did not get bat mitzvah [in the Orthodox tradition]—but we had this nice graduation, and the girls were prominent. The valedictorian was a girl. And the salutatorian, I think; that was me. Also, I got to sing [the Yiddish song] “Rojhinkes mit Mandelen” [“Raisins and Almonds”], so it was sweet.

Petnick: I’ve heard you sing it on your Jewish Soul album. Beautiful.

Next question: Were you called by your Hebrew name?

Barak: Yes, they called me “Shoshana.” They gave me the name Shoshana in Hebrew school.

Petnick: What does that mean?

Barak: It means “rose.” Some sources say it means lily, but my name was Roslyn, so they gave me the name Shoshana. Names have always been a crazy thing in my life; names are just like … very confusing. In fact, a lot of the corrections I will have to make for you [on the manuscript] will have to do with names. (Laughs)

But, anyway, yes, I had a nice three years in that school. I used to love going to the services and kind of sitting in the balcony and looking at the boys in their suits and tallises and yarmulkes. To this day, I think that is the sexiest look in the world; it turns me on. Every time I see a man in a suit with a tallis and a yarmulke, forget about it—I think it is fantastic.

I took part in a few of the things in that synagogue and Hebrew school, but I was not really part of that community because my parents were not members. I did not feel a sense of community there because it really was that families were coming together there every Saturday morning, and the kids were running up and down the aisles, and a little kid would sing at the end, and there was always—it was a lovely shul actually—and there was a fine chazzan, a fine cantor.
His name was Abraham Schwerd. I did not know him; I did not say two words to him. But he was always right there in the center—because the cantor stood in the center—and I did not really know what I was listening to, but I knew that this nice guy with a nice, beautiful (sound of telephone ringing), beautiful tenor voice was leading the prayers, and everybody else was going (imitating sounds), davenning. And that was it. It was the sound of the place that I remember the most.

(Sound of voice on telephone answering machine in background)

I did not know what I was listening to so much because I had not grown up in that place. But I knew there was a unique sound in that shul—that there was the voice of a cantor, a beautiful voice; that there were people murmuring underneath; that there were kids running up and down the aisle; that there were women chattering away in the balcony; that there were men turning around and going “tsk, tsk, tsk” to the women up in the balcony. There was a sense that everything was alive. It was all alive! And that people were [doing the services] at their own pace, and that there was real praying going on, that there was something really happening there. I don’t know if it was a spiritual thing, but it was a Jewish thing. It was Jewish expression. And it was authentic. The high point for me was always the little boy at the end. They always had a little boy who would go in front of … I don’t remember if he was sitting on the bimah or in the amud, the place where the cantor would stand, but always a little boy at the end would sing Anim Zemirot [“I shall sing sweet songs”] and the congregation would sing the responses. It was like this whole communal ending to the service that was joyful, a beautiful closure. I just thought, “Wow.” I did not know what was going on, but I felt something. I was grateful that I had that to refer to later in life. I had no intention of becoming a cantor; there was never a thought [of that] in my mind. This [being a cantor] was something a man did, and you just did not think about it.

The idea that I could at least refer back to what a real authentic Jewish prayer experience sounded like was really … I am so grateful that I had that [Orthodox synagogue] experience because so many people now don’t. Most of the cantorial students, being trained in Reform tradition, have never heard this. They have no idea what a [Orthodox] synagogue sounds like or sounded like. That is sad to me.

Petnick: I love your description of all the different parts and pieces that were going on. Try a little harder to remember what your religious feeling was.

Barak: My inner religious feeling was God was just a fact. There were times when I was I was around twelve years old, that I would question. I would say, “Oh … what is this all about anyway? I don’t know if there is a God,” and blah, blah,
blah. But I never really took that seriously. My feelings were always [that] there is something out there.

Petnick: Did you feel close to God when you were a kid? Did you talk to God?

Barak: I don’t remember that. The time I started to really decide that there was a God was when … My grandparents on my father’s side were mildly Orthodox; they were kosher, but they prayed in a Conservative synagogue only because they wanted to sit together. My dad went to shul every day. After his father died he went to a little tiny shibol—a little tiny hole-in-the-wall synagogue in my neighborhood with a weird rabbi.

But my mother’s side of the family (the Sephardics) were superstitious people. My mom wore garlic around her neck a lot. They lived in the Bronx for a while, and there was a woman there named Mrs. Farqi, who was the Bronx Sephardic community psychic. She was the lady who everybody took her kids to. The woman would give you a rundown on what the kid was going to go through in life. I had an aunt who had a nervous breakdown, when she was a younger woman she just went stark raving mad. She was my mother’s aunt—my great-aunt.

The family took her to Mrs. Farqi, and Mrs. Farqi said, “Leave her with me for two weeks.” In those days you put somebody in a mental institution, and you didn’t know if you would ever see her again. But they took her to Mrs. Farqi, and she took her and kept her for two weeks. Supposedly there was some praying, and there were some other women involved. They took her to the ocean, and two weeks later she was completely cured and never had another episode again. My mother said that her sister was taken to Mrs. Farqi, and Mrs. Farqi started to yell, and scream, and wail, and say, “Don’t marry the man you think you are going to marry. Don’t marry him! Don’t marry him! He is going to be terrible.” And my aunt went and married the guy and lived a miserable life of abuse for many, many years.

My mother took me to her when I was two. When I was two, she brought me to Mrs. Farqi for an evaluation, I guess. Mrs. Farqi looked at me and said, “Protect this one.” My mother did not know what she meant, so she started overprotecting. She looked at me with a strange look and said, “Protect this one.” I had these stories in my life for years. When I was seventeen or eighteen, I went on my own to a psychic I heard about. I had a reading, and everything happened as he said.

Petnick: Like what?

Barak: What I do remember vividly was he was a young guy. His mother had been psychic, and he was also psychic. He said to me, “You are going to meet this boy,” and he described him. I remember being at conservatory one day, and
this guy from my class got up and was doing some conducting, and I looked at him and I went, “I think that’s him.” He fit the description, and it turned out to be a big relationship in my life. He is now a well-known conductor, and I should have married him but I didn’t.

(Comments on noise)

Barak: Then I said, “Boy, this stuff really works,” so I made it a practice every few years to check in with a psychic or two. I was really quite astounded at some of the things that happened when I did, and some of the things they said to me. Then I had an occurrence that completely … Well, it did not hit me right then what happened to me, but it hit me years later as I looked back, and I remembered it.

My life was kind of saved by a supernatural force, and I did not think about it much. But when I do think about it, it freaks me out a little, and yet at the same time I feel protected. I had been told by psychics, “Oh, you have all kinds of spirits around you, and they are kind of funny, and they wear funny hats.” And blah, blah, blah. Weird things.

When I was at conservatory in the work-study program, I would go in on Saturday because they had a prep division, and I would work in the kitchen. I was a dishwasher at Manhattan School of Music, when they were still in the East Harlem building, before they moved to the old Juilliard building near Columbia University. One Saturday I had gotten up early, and I was tired, and I was washing the dishes, and I was kind of grumpy, and I was feeling really exhausted, and I wanted to go home, which I had to do on the subway. My train came, and I put my foot inside. I don’t remember if I put it inside or what happened, but one of my legs went down between the train and the platform, and I was crumpled. This was early afternoon on a Saturday and nobody was around. I just was lying there in a heap, and I was too tired to move. I guess I whimpered or something—I don’t know—because I did not know if the train was going to take off. Luckily the train stayed there for a while, but I was in a heap with my leg caught. I looked around and didn’t see anybody. All of a sudden I was pulled up. I WAS PULLED UP. I was standing on the platform vertical. I looked around, and I went, “Thank you,” and there was nobody there. So … I don’t know, maybe somebody was there and walked away, but I did not see the person. I was just pulled up. Years later I looked back on that and went, “Whoa. Holy cow.”

Hindsight is 20/20. I honestly did not know what to do with it, except that things like that, and little coincidences all through my life (crazy coincidental things that would happen), and little psychic experiences—strange little messages and things that I could tell in advance—would come to me. It is not developed. I could not open a shop and say, “I’m going to read you,” but there
are just little things that happen all the time in my life that kind of make me feel like there is something going on.

After my mother died—and I had had some experiences with being in touch with her in her own way, and with other things, too—[and with] some other things that happened, I said, “There is a spiritual component to this earth, and we can’t see it. It is not a dimension that we can see. It is a mystery, and there have to be some mysteries in life. You can’t know everything.” I applaud people who want to know everything. They go for it, and they search, and they journey, but there is also a point where you have to say, “I surrender.” That is the point that makes you humble and makes you realize, “Maybe I don’t have to know everything. Maybe I have to maintain some innocence and some purity.”

Petnick: That is one of the many things I love about Albert Einstein. He knew so much and yet he also had a great sense of mystery and wonder about what he did not know.

Barak: Yes, I fear that people are losing that, mainly because of technology and everything that is happening so fast all the time—and more stuff and more stuff and more stuff that is being thrown at us. [There is] a lack of ability to concentrate anymore. There’s a [lack of] an ability to go inside and be quiet.

I have always gotten my jollies through music. I listen to music in a way that affects me physically. I have been listening to it since I was a little girl, all different kinds of music. That is the one thing that I can turn to at any time for any kind of inner peace or any kind of expression—to release expression of whatever I need to release; it is like the emotion. I just feel it is a miracle. I feel music for me is a miracle; it is a miraculous thing. I know that other people experience it differently, and that is what I love about it because I think everybody is such an individual, and everybody experiences music differently. I know that I experience it not only on an emotional level and a spiritual level but also a physical level; it does something to my body.

Petnick: Can you tell us more about that?

Barak: Well … I could talk about romantic and classical and how I feel, but, honestly, the most dramatic example of that is listening to minimalist music, which I hate. I hate it because it makes me sick. It makes me literally sick. I attended an event in New York that was a music thing, but it was like a crazy music … I don’t even know what it was, but it was commercial stuff. I walked into a big hall, and it was a bunch of visual images of, like, graphic geometric images moving around on a screen, and Philip Glass music was being played. It was snippets of this and that and repetitions. I was sitting there, and I remember feeling like, “I’ve got to get out of this room now because it is rearranging my DNA.” I felt physically just like, “This is not normal—this is
not healthy for me—this is making me ill,” and then I had to leave. I know that sound can do that to me: sound is prominent in my life. I know when I’m taking a massage and my masseur says, “Okay, what kind of music?” He already knows he can’t play regular music for me because I get too distracted, and I will have physical reactions.

Barak: I say, “Just put on the Tibetan bowls and the bells.” If I had the bowls and the bells, that is what sort of just puts me in the space. That way I can totally relax.

Petnick: And that feels good to you—to your body, the vibrations—

Barak: Yes, the vibrations feel good. Yes, I love that; yes, that is good. When I take massages it is always the Tibetan bowls and bells—it can’t be anything else.

Petnick: Do you have any sense of being able to hear music with other parts of your body—your spine, your legs …?

Barak: I can’t say I know what that is, no.

I just know that I hear music in my ear fairly constantly, and it is always harmony; there is never just a melody. There is always full harmony. I can’t even sing just a melody most of the time; I have to be in harmony all the time. It is a strange thing. I hear every chord. If I am singing a song, and someone is playing for me, and they don’t play the right chord I just get physically—“No, that’s not the chord. We’ve got to change chords. No, no, it sounds like …” I mean I have to do that—I have to get the right chord. Honestly, I can’t bear to hear the wrong chord. (Laughter) It drives me crazy. It drives me crazy. Yes, I am really attuned to that.

Petnick: How far back does that go?

Barak: Oh, a long time, a long time. My harmonies are intact. My harmonies are my harmonies. The only thing I can tolerate, which is odd—I can tolerate jazzing up the harmonies. I can tolerate jazz harmonies. There was a time I was making my recording, and my pianist got a little playful and started jazzing up a Hebrew song I was singing on the recording—a song I have known for years and the harmonies are very simple. He started putting jazz chords to it. I said, “You know what, I like that, let’s keep it in.” He didn’t, but I could see myself singing to the jazz chords.

Petnick: Is this on your Jewish Soul album?

Barak: Yes, it is “Al Kol Eleh.” It is a famous Naomi Shemer song. He was just like jazzing the chords, and I went, “Yeah, that’s nice—that’s nice.” Because it gives it a whole other feel. It gives it a feel of—there is almost like a more relaxed, more—it’s not intense so much, it is more relaxed. It gives it like a
very, very mellow feel. If you sing a song like that, you can actually make that work—you can make it work. So, I have gotten into jazz.

Petnick: Yiddish songs, at least the ones that I know (and I don’t know many) have kind of a relaxed feeling to them. No?

Barak: Hmm. Yiddish songs? There are different Yiddish songs. There are folk songs in Yiddish, and then there are art songs in Yiddish, and then there are theatre songs in Yiddish. They are very different. The art songs are like singing Schubert or Brahms. The theater songs are like theater songs: [demonstrates by singing] dat, dat, da, da dat, dat da da—that kind of thing. And the folks songs are like anything you would expect, [singing rhythms] ay yai ya ba bah bim bum. They are these little folky songs. And, of course, there are songs in Yiddish for the Holocaust, and songs in Yiddish for all different themes, but some of them have a folky feel, and then some of the folk songs were turned into art songs. The art songs have elaborate accompaniments and more difficult vocal lines to sing and they are for more classically trained singers. The theater songs are [for] theater people and they are fun.

Petnick: What do you like to sing?

Barak: I love them all, but I love art song because that was my training. For me, that is what I glom onto the most because they have a more classical feel, and because they are so exquisitely composed.

Petnick: Would you give some examples?

Barak: Probably the most divine composer of Yiddish art songs is Lazar Weiner—just a master, a master. You feel like you are singing Hugo Wolf or somebody like that. You feel like you are singing real heavy, serious music, and the texts are beautiful: they are profound Yiddish poetry. It is not folky; it is profound stuff. He was a Russian Jew and used some of the best poetry. But there are other famous composers, such as Moses Milner, and their songs are beautiful, so beautiful. I wish I had more repertoire in it. I don’t have as much as I would like, but I know the songs, and they are beautiful. Then I love the theater songs, too. They’re fun. (Sings in Yiddish) They are really fun songs.

Petnick: I’d like to go back to when you were a kid and going to shul. The synagogue that you went to a lot when you went to Hebrew school, what did it look like physically, what was the style of architecture—

Barak: [It was] a brick building. The inside was pretty. It was fine. I think it actually won an award or something, at some point; I heard that once. It just looked very simple to me, but it was nice.

Petnick: And it was modern Orthodox, and did women sit in the back or balcony?
Barak: Women sat in the balcony and on the sides of the bottom floor. There was a partitioned area on either side, on the right and the left, where the women could sit.

[Once when I attended] Torah services I sat on the lower floor with the partition, and a woman broke into the men’s section as they were dancing. She said, “I’m going there,” and I followed her. I just kind of wandered in. I was standing there, and the rabbi was looking down at me, and he did not say anything. I just looked up at him, he looked down at me, and I was just standing there with the men dancing around me. I thought, well, that’s good that he did not reprimand me or make me go back into the women’s section. He just kind of looked at me.

Petnick: This was on Simchat Torah, so explain what kind of holiday that is.

Barak: It is the completion of the cycle of reading Torah. It is the end of the Sukkot holiday. It is the very last day, where everyone basically gets drunk. (Laughter) It is a joyful holiday. They make a lot of circuits around [the synagogue] with the Torahs, and they dance, and it is a fun holiday. We went out into the street and danced. I remember, yes, we danced out on the street.

Petnick: Describe all the components of this holiday for those who might not know these rituals and celebrations.

Barak: Every week in the synagogue we read the Torah—every festival we read the Torah. It [the Torah] is the Pentateuch: the first five books of the Bible. There is a cycle of readings during the year because it is a scroll. You read from the beginning of the scroll to the end of the scroll. Simchat Torah marks the time when we have reached the end of the scroll and when we begin again from the beginning of the scroll. It is a big, joyful event.

Petnick: Did you go to Conservative services with your grandparents or great-grandparents?

Barak: No. [I] never went to a Conservative shul; never went to a Reform shul. I was strictly in the Orthodox world, but not an Orthodox upbringing. We were not an Orthodox family, so I really did not belong there. (Laughs) I remember one of the professors at Hebrew Union College calling it “secular Orthodox.” You ate bacon at home, but the only shul you would go to would be an Orthodox shul. Like that is authentic. That was kind of the way it was.

Petnick: What do you remember about the interplay of the roles between the rabbi and the cantor?

Barak: There was no interplay that I could tell. The rabbi sat on the bimah with the president and a few of the mucky-mucks from the congregation. They all sat
on the bimah. The cantor was in the middle of the aisle in a special place called the amud, which means “the stand.” The reading table was there for the Torah and the cantor would pray from there. He would face the Ark, [Aron Ha Kodesh] where the Torah scrolls are kept. At all times he would face the Ark. There were men on either side of him and the women’s sections on either side of that, and then there was the balcony where the women sat.

Petnick: That position of the cantor creates in a very literal way the feeling of the cantor being the messenger of the congregation?

Barak: In my world (laughs), and in everything I have ever observed in a Conservative or Orthodox synagogue, the cantor leads the service, the cantor leads the worship, the cantor is the voice that is the unifying factor through all the prayers. The rabbi is the scholar. The rabbi sits, the rabbi gets up and makes a sermon, and other people make announcements. That’s how it goes, folks. (Laughter) Honestly, rabbis are the head of the congregation—cantors are the heart. When you pray you are supposed to pray from the heart, not necessarily from your head. To me—I’m sorry, I’m extremely prejudiced on this, and I will say this to my dying breath—it is the cantor who should be leading the worship. The cantor has the artistic sense, the spiritual connection. The cantor is the vessel. The cantor is what is called the sh’liach tzibur, the public messenger, the one who is empowered by a congregation to be a vessel of prayer for everyone in that congregation, especially the ones who cannot pray. That is how it has been recognized throughout the centuries. The nice humble rabbis out there realize that they are to sit and pray along with everybody else and then get up to make a brilliant sermon—and honestly, I, too, need a brilliant sermon, so I’m always looking forward to that part. But to share the bimah with rabbis is very often very, very complicated and distracting for me.

I feel that prayer has a flow. In traditional Judaism there was always the flow between the chazzan (the cantor) and the congregation. There was always kind of a back-and-forth and a going along—just guiding. The cantor was always guiding the prayer. When prayer stopped being chanting in Hebrew and became—in Reform services—readings in English interspersed with musical numbers, then the rabbis got to be on stage. That’s fine, but my view is that there should be one voice leading the congregation, and there should not be the distraction of several voices chiming in all the time. If you really want people to get into a flow of prayer, you need to remove distraction. That is my feeling, and I’m sticking to it. If anybody wants to challenge me on that, fine. But I’m not changing my opinion.

Petnick: The Orthodox synagogue that you went to when you were a kid—people were davenning and reading the prayers rapidly—
Barak: Yes.

Petnick: I attended an Orthodox shul as a child, and what I recall is the murmur of rapid readings in Hebrew, not necessarily in sync with one another—each person reading at their own speed—and then the cantor’s voice rising above the multitude of voices—

Barak: [The cantor’s voice] soars above them, doesn’t sing everything. The cantor has designated parts of the liturgy that he or she comes in on to keep people on track—to lead them through the prayer book in an efficient way, so that nobody gets too far ahead or too far behind or whatever. You keep them going by punctuating certain parts of the liturgy. Then there are places that lend themselves to a little melody, and everybody can join in and sing along. And then there are places where it is back and forth; where it is antiphonal. But there is a respect for the role. The sh’liach tzibur, the cantor, will say, “Come, let us worship: Bar’chu et Adonai ham’vorach. Come, let us bless the Lord,” and the congregation responds “Baruch Adonai ham’vorach l’olam va-ed!” Okay, “Blessed is the Lord,” so that they know what they respond. Nowadays everybody sings everything [the call and the response], and it makes no sense. After a person makes a blessing, the congregation is supposed to say, “Amen.” That’s it. Not everybody should recite the Torah blessings together, because that is an honor that is reserved for a person having an aliya. A person having an aliya gets the honor of coming up and making the blessing, and the congregation is supposed to say, “Amen.” And that is it. It is very, very off-putting to hear everybody singing everything all the time because they are not supposed to, and they don’t know that because they have not been taught. Whenever I have given a liturgy course, or something like that, I try to teach these things. But then when you go into the congregation and nobody is respecting it, you get caught up. So, it is very hard. I kind of like old-time religion. I wish we would go back to the way it was, because there was a dynamic—there was an elegant and authentic dynamic that is being totally lost.

Petnick: I understand the dynamic as you described it in the old synagogue in New York, but do you ever experience a kind of flow and dynamic in a Reform service?

Barak: I think that it is doable. It depends on whom you work with, really. I respected classical Reform when it was very formal, and when everybody knew exactly what their roles were. If the rabbi was going to do the readings in English, and the cantor was going to sing, that’s fine, but there was also how they read the English and how they allowed people to read along or not read along. I like the formality of classical Reform, and when it became more informal—when it got kind of loose as it is today … when the readings are being supplanted by
little—what they call *iyyunim*—little explanations which turn into little teaching sessions. Again, I find that irritating. I find it disruptive of prayer. It is like, “Okay, these people have been sitting here for twenty years, you don’t have to teach them every” … “And now we sing a song of freedom.” It doesn’t make sense to me.

There are a lot of things being omitted that are upsetting me, too. The prayer book is called a *siddur* for a reason: it is an order. The prayers are ordered for a reason, and you have themes. (The word *siddur* is related to *seder*, which means order.) There are themes to prayers, and they are put there for a reason. After you get finished with preliminary blessings, you then have a whole section called “The *Sh’mah* and Its Blessings,” and there are themes. The themes are Creation, Revelation, and Redemption. You can’t leave out Revelation—you can’t do that. You can’t just leave out the prayer about Revelation and then go right to the *Sh’mah*; it does not make sense. You can’t talk about creation, you can’t read the *Maariv Aravim* prayer, which is the creation of night and then go straight to *Sh’mah*. It makes no sense.

**Petnick:** Which prayer is in the middle?

**Barak:** *Ahavat Olam*, which is all about God showing us love by giving us Torah. And then you recite Torah, you say *Sh’mah*, and then you say *V’ahavata*. You can’t leave out the *V’ahavta*. We have already condensed the prayers down to nothing. The prayers in the traditional prayer book are so much more extensive, and we have already condensed. So now you are chopping off more, and you are leaving out the meat. I’m trying to be cooperative [these last days at Emanu-El], and I’m finding it kind of difficult …

**Petnick:** In the Orthodox service you would have the same prayers, the same basic order of prayers but the prayers are longer.

**Barak:** They are much longer; they are much more extensive. The Reform redactors just cut them up and made them fit our philosophies. [They] took out a lot of references to the Temple and Jerusalem and all that stuff. They just kind of chopped it up.

**Petnick:** My last question for you today would be about Ladino. You have not said much about Ladino music or language.

**Barak:** The Ladino stuff came to me much later. It was a language in my house. My mother and my grandmother spoke Ladino all the time; they did not want me to understand anything. They were always speaking Ladino. But I started to understand. I grasped a lot of the meanings, but I just could not speak it. And then Yiddish was on the other side.
All the music came much later, much later. I really did not dabble in Yiddish or Ladino music until I went to Hebrew Union College, which is where I started picking up all this stuff because nobody really sang [it]. I think my grandmother sang one song; each grandmother sang one song. (Laughter) I never really learned it. It was not part of the culture. My mother was more into classical music or pop or whatever—Broadway—all that stuff. We were totally assimilated, really.
Interview 3: February 13, 2105

Petnick: I would like to return to the chronology of your life story: you graduated from the High School of Music and Art in 1967, and then in what year did you enter Manhattan School of Music?

Barak: Same year.

Petnick: Tell us all about it, where it is in Manhattan, and—

Barak: Manhattan School of Music (MSM) started out in the area of Manhattan known as Spanish Harlem, which was on the Upper East Side, past 96th Street. I think it is still Spanish Harlem; it was a heavily Hispanic section of upper Manhattan. There was a small building there that housed the school. It was a challenge getting there on the subways from where I lived, but I managed. It was an unusual little neighborhood—you did not see a tree, ever. It was a cute little building, easy to negotiate, and we had a fabulous little cafeteria on the top floor, run by a Finnish cook. It was a haimish—a homey—kind of school. It was relaxed, and it was not like Juilliard, where there was a lot of pressure. I had a boyfriend from high school who attended Juilliard, and when I would visit him there, I did [not] like the vibe; it was very, very … it just felt like you were in a pressure cooker; whereas, at Manhattan we were all having a good time hanging out in the cafeteria, just enjoying life.

I really enjoyed the school. I had chosen Manhattan because I thought the vocal department was really one of the best. I had been accepted to Mannes College of Music as well, but they did not offer a scholarship, and Manhattan School gave me a half-scholarship, so it was definitely worth it. At that time tuition was $1200 a year. I paid for it myself: it was six hundred dollars. Boy, it was amazing.

Petnick: Tuition is about $50,000 today.

Barak: It was amazing—a tiny little place—but I got great training. I had a voice teacher, and, first of all, it was worth the six hundred just to be able to look at him once a week. He looked like Gregory Peck. (Laughter) I chose him because the first time he opened the door, when I met him, I went, “Oh, my god! I don’t care if he can teach or not—this guy is gorgeous!” So, I had a ball. I would travel to Central Park West every week and have my lessons with him, or in his studio at the school. He had a wife who was a producer; she produced The Price Is Right on TV, the original The Price Is Right—Beth Hollinger. He had two little sons, and I became a babysitter for them.

Petnick: What was his name?
Barak: Daniel Ferro. He was also a cantor. He was the cantor at Temple Shaaray Tefila, Manhattan for many years. It was sort of a side job for him. I wound up singing there years later in their quartet. They are the congregation that sent me to cantorial school. I have had a life that is rather connected—I have had a lot of connections—and in many ways, it has been interesting. Mr. Ferro was like a father to me. I was attached to him, and he was a superb voice teacher: I got lucky! I got lucky that the best-looking guy I ever saw in my life was also a great voice teacher. (Laughs) You can never tell, you know.

We had a lot of affection for each other, and he was a good teacher. By the time I got to him, I already had a solid repertoire … and even opera, because at the High School of Music and Art we learned all of that. I had three straight years of singing Schubert, Brahms, Wolf, Italian art song, Fauré, Debussy … the French … all the literature … we used to go through all the books and just read all that stuff. I also had a good choral background because I had been in choirs at the High School of Music and Art, and I was in the opera workshops there, too. I had graduated from Music and Art already having a huge body of knowledge of vocal repertoire. By the time I saw Mr. Ferro, he was, “Oh, you know that song, too? Oh, where did you learn that? Oh, my god, you know this, too?” My time with him was mostly spent on vocal technique because he did not really feel the need to coach me, so much. I had an innate musicality, and when I would pick up a piece of music, I just sort of knew how to phrase it. He was always kind of astounded.

Petnick: Did you have any bad vocal habits or difficulties that you had to change or overcome as you went into this more advanced work?

Barak: I had a fairly small voice, a soubrette, which meant you sang the little Mozart maid roles. I was always a maid or something … it was not a large voice. It was a very pretty voice, and I was very, very musical, so people were impressed with my singing. But it was not going to be, I think, ever a major instrument. I probably would have had a nice little career doing all those little soubrette roles. I did do some coloratura stuff. At one point I had high F’s and I sang the “Queen of the Night” aria. I might have been able to capitalize on that, but … I don’t know… that was a lot of work.

(Laughter)

He did not have the same approach to vocal training as, let’s say, Beverly Sills’ teacher, Estelle Liebling, who drilled her constantly on runs and high notes. We had a different approach. That might have seemed like a disadvantage because I probably did have the capacity to be another Beverly Sills at some point, but honestly, opera was not the music I really enjoyed singing anyway. I think in the end what seemed like a liability in my training turned out to be a benefit because I really learned how to sing with much more color and to be
able to connect my registers and have a very smooth sound. The one thing he
did teach me to do beautifully—the one thing I wound up doing very well and
I still do—is I can sing high pianissimos. I just kick right into it. That is a gift
because a lot of people cannot do that. What I cannot do is give an impressive
sound in my upper register or a very dramatic high sound—I never really had
that. I probably could have worked on that and done something … but I really
enjoyed … honestly, I did not want to be an opera singer—that was not my
first love: my first love was art song, and what I really wanted to do was study
all that lieder and art song literature.

I entered many competitions. I liked to work with one accompanist. I love
chamber music—I love singing chamber music, and I was hoping to make a
career in that but, unfortunately, it did not seem like there was a career in it,
especially in this country with all the languages [in which it must be sung.]

The European singers who made a fabulous career [singing art song], Dietrich
Fischer-Dieskau and Elly Ameling, could get away with that in Germany and
Holland and [other European countries], but when it came to the US the
sensibilities had already begun fading for anything with classical music and
foreign language texts. It did not seem like it was a viable career.

Nowadays only people who already have an opera reputation give those
recitals. It is kind of sad. Just because you have a name in opera does not
make you a good art song singer. It makes you a great singer, maybe, but not
necessarily as proficient in the intimacy of the art song. Singing art song is an
intimate art, and I find it helps me a lot in my life as a cantor. It requires the
ability to convey a wide range of emotions on a smaller scale, change feelings
from joy to passion to pathos, and create an intimate space and go inward
without being confined to playing a character.

Petnick: Tell us more about what an art song is?

Barak: An art song is great poetry that was set to music by mostly classical
composers. Nowadays there are even some pop composers that do this—
composers that write serious-but-not-so-serious Broadway musicals and
things like that. There are people today who are composing poetry to song that
is not quite in the pop genre—it is a little more upscale. Back then it was
Schubert and Brahms and Beethoven and Hugo Wolf and Mendelssohn—
those were the Germans. Then there were the French: Debussy and Fauré and
Reynaldo Hahn. They would take these great poems—French poems, German
poems, Italian poems—and set them to classical song. That is an art song.
When you make a recital you usually group them together. I do a group of
French songs, a group of German songs, or a group of songs of one composer;
each tells its own story. You are constantly changing the focus from
something lighthearted to something dramatic to something romantic. You are
always telling a little story; it is a little drama in a four- or five-page song. Some of them are longer than others. There are also Spanish … There is a huge body of this literature, and it is magnificent. These songs are exquisite, and they would touch me. And my voice was more suited to it.

Petnick: Do you have a recording of the performance that you did at Emanu-El in the Music at Meyer series—was it last year or the year before? You did a whole series of art songs there in various languages.

Barak: Yes, I do have it. I listened to it and I was not happy with … maybe it was the quality of the recording or the fact that there was no editing … I don’t know. I think I would rather not use that recording. But the recording I made—my little album, The Jewish Soul, is something I am very happy with. It was professionally produced, which makes a big difference. It really does.

Petnick: Oh, yes, how it is mixed and edited and the recording quality …

Barak: There is really a difference between live performance and recordings as well. I do have a DVD—I could share it with you—of something I did last year; kind of a mini-recital that I gave, and it had a theme. It had a very different compendium of pieces that I chose for the theme.

Petnick: Who headed Manhattan School of Music during your years there?

Barak: George Schick. He was a European conductor, an elegant, aristocratic type of man—a fantastic conductor; [he was] just wonderful, especially [conducting] Mozart. It was a fine place. First, there was John Brownlee, who was an operatic personage. He had sung at the Met; he was a baritone, I believe. He passed away, and then George Schick took over.

When I was there I was heavily focused on my vocal studies, but also I sang a lot of operas while I was there. There was a vibrant opera program at Manhattan. Then the school moved from East Harlem. I was two years in that building. And then, I think in ’69, it moved to the old Juilliard building because Juilliard moved to Lincoln Center. We were up on the Upper West Side surrounded by Jewish Theological, Union Theological, Columbia University, Barnard; it was all—

Petnick: This was in Morningside Heights?

Barak: It was up in Morningside Heights, and it was nice up there. It was very nice. It was also a schlep to get there from Queens, but it was nice.

Petnick: You had had to schlep to Music and Art also, didn’t you?
Barak: That was a huge schlep. Yes, I was schlepping all the time. I was schlepping from Queens all the time—on the subway all the time, on buses all the time. So I was used to it. It was something.

Petnick: Were you considered a mezzo-soprano?

Barak: No, absolutely not! I was considered more of a coloratura, light lyric.

Petnick: Is that still your classification?

Barak: Not really. We call vocal categories by the German word “fach.” What I say now is, “Why fach myself?” (Laughs) I don’t fach myself anymore. I sing what I sing. That’s it. I still have a higher voice—

I’m singing mostly middle range now more than anything else. But I’m not a mezzo, no way; [that’s] not the quality of my voice at all. I can negotiate lower notes for sure now, and I’m older, so my voice has dropped a bit. I do not have the high F anymore. I won a competition by singing “Queen of the Night,” but I do not have that high F anymore.

Petnick: When did it disappear?

Barak: (Laughter) It disappeared a long time ago. Singing as a cantor has dropped my voice because it is just a different … I sing differently … I do not sing the same way … it is very different.

Petnick: In addition to vocal training, did you also study instruments—percussion and/or string instruments?

Barak: You had to take piano. I sort of fudged that one because I had studied piano before, and I just was not in the mood. I was very lazy. I just wanted to sing, so I just stuck with the singing. I also sang chamber music, and a lot of composers would give me their stuff to sing. I had a fun time. I was hanging out with instrumentalists all the time. I had a good time. I was entering a lot of competitions, and I was doing a lot of the operas. It was great. I was busy. I was also working a lot. I had work-study. At one point I had four jobs. I was working at the school in work-study in the extension division; I was working at Carnegie Hall as an usher; I was working at a fabric company part-time; and I was singing at a church. I was constantly working. I needed money.

Petnick: Where did you live?

Barak: Mostly I lived with my parents, but when I was about nineteen, I finally moved out and tried something else and wound up in various places. Nothing ever stuck because you always had roommate problems. But I did live for a while with a model. She worked for Elizabeth Arden, and she took ballet
dance lessons every night. We shared a studio apartment right by Carnegie Hall. That was fun, but that was only several months. Then I moved out to a one-bedroom apartment on the Upper West Side with a crazy soprano. Then I moved in with a boyfriend for a while. I had two other roommates besides the boyfriend. (Laughs) I’m telling you … college years? It was crazy. But I had a good time. I lived with a lot of cockroaches—many, many cockroaches. They were friends. They all had names.

Petnick: (Laughing) You named them! You told me in our first unrecorded preliminary interview that you learned to be a diva at Manhattan School of Music.

Barak: I never thought of myself as a diva. I did not. I do not think I had that DNA. I observed divas, and they fascinated me, and I went to school with them, but I did not think I was such a diva. I thought I was very talented, but I do not think I had the attitude of … like … cutthroat.

Petnick: Tell us about divas—are divas cutthroat?

Barak: Divas are just super-confident people who walk around and kind of expect that they will be loved and adored. (Laughter) I do not think I ever thought that.

Petnick: So you were joking when you said that to me?

Barak: Yes. Look, I always say that tongue-in-cheek. I have to say, yes, I have an ego. But when I sing and when I think about music, I am in total service to the music. That is it. That is all that matters. It is about the music. It is not about me. It is about the music and the conveying of the text. That is what speaks to me. I get upset if I see people singing in a way that I feel is dishonoring the piece or just serving their own …. you know, singing for the high notes. I get kind of irritated with Rossini because it makes no sense to me to be going (demonstrates by singing) constantly, and repeating the words over and over again … and repeating those phrases and those words… I just get bored with it. I kind of want to go on and get to the meat of it— to the message.

Petnick: That brings up a question about how you personally study a piece of music and how you ruminate on it; how you integrate with it and make it your own. Can you talk about that? I’m sure it varies from time-to-time and piece-to-piece but give us some idea.

Barak: I was once in an opera called Il Matrimonio Segreto [The Secret Marriage] by Cimarosa. It was a classical-era piece, a little bit pre-Mozart, but around that time. I thought it was a charming piece because the character was sweet, but it was not profound. I remember working on it with this wonderful Italian guy, Giampaolo Bracali, who was my coach. I would sing, and I would just really be able to phrase it well, and he did not really coach me. What he would say
was … he said, [Italian accent] “You know, when I play Mozart I hear the music, and when I play this I don’t hear so good this music. I don’t really think this is such good music. But when you sing it, you make it music.” (Laughter) He says, [Italian accent] “I can appreciate when you sing.”

It was very sweet. People have told me that many times—that there might be pieces that they didn’t think were that great, but when I would sing them, somehow they would go, “Oh, maybe it is not so terrible.” I’m not quite sure what that is, but I seem to have that as part of whatever it is in my musical being that exists. I do not always know where it comes from—it is just the way I feel it.

Petnick: When you were at school did you get a deeper realization of having this gift of voice? What a huge gift it is! It has made your whole life.

Barak: Yes … yes. And it is so funny because I do not think of that so much. I just keep on singing and have fun and enjoy the music. I have this guy from high school that I connect with occasionally, and he is always saying, “Roz, when you were in high school, oh, my god, we loved you.” And I’m like, “You did?”

Petnick: They loved your voice?

Barak: Yes. “You were one of the greatest there.” I was going, “I was?” I had no idea. I just knew that I was not getting all the recognition. I thought I could sing better than another person, and that person would get the part, and I would go, “Why are they giving that person the part? That person does not sing very well.” That is what I would carry with me. I guess they did not like me as much in high school, but then this guy would say, “You were one of the best. We remember you.” And I’m like, “Wow, I had no idea that people even gave me a second thought in high school.”

Petnick: Were you chosen for important performances at MSM?

Barak: I started out in the choir. They put me in the opera chorus for Thaïs, which was kind of a funny little opera. Then I got to be in Gianni Schicchi and I sang one of the roles in Gianni Schicchi, which was hilarious; one of my favorite operas ever.

Petnick: Who wrote that?

Barak: Puccini. It is part of a trilogy. It is three operas.

Petnick: What are the other two?

Barak: Il Tabarro and Suor Angelica. We did all three. Then I was in The Magic Flute, and I was in L’amico Fritz, but all I said in L’amico Fritz was, “Dinner
is served,” and then there was *Il Matrimonio Segreto* and the *Marriage of Figaro*. And I did rather a curiosity of an opera that had not been done for many years in New York, so it got a lot of press: *Cendrillon*. I got to be the Fairy Godmother, a big coloratura role. I also did a couple of roles in a Ravel opera that was for the preschool division—the early division for the younger kids of Manhattan School, Prep Division. I did *L’Enfant et les Sortilèges*, which is just a magnificent little piece. I played a nightingale, and I played Fire, and I got to kind of whirl around the stage while I was singing coloratura arpeggios. It was a crazy role.

I was reviewed in the *New York Times* a few times for some of these things, which was very sweet. They were good reviews. I always got good reviews. My mother had a big box of my reviews and things and, gosh, I hope I still have it. I think it is somewhere in a closet—I have to look. I have not looked at that stuff for years. It might all be yellowed and I don’t know what.

I also struck up a friendship at that time with a radio personality in New York. I would go to his radio studio and meet opera singers when he would interview them, and I [was] on his program a couple of times. And there was a wonderful professor at Manhattan School of Music that I was also close to, Fritz Kramer. He had been in one of the iterations of the Comedian Harmonists. He grew up in Vienna. I adored him. He would take me with him on his lecture demonstrations, and I would sing. I was very active, very busy, very active, singing—

Petnick: You had four jobs and all this music going on?

Barak: All the music going on—it was crazy! I do not know how I slept at night, honestly. It was nuts. I was taking auditions—I was doing all sorts of things. In ’69 or ’70—I cannot remember—I did a summer out in Cape Cod in Falmouth, Massachusetts with the College Light Opera Company. I did a whole bunch of performances with them. In ’71 and ’72, I was in Santa Fe. I did an apprenticeship at The Santa Fe Opera, and I did a couple of roles there as well. I also gave my senior recital in 1972, which was wonderful. I won some competitions: I entered the Liederkranz competition, Minna Kaufman Ruud Foundation; and I got a Kathryn Long scholarship to the Metropolitan Opera. And I was taking acting lessons with Frank Corsaro. I was very, very busy. And I was singing in churches. Somehow, I never got a synagogue job. I once auditioned for a job for Passover to go up to one of those Catskill Hotels, but I did not get the job. I do not know what went on. Here I was a Jewish person [and] could not get a Jewish job. I was always singing in churches. I know a heck of a lot of masses and requiem, and I love them but it was just kind of weird. I guess that’s why I am so into interfaith relations.
My biggest relationship during the time I was in Manhattan School was with a young conducting student who was also a wonderful pianist. He later went on to be the artistic director of the New York City Opera. He is still a friend; a great guy.

Petnick: We are not saying his name?

Barak: I don’t think so. Let’s keep his privacy. We broke up after I had applied to the Israel National Opera. I sent them a tape, and I did not tell him. They sent me back a telegram that they were going to give me a contract, and I told my boyfriend and he was in shock; he did not realize I had done that. That is when our relationship started to break up, which was sad because he was a wonderful guy. I don’t know why I did not tell him, but I did not. I was focused on career at that time. But it is good now that we have reconnected and we are friends again. He is married and happy, and I am good, so it is nice.

Petnick: You mentioned your senior recital. Before we go further into this let me go back. What did you perform for your senior recital?

Barak: I honestly do not remember the whole program, but I know that I sang some songs of my professor, Fritz Kramer, of whom I just spoke. He gave me a set of his songs, and I did them and they were beautiful. I did some Mozart—I did some Schubert—I do not know if I did Brahms—I did Hugo Wolf, I think—I did Debussy. I think I ended with some American songs, but I cannot remember. It was a nice recital. I wore a funny little dress. I do not know why I wore that dress. It was red-and-white checked. I looked like a tablecloth. (Laughter)

But I was so cute then. I had long blond hair and I had dimples; I was cute, so it looked all right. It just was a weird dress.

Petnick: You said that you had a smaller voice, a softer voice. How did you get the strength in your voice that you—

Barak: It was not soft—it was just not the power you need for a major opera house. I never had that. Had I focused more on coloratura training it would not have mattered because when you sing coloratura your voice goes out like a shot. Those pitches go out very, very clear. It is not a huge sound but it is very focused, and you can pick up on the sound no matter how big the house is. Some of the smallest voices in the world have sung at the Met, but they were coloratura, and they could just really ping right out to the crowd. I did not have that huge sound to really go for the major roles. You must have a pair of pipes that really … I think it is all physiological. It is mostly the way you are built. I knew some really petite people with incredibly large voices. I did not have that power.
What you hear in the Main Sanctuary at Congregation Emanu-El is that I am miked. If I did not have the microphone I probably would not be heard over the organ and the choir. My voice is not that big. My voice can carry in the Main Sanctuary—I can sing, and you will hear me—but once the organ starts to play, it is another kettle of fish.

Petnick: That brings up another question: how much is great singing a person’s natural ability? As you’ve said, there is your physical structure, your physiology. And then there is some sort of natural ability that one would have for musical memory and pitch and so forth. What are the ingredients of great singing?

Barak: I think it is a subjective thing. Some people just want [to create] a great sound, but when they sing you do not feel moved. I hear that all the time. I hear people with lovely voices, but when they sing I am not particularly turned on. I remember a student at Manhattan School of Music with a gorgeous tenor voice, but he could not learn music. It was the biggest waste. Here was this amazing voice with someone who had no musicality. Could not learn it, could not remember it. He barely got through an exam that required learning one piece of music and the easiest piece you could imagine—like a real basic Italian art song. He just had no way of feeling to convey anything.

Physically [he] had a great voice, and I think that occurs a lot with people who have great voices who have no idea how to really sing. Singing is … I think it is a huge.

There are some singers who just sing from their gut and just sing from passion, and you will get the goose bumps, because they really throw it all in. I think we have to look more toward the melding of the intellect and that emotion and that passion, because you need to know a lot of things. You need to dig deep into that text and be able to interpret a text and know how to convey it. You need to understand why the composer said it the way he (or she) did. What was he thinking, why did he write that particular note right there? You should give some intellectual thought to that. You also just need the basic joy and pain and everything. You have to have part of that in your soul to be able to bring that out and bring that forward. You have to really be able to bare your soul. You have to be vulnerable, and not everybody can access that stuff.

Petnick: And you could?

Barak: I hear it a lot in the cantorate. I think a lot of people, they really, really mean well and they want to serve the Jewish community, but I’m not sure if they are not really ambivalent about what they really believe when they are singing those texts. For example when you are singing (sings in Hebrew) “Because of our sins we were exiled from our land …” I would have trouble singing that. I don’t know if I believe that, so how do I convey it if I am singing it?
Petnick: I listened to an interview on the Internet with scholar Mark Slobin and Barbara Ostfeld, the first ordained Reform female cantor in America. Slobin asked Ostfeld if she believed in God, and she said she didn’t.

Barak: Barbara is a magnificent person. She is a wonderful human being. She is bright, she is funny, she is giving. I adore her, and I cannot judge that. But I can say that in order to stand up and sing those texts, and in order to really be convincing you have to be either a damn good actor or you have to really, really believe it. How do you get touched by someone who … but yet …

Petnick: I’m not judging—I have never even heard her sing, but I just want to say it really surprised me that she was the first ordained Reform woman cantor and she didn’t believe in God.

Barak: But I have heard that come from rabbis too, that they do not believe in God. Yes, that is a tough deal for Jews. That is a tough gig, for Jews to believe in God. I happen to believe in God, and it makes my job easier. But there are days that I really am angry at God. Or I am really just ticked off about the world, and it is really hard to stand there and pray. There is one particular text that occurs on Saturday morning, in which right after the Mi Chamocha, we say, “Rock of Israel, come to Israel’s aid. Fulfill your promise that you made.”

Petnick: Tsur Yisraeil?

Barak: Yes, Tsur Yisraeil. You fulfill the promise that you made: Ye-hu-dah ve Yis-ra-eil. “You are our Redeemer—get with it!” And there are mornings when I just do that very quietly and then there are mornings when I am screaming, and I am like, “Get off the pot.”

(Laughter)

I have to believe somebody is listening or else I do not think I could do this. It is true that when you sing an art song you might never have had the experience of what is going on in the poetry, so you have to do method acting—in a way, you sort of have to act. But when it comes to the life of the spirit, there is a big obligation on us to really touch people, touch people in a big way.

Petnick: I want to add this about Barbara Ostfeld—I want to be completely fair to her. She said some interesting things in response to a follow-up question about being a cantor and not believing in God. She expressed a high regard for prayer—for its ability to renew our sense of what is ethical and right. She said, “I believe prayer realigns a person with what’s important in life.” And she expressed a high regard for text, for really singing each word completely, and through singing, making what she called, “a living siddur,” a prayer book. That’s beautiful.
Barak: That is beautiful, yes.

Petnick: It made sense.

Barak: Yes, yes it does make sense, and, believe me, I know she is not alone. She is not alone. No. But I can tell you that I think everyone comes to their own beliefs through their own experiences.

I have had some experiences, which if I tell people about them they look at me like I am out my mind. But I feel connected to a higher entity. I have had stuff happen to me that made me feel that I am under some protection and that every day I am aware of it, and I am reminded of it. I do not know if I can go into it any further, but, boy, there is a reason why I am here and why I came to this town and why I am connected to Emanu-El. I have had too much going on that I could not explain, but that I paid attention to. It made me feel like, “yes, there is another realm we do not see and do not understand, but it is very powerful.” And I have had it happen. I had it happen during Manhattan School of Music, and I had it happen after that, so I was made aware of it.

Petnick: When you were at Manhattan School of Music… is that when you had the incident you had on the subway? Is that what you are alluding to here?

Barak: Yes. That is it. At the time I did not think anything of it. At the time I did not even pay attention to it. I just said, “Oh, good. All right. I’m alive.” But years later I looked back and went, “Whoa, something happened there,” and I could not explain it. It was very powerful. And I realized, “Hmmm, okay.” As I dabbled into my psychic with all the stuff I was kind of getting involved in—not deeply but just here and there—I realized, “Boy, there is stuff out there.” There is stuff out there. There are people out there. I have met some extraordinary souls who have told me stuff, and some of it was spot on.

Petnick: I had some other notes on things that you wanted to share about this time period. Do you have other things you want to bring up?

Barak: Just that it shaped me very much. It solidified what I always knew, [that] I am supposed to be singing. I just met a lot of people. There are so many rich people in my life that I cannot even begin … It started in high school, and that has been … the thread that has been all through my life is all these people that came into my life that made a difference.

Petnick: You mean culturally—musically—spiritually rich—is that what you are talking about?

Barak: Just—as I look at the timeline, and I look at the thread from the beginning—the fact that I had grandparents from two different cultures; two different languages besides English that I grew up with; the richness of the Yiddish
culture and the Ladino, the Sephardic. Seeing always life from both sides, seeing from every different angle, usually, and being able to observe that, and to see what I did like and what I did not like. Then growing up in New York, which afforded me incredible opportunities for everything—everything with culture—and I did not feel like anything was missing. And not having a huge amount of money, so I was never spoiled. I had to go out and really work. My parents worked—they were working people—and they did not really save much. We just lived life. We just had a good time. Our big Saturday night was getting in the car and either going to a drive-in movie out on Long Island or going to the airport and watching planes take off. And having a burger. That is what we did. I lived between LaGuardia and Kennedy, so we would go to the airport. That was our big entertainment. We loved it! And we had fun. And just having an entertaining family … they were very entertaining. (Laughs)

Petnick: And a mother who brought home thousands of records for you—how about that?

Barak: Thousands of records, constantly music all the time, all the time. Then getting into being well trained as a singer and a musician, having all the opportunities to learn all that repertoire and to sing it all the time. To be working so I could make a living, to be living in New York, getting the benefit of all that and then going off to Israel finally.

This is funny. When I look back I say, “This is how these crazy people influenced my life; people that you would never normally listen to.” The reason I got Daniel Ferro as a voice teacher is because I really did not know many of the teachers Manhattan School of Music—I just knew it had a good department. There were a couple of well-known opera singers on the faculty, and I thought of studying with them. But I had a friend in high school named George; George was a bassoon player. George was not the brightest star in the universe, all right, but I said to George, “George, you are going to the Manhattan School. Get me the names of some good teachers. I just want to know who are the best teachers there.” He called me up one day, he said, [Brooklyn accent] “Hey, Roz, I got some guy named Ferro.” I said, “Who is Ferro?” He said, “I don’t know, that is the name they are all telling me, ‘Ferro’.” F-e-r-r-o, which was the Italian translation of Eisen because his name was Daniel Eisen; he was Jewish.

Petnick: So he Italianized.

Barak: He Italianized his name because he went to Italy to sing. So “iron” in Italian is “ferro.” So there I get my voice teacher through George Lamothe, the bassoon player, right? I mean, it is just nutty. And everything goes very well.
Then to go to Israel—I did not know they had an opera company, but then I had a date once with a guy named Bobby Bloch when I was nineteen. I met him at Manhattan School of Music, and I had never been asked out on a date before, so I went. He took me to see [Leonard] Bernstein conducting *Fidelio*, the concert version at Philharmonic Hall. Bobby was crazy. I went out on the date, and Bobby was nuts. He was acting nuts the whole time, and then when the performance was over he said, “Okay, let’s get in my car, and I hope you don’t mind I’ve got to drive up to Connecticut to do a wedding.” And I went, “What?” He says, “Yeah, we will go there first and then I’ll—” He said something like, “I don’t think know if my fan belt is working too well.” I said, “Bobby, thanks a lot, but do me a favor: go to a psychiatrist!” Then I called my father, and my father picked me up. That was my date with Bobby Bloch.

But we were doing an opera together a couple of years later at Manhattan School. We were doing *Gianni Schicchi*, and he said to me, “I just got back from Israel. I sang opera. You should go.”

I said, “What?” He said, “It’s a good opera company. It is very good. You can learn a lot of roles there; you should go.” There I am listening to crazy Bobby, and that is how I sent my tape to Israel.

(P.S. Years later, Bobby wound up being a cantor. His father was a cantor. Bobby was a manic-depressive with many, many, many deep problems but he had the sweetest, biggest heart in the world. He was so deeply sad about his situation, and he could never find a real wife, and he could never have a real relationship, and he could not sustain anything. He could not sustain a job. He kind of did his own thing. He did weddings on the side—that is how he made a living. He died a few years ago. When my father died in 1990, Bobby read the obituary in the *New York Times*. He showed up at the funeral. He said, “Oh, I’m so sorry for you,” because he loved me. I mean, I loved him—he was dear. He showed up at the funeral, and he sang. I said, “Bobby, will you sing?” and he sang. What a sweetheart. He had a good heart, but he was crazy.)

Because of crazy Bobby I went to Israel. Because of crazy George I got a singing teacher. I don’t know how these things work out in my life but they kind of do. And because of crazy psychics I went to see, I realized that I was coming to Emanu-El because they told me. I had a great interview. I walked in the room going, “Hi. I’ve been waiting to meet you guys.” And they were, “We’ve been waiting to meet you.” Everything was great after that except for one incident that almost cost me the job.

**Petnick:** We are going to do a whole chapter on Emanu-El so I won’t ask anything right now. This is fascinating, but I am going to deliberately change the subject so we can discuss it completely in another interview. Back to Israel:
you said you heard about Israel Opera from Bobby, and it sounded good, and you made a tape for your audition. What did you record?

Barak: I do not remember. Originally I had been accepted to go to the training program at the opera in Zurich. My uncle was going to pay my way, but then I just did not want to go to Germany or Switzerland. I did not have the taste for it, and when I heard there was an opera company in Israel I said, “Oh.” I was kicking around New York for a year with not much to do and—

Petnick: Oh, yes, there were some things that happened in that year while you were kicking around. Didn’t you have a few auditions and you won a contest … something at Carnegie Hall?

Barak: In 1971 I won a competition for the Youth Symphony of New York, and I wound up singing in Carnegie Hall with them. I think I was not working there yet at the time; I worked after that. I worked at Carnegie Hall, I think, slightly after that. I do not remember exactly the timeline. But I got a good review for my appearance. I know Eleanor Steber was on the judging committee and wanted to take me on as a student, but I did not want to study with her. I might have put the kibosh on my career right there. I probably could have—

Petnick: I don’t know who she is.

Barak: She was a famous American opera singer. She was an exquisite singer, actually. Samuel Barber wrote *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* for her, and that was the competition. I sang that, and I was a co-winner because they did not feel my voice was big enough for that piece. But they gave me a concert anyway, so I did my own things, which was nice. I still want to sing *Knoxville* someday; I love that piece so much. Although she was a well-known American concert artist and opera singer, I did not want to study with her because I already had my teacher.

Petnick: When did you leave for Israel?

Barak: I left in 1974. What happened was they accepted me in 1973 but then the war broke out so they told me, “You will have to wait until after the war.” I went in June 1974. I had been kicking around New York doing this and that: working in a doctor’s office, and having a boyfriend—I had several boyfriends—I moved from one to the other. At that point I was going to Overeaters Anonymous and having relationships with every hundred-pound loser in the place. That was basically what was going on. It was kind of a dark period because I was going through a lot of emotional shifts and losing weight. I was having kind of a rough year. Going to meetings almost every day, that was my lifeline.
I was busy but I was just in a waiting period to go to Israel. Then I finally got there and saw the opera company, and I nearly plotzed. I mean, it was awful.

Petnick: I’m going to stop here because our next interview is going to be all about Israel and the opera company in those days. Do you want to say anything more about Manhattan School of Music?

Barak: Oh, the one thing I did not talk about was the reason why I do not support the Manhattan School right now because something happened. It was a political thing. I auditioned to sing Mahler’s *Symphony No. 4*, and I did not get it, but I might have had politics not stepped in, which really left a bad taste in my mouth. I just turned my back on the school, and I have not really looked back at them. They are always “Send money, send money,” and I’m like, “No dice.”

Petnick: But you are a big supporter of Music and Art?

Barak: Music and Art gets my money. They did not give me everything I wanted to sing, either, but I love that place so much, and I believe in them. Manhattan School is probably going to be doing much better in the next few years. I think they have a good director now, and I think it is going to be good. But they made a few missteps with me, and I’m just not—

Petnick: A lot of famous people went to Manhattan School of Music. I have read Paul Horn went there and … Were there people who became famous who were classmates or teachers in the years you were there?

Barak: Very famous? I would say more like famous of the people in the know. Look, I went to high school and Manhattan School with Catherine Malfitano who became a well-known opera singer.

Petnick: Was she the one who auditioned for Juilliard and did not get in?

Barak: She did not get in, so I did not audition for Juilliard. But I did not really want to go to Juilliard, so it was okay. Although, one teacher said to me, “You’ll get in.” And I’m like, “That’s all right.” I thought Cathy was a fascinating artist. I used to watch her a lot in her rehearsals. Part of the reason I am so ticked off at Manhattan School is that the *Mahler Fourth* was actually engineered so that she would sing it, and in the end she did not; somebody else did. It was a painful episode to go through that. I really thought that was unfair, what happened. They really wanted her to sing it, and the conductor did not pick her. The conductor wanted to work with me and another soprano, but he was told he had to pick her as one of them. So he worked with her, and he worked with this other woman with whom I am friendly, and she got it in the end, for which I was happy. But Cathy went off and made a stellar career. She now teaches at Manhattan School. She did fine. She made a movie of *Tosca* with Placido Domingo. She has done a lot of stuff. I guess she was
pretty well known, and the school was banking a lot on her, that she was going to be very well known.

Elmar Oliveira is a very well-known violinist in concert circles. [He studied at Manhattan, and] I brought him to play on the *Music at Meyer* series. I mean, there are jazz musicians who are well known who have studied at Manhattan because they have a very good jazz department. A lot of singers came through Manhattan or did opera theatre at Manhattan but did not really study there—they just did opera theater there. It is different. But, yes, there were some good singers that came out of Manhattan School. I am trying to think. I can’t recall now.

There were well-known people that did come out of there, but, of course, the focus in New York is always on Juilliard: Juilliard, Juilliard, Juilliard. That is the name that everybody knows. Whatever. But it did not matter. I was happy. I had the best teacher and I was happy.

Petnick: I’ve read that Manhattan School of Music was considered one of the three top schools: Juilliard, Curtis, and Manhattan.

Juilliard, Curtis, but I think there are many others now. Eastman is a good school. Indiana is a good school. There are some other smaller colleges that have fabulous music departments … Rice [University] in Texas. There are some great places out there. Nowadays you ask, “Where should I go to study voice?” and they give you a list you cannot believe. It is like, “Wow, look at that.” Amazing. Back when I was going to school there were only a few choices.
Interview 4: March 9, 2015

Petnick: Good morning. Today we are going to talk about the time period just before you went to Israel, about your decision to send your audition tape to Israel National Opera, and your invitation to join.

[Repetition deleted.]

Barak: [As I’ve told you], Bobby Bloch came back from being in Israel for a while, and we [performed in] an opera together at Manhattan School of Music, and he said, “You should go to Israel. There is a great opera company there, and you will learn all your roles.” I thought, “Now that’s interesting. That could work.”

I sent a tape in early 1973, and I received a telegram back that I was going to be accepted. I know that the woman who was running the opera company came to the United States, and I met her, and I did not particularly like her at all. (Laughs) She was an awful person. She had quite a reputation in Israel that I was not aware of. But I thought, “Well, what the hey? I will go there, I will learn my roles,” and all that. She went back to Israel, and they offered me a contract and then the Yom Kippur War broke out, I received a communication saying, “Your contract is delayed until we can figure this out.”

Petnick: This is still 1973?

Barak: Yes, it was ’73. Then eventually I received a telegram with, “Yes, these are the roles you are going to be doing. Come. Let us know your date of arrival. You must go to the Jewish Agency to arrange for your trip here.” “Jewish Agency?” I thought, “that is kind of odd.” But I went. I went to the Jewish Agency for Israel in New York on Park Avenue.

That is the place you go when you are making aliyah, when you are actually immigrating, so I was kind of confused about this, but I went. I find out, “Oh, you are going to sing with the opera company, and you are Jewish. This means you are immigrating.” (Laughter) I said, “Well, this is odd; this is unusual.” It turned out that the opera company had a deal, I guess. The woman running the opera company was an American. Her name was Edis de Phillipe which, as I understood it, was an interpretive take on her real name, which I think was Edith Phillips. I believe she was from Brooklyn.

I have always wanted to write a book about this. She had gone to Israel in the 1920s on a Coca-Cola tour. She was sort of an opera singer, I suppose. She was sort of a Leona Helmsley type—extremely officious and snobby and elegantly dressed. She was quite a type. I did not take to her very much. She was also a racist, which I did not appreciate. She made some terribly disturbing comments when I was in her company, and I was really, really
distressed about it but thought, “Well, it is still opera, and I want to sing opera. I guess I have to go along with this.” I was young and used to caving. I agreed to go.

At the time I was involved in a relationship with a wonderful young guy from my conservatory who turned out to be a fine conductor and is rather well known in opera circles. I had not told him I had applied to Israel Opera, and he got upset and started the breakup process right then. It was all very sad. There were other things going on in my life at the time that were … It took me a while to get to Israel because of the war, so I was involved in all sorts of other things to keep myself busy. There was a lot of stuff going on in my life at the time, and some of it I have trouble keeping straight—like, “When did this happen?” I did an opera at Wesleyan University in Connecticut during this time. I had a man who wanted to be my manager. There were a couple of confusing chronological incidents after I left Manhattan School of Music because I was still shooting for my opera career, but I had to work, and I was busy doing auditions and doing operas. I was trying to lose a bit of weight before I went to Israel.

Petnick: Were you performing in Santa Fe in that period?

Barak: Santa Fe was 1971 and '72. Yes, I was an apprentice there, and I had a really good time. I must say, it was an eye-opening experience.

Petnick: In what sense?

Barak: Just the people that were there. It was a whole new experience for me. There were opera people and a lot of gay men and a lot of odd politics going on here and there with certain singers. It was a learning experience, but I really did enjoy it. I can say that I was once Frederica von Stade's understudy for Pelléas et Mélisande, and I also got to perform in Magic Flute and in an opera by Villa-Lobos, which had been uncovered, called Yerma. I was in that opera. I felt like I did some nice summers there. It felt very good. The town was interesting, it was a beautiful opera house, and we were treated professionally—we got salaries and everything. It was nice. I was twenty-one … twenty-two.

I got into the Santa Fe Opera by doing a rather outrageous thing that was not intentional. I did not do it on purpose; it just happened. I was ushering at Carnegie Hall in 1971. There was an incident at the hall, and we were expecting some problems. There was a booking for the Siberian Dancers and Singers of Omsk, and the Jewish Defense League was planting smoke bombs and things on the premises. I had to do my audition for Santa Fe between the Siberian Dancers and Singers of Omsk performances, and they did not want us to leave the hall. Luckily, the audition was down the block at Steinway Hall. I was not going to miss my Santa Fe Opera audition, so I went to the audition
in my little blue Carnegie Hall uniform. They all looked at me and started laughing. I said, “I’m sorry but the Jewish Defense League is bombing Carnegie Hall today, and I have to go back.” (Laughter) I sang in my uniform, and one of the men there—I think it was Richard Gaddes—was just doubled over, laughing hysterically. They called me back for next week because I was memorable, and the next week I wore a big purple, flowing gown and sang something else. I got in, I think, because they remembered me. I had a nice voice, but I was a light, lyric, soubrette soprano, which are a dime a dozen, basically. I just had, I guess, my little gimmick, which was not meant to be a gimmick but just worked out that way. They sat up, and they laughed a lot, so I got in. (Laughter) And that is my audition story. To be noticed in New York, I guess, you just have to do all sorts of things.

I had a lovely time in Santa Fe. Like I said, it was a good training ground for opera, but it was also a training ground for life. I was there with some other apprentices who turned out to have significant careers.

There was Neil Rosenshein and David Kuebler and … I am trying to remember some of the other people. There was Toni Alexander … Leona Mitchell was with me that year. Some of them had shorter careers, but they were good. They were talented people, and I felt lucky to be there. The [second] year I was there I was rooming in sort of a motel with a proud Cuban mezzo-soprano named Gloriosa Caballero. She had long hair, and she was very, very elegant and proud—a very formal person. Guys knocking on the door and asking for Susie, or someone, would awaken us in the middle of the night. I guess there had been some sort of lady-of-the-evening living there before us. We were terrified. The first year I lived in a house with people.

Petnick: I wanted to ask how it felt to you to be a shorter, slightly wider young woman from Brooklyn next to or in the company of these kind of grand, elegant—

Barak: Oh, no, they were not at all like that. No, no, no. Gloriosa was Cuban—I think her father had been a politician in Cuba, and they were kicked out during the revolution. She still had a lot of that fiery pride. She was great. She had a beautiful voice, and she was a great gal.

Petnick: And you got along well?

Barak: Oh, yes, we had gone to Manhattan School of Music together, so we knew each other well. The year before was kind of a crazier year. I had moved into a house with a bunch of people, and that did not work out, so I moved out and got a house with one other person. We were all a little crazy and wild. But it was nice getting to know some of the opera stars and everyone. Kiri Te Kanawa made her debut in the United States that first summer I was out there, and Flicka [Frederica von Stade] was singing.
Petnick: You were her understudy for—

Barak: The second year I was there, von Stade did *Pelléas et Mélisande*. I think it was the second year, but it might have been the first. I know she did *Giovanni* while I was there. I know she did *Pelléas et Mélisande*, and I understudied her for *Mélisande*, probably because I had long, blonde hair. I am sure—that there is not one doubt in my mind—that I would never have ascended to that stage had she been sick; they just would have canceled the performance. But it is nice to say I was her understudy. She likes that too. I tell her, I say, “I hope you don’t mind I keep saying this.” She's, “Oh, no, no. It's cute.”

(Laughter)

She is great. She is an incredible human being. I just really adore her. Anyway, so that was Santa Fe. The second year that I was there my boyfriend came out. It was funny because he was just this student from Manhattan School of Music studying conducting, and years later I am a cantor, and he conducted at Santa Fe Opera. How things change.

[Interruption]

Petnick: Please do go on. In our verbal travels we are on our way to Israel.

Barak: I received the telegram and made my plans. I went to the Jewish Agency and got signed up as an *olah khadasha*, a new immigrant, which just confounded the heck out of me. ... going through the bureaucracy ... and getting the citizenship card and all this stuff. It was a crazy deal. And then I realized that my salary was being paid by the Jewish Agency. They had this deal constructed where if they took American Jewish opera singers to the Israel Opera, they had to come as immigrants. But if you were not Jewish, and you were an opera singer, they paid you directly. I was really appalled when I found out because I thought, “I don’t need their money. There are other people that need to come to Israel that the Jewish Agency should sponsor.”

I was pretty upset with the opera company from the get-go, when I found it out. They put me in a hostel called Beit Brodetsky in Ramat Gan, which was a little suburb of Tel Aviv. It was pleasant; I had a room, and we got our meals. I got to know some ballet dancers from the Israel Classical Ballet who were also living there. The first night they had folk dancing, and I went out for that and had a little experience with some man who was after me. (I looked pretty good then.) I also went to the opera one of the first nights I was there, and it was pretty awful.

There was an old Knesset building down on Allenby Street, which is right by the sea, right on the ocean. They were using an old Knesset building, and it was a like a high school auditorium. The orchestra was kind of old and tired,
the conducting left a lot to be desired, and the singing that I heard … I went to see *Marriage of Figaro*—the direction was just awful. Except for the foreign singers, the American singers or whatever who came to sing, the natives were not very good. It was an experience. I kind of stood at the back and went “Oh, dear! What did I do?” But I figured, “All right, well, just go with it.”

I met a lovely guy the first night I was there and sort of started dating him for a couple of weeks. Then I also looked up some members of my family. I stayed at Beit Brodetsky maybe for a month, and then I looked for an apartment. And I found an apartment in Holon, which is another suburb of Tel Aviv. I found out that I had family in Holon, so I called them.

I arrived in Israel … I think … on June 10, 1974. I will say that it was fun. It was sunny, it was nice, it was the beach. I would go to the beach and have fun. It was incredible being in Israel for the first time. I was very emotional, actually. I won't say people were dancing the *hora* in the streets as I had been led to believe. In fact, they were rather glum because it was post-war, and there were lots of widows because lots of boys had been killed. There was a lot of sadness, but it still was a fun place. People were energetic, and there was a lot of—what can you say—it was just out-there kind of behavior.

Everyone in Israel is enthusiastic, especially when they meet Americans. I do not know about now, but then when an American would come, an American girl especially, you got a lot of attention. A lot of Israeli boys wanted to be with American girls for whatever reason. And I was cute. I was just having a good time. I was picking up the language. I was going to be doing an operetta in Hebrew so I was taking lessons for my script because I had to speak dialogue in Hebrew and sing in Hebrew. I could read Hebrew, but I really did not know the language at all—I started picking it up in the street. I started taking taxis home every night and talking to the taxi drivers. They would ramble on in Hebrew because I had a good accent for my address. I would say my address with a good accent, and they would think I could speak Hebrew, and they would talk, talk, talk, and I would be going “Hm, hm, hm.” I did not know what the hell they were talking about.

Then I started picking up a word here, a word there, and eventually I started to figure the language out. I thought it was a very logical language, and I loved it, so I was having a good time.

The other thing that made me learn the language is that about a month after I arrived when I moved to Holon I called this family I knew—distant cousins or something—and they lived in Holon, and they came over. They had three sons, and one of them immediately … we started to go out. I met him on a Saturday, in fact, and on Monday we decided to soon get married. Things were happening fast.
Petnick: This is Jacob Barak?

Barak: Yes. Now I had left a boyfriend, a different boyfriend, back in New York who kept calling me up and saying, “Come back and let's get married,” and I am going, “No, no, no, I just got here.” I kind of broke his heart, and I felt really bad.

Then I decided, “I will marry this guy because he seems stable and he earns a living and he is responsible, and he is nice and everything. And he is family so he will never hurt me.” (Laughs) I decided to get married. Then I told my parents, and they had a cow. “What are you doing? Where are you?” I think part of that decision and the impulsiveness was just being away from home for the first time—really, really away, like really away. I am an only child, and it was scary, and this was family. I had other family, from my mother's side, in Holon, as well, that I got very close to. I connected with them and got very, very close to them.

Petnick: Is that why your parents reacted that way—if you married an Israeli you might stay in Israel, and it was so far from them?

Barak: It could have been, but I think it was also that it was just so fast, and they just thought I was crazy. They tried to talk me out of it, and they had a friend of mine try to talk me out of it. It was dramatic. But I did get married, and I think from the beginning I knew it was not going to be a successful marriage. I just had a gut feeling, but I did it anyway. He kind of protected me. I mean he took over; he took over and negotiated everything for me in Israel—got me my driver's license and did this and did that.

He was practical, and he got things done, and it was his language, which is why I learned Hebrew, because I would go to their house for Shabbat dinner or whatever, and they were all speaking Hebrew, Hebrew, Hebrew. And when I would say, “What are you saying?” he would say, “Oh, it's not important.” I went, “Oh, boy, I had better learn this language.” So I did. I picked it up. I think within two months of getting to Israel I was speaking almost fluently, with actually little background. I had not studied it. It was crazy. By the time I enrolled in an ulpan months later they told me I was too advanced.

Petnick: What is an ulpan?

Barak: It is a place where you go for intensive study of Hebrew. You are there with a lot of people from Russia—they are learning daily, and they only speak Hebrew. It is a wonderful way to learn Hebrew, but I already knew a lot. They put me in beginners, and they said, “No, you are too advanced.” Then they put me in intermediate, and they said, “You are sort of advanced for intermediate.” It was kind of crazy, so I got out of the ulpan and just spoke. I was kind of fearless back then. I would make up my own words, and people would laugh,
but I had fun. It was refreshing coming from New York to be in Israel. You had wide-open spaces, you had fresh air, you had delicious vegetables. I think it was a healing time for me. I was singing.

Petnick: After the intensity of the subways and the canyons and tall buildings of New York City and for years riding the subway underground daily, I can imagine what it must have been like for you in Tel Aviv, the ocean, the fresh air, the sun—

Barak: Yes. Santa Fe kind of started that ball rolling because that was also the big wide-open spaces and the beautiful landscapes. Then you go to Israel, and you feel this connection suddenly to your people: you are with your people. I picked up the personality very quickly.

Petnick: What is the personality?

Barak: There is a way of talking in Israel—not only did I speak the language, I had picked up the inflections and the whole thing. Even today when I speak Hebrew people say, “So what town are you from?” They do not know that I am not Israeli. My Hebrew is not super-fabulous. It is not intellectual Hebrew. I speak street Hebrew and not even up-to-date street Hebrew. (Laughs) I do not even know all the latest slang terms, but I speak enough, and I can carry on a conversation. It is convincing enough, and often people think I am Israeli. I love that. That really helped me. It is kind of like the next step on the path to being a cantor because by the time I was done with Israel I understood … and when I got my synagogue job for the first time, I was really ahead of the game.

But, anyway, back to Israel. There I am in this opera company, and it seemed to me that the woman running it was a nut case … to say the least. She was married to Simcha Even-Zohar, former secretary-general of Histadrut, and there were dark stories whispered about how he helped her finance the opera, but I do not know if those stories were true. Suffice it is to say that in those days, the Israel Opera was made up of a collection of the saddest people on earth. Sad, neurotic, just … There were some local singers who … were good … and there was a lovely baritone named Mordechai Ben-Shachar and a little tenor from Turkey named Sami Behar who had a good voice. There were a couple of sopranos whose names I won't mention because they were not good. But they had temperament. They had quite a bit of temperament, and they did not really like this young upstart coming in and taking roles.

Petnick: Upstart? Do you mean you?

Barak: Yes, me. Or some other Americans that were there—any American upstart, or whatever. The ones who were the most successful [there] were the ones who came from outside and just learned their roles and left within the right time. Those were mostly guys: baritones and tenors. Placido Domingo started there.
It was a good training ground, mostly for men because the woman [Edis de Phillipe] liked men, and she was jealous of other women singers. She was just horrible to women singers. She was dreadful. She stopped talking to me after a while. The company threatened me. I got sick one night—terribly sick with food poisoning—and I could not go on, and they did not have an understudy for me. They threatened my husband: “You bring her here now.” He said, “She is not coming. She is sick. She is not coming.” They did not care.

They did not cancel the performance. They took a girl from the chorus and made her stand in, and she just kind of made it up as she went along. They had no respect for their audience. It was like, “Here, do it.” I felt sorry for her.

The chorus was made up of these poor little Romanians. They were scared. They needed the money, and they needed the job, and they were being paid nothing. They were being treated like garbage. But they wanted to be on stage. It was so sad. I thought this place is … like, “Wow, this is really bad.”

Then we had a fight in the newspapers.

I went off and did a concert, which was sort of breaking my contract because I had had enough of them. I took an audition for Kol-Yisrael and got in. And then I started doing concerts and other things.

Petnick: What was Kol-Yisrael?

Barak: It was a radio station, but they also gave you a lot of opportunities to do concerts and things, and they would put me on the radio. I was on the radio a lot. I was doing concerts all over, and the opera company got angry with me and started writing letters to the newspapers about how I was a know-nothing and blah, blah, blah. I started writing letters back saying, “Yes, I grew up in New York, and I went to the Metropolitan Opera, but I don't know anything,” and that sort of thing. It was kind of dramatic there for a while. It was me having my diva fits, and them trying to ruin me. In fact, I think they hired a reviewer to give me a very bad review for a concert. It was just disgraceful because he wrote about how all my pitch was off and … I went to all the musicians who played with me and said, “Was my pitch wrong?” They said, “No, your pitch was perfect.” They hired people to write bad reviews. It was kind of amusing now that I look back on it, but at the time it was aggravating.

We got married on October 13, 1974, and my son Danny [Barak] was born in October 1975. Right on schedule. That was a new experience for me.

I was not expecting to have a baby so quickly.

Petnick: You were born in 1950, so you were twenty-five when Danny was born.
Barak: Yes.

Petnick: Tell me about your pregnancy and the birth. Was he born at home or in a hospital?

Barak: First of all, we had a fourth-floor walk-up apartment in a section of Holon that was kind of getting older. It was a tiny little apartment. I did not even know when I got pregnant, exactly; I was not sure of anything—I was so clueless. The doctor I had was not helpful. I had to switch doctors—she was terrible. I got another doctor, and Danny was going to be born in a private hospital. I was really, really morning sick for months, and I was walking around Tel Aviv just ducking behind fences and barfing; it was not pleasant. Plus, I was working. I was working in Ramat Gan for a tire company. This guy was an exporter of tires, and they had to do all these machinations to get tires to the Arab countries. They would go through Cyprus … I do not know what he was doing. But I was working. I had a couple of jobs in Israel while I was there just to make money. This guy, he was a nice guy, and he owned this tire company, Alliance. I was traveling to Ramat Gan from Holon every day, taking something like three buses each way. I was doing that all during my pregnancy up until the end, when I got a bad cold and stayed home.

(Voices in background)

I worked until the week before I gave birth. The only reason I stopped working was because I had a cold. So I stayed home and gave birth a few days later in a private hospital.

Petnick: It's a good thing you were at home when your labor started …

Barak: Not only that, the doctor I was seeing—the obstetrician—was off on military reserve duty during the week I was home. I had had a false alarm. I went to a hospital, and this woman said, “Oh, go home, you are not going to give birth for a couple of weeks.” And then, three days later, I went to see my doctor and he broke my water. It was the one day he was home from reserve duty—he was home for his wife's birthday—and he broke the water and said, “We are going to the hospital.” Timing is everything. He was there, so I went and had the baby in four hours. I did pretty well. (Laughter)

[Interruption]

Petnick: Go ahead, Cantor, please continue: we are in Israel, and your son has been born at a private hospital.

Barak: I was working and gave birth and stopped working, and three months later decided I could not stay home. I was going crazy. I got another job in Tel
Aviv, for a lawyer. I had nothing to do there; I do not know why I was hired. Three months later I quit and stayed home with my kid and just kept singing whenever I could.

**Petnick:** Tell us about Danny, how it was to have a child, and how he seemed to you when he was first born. Tell us about Danny.

**Barak:** It was a (laughs) kind of an odd experience for me. I think I was very young, not quite prepared. But I adored him. He was just … I think what happened was I realized the enormity of the responsibility of a child, which I had not really thought about before I had the baby. I was still singing concerts while I was pregnant. Yes, I was building my career while I was pregnant there, and it was an interesting time. It was nice the way everybody accepted it like a normal fact of life. I had never seen pregnant people in the United States singing, and here I was in Israel—if you were pregnant, you were pregnant. That was the way it was, and they still had you sing. Two weeks after Danny was born I had an audition for Luciano Berio. (Laughs) That was it.

I said, “Hey, I just gave birth.” He said, “Oh, that's okay,” and I sang, and he hired me anyway.

**Petnick:** Who was that?

**Barak:** Luciano Berio was a composer, who also worked with the Israel Chamber Ensemble. He died in 2003. He hired me [to sing two concerts, one a Purcell opera, which I performed and then he canceled the second concert because he left the country or … something … I do not know. He was a nice guy. I sang for Zubin Mehta. I was hired to do The Magic Flute with the Israel Philharmonic. I had sung with the Jerusalem Symphony—I did Pirates of Penzance. I did a bunch of concerts with them. Zubin Mehta was conducting the Israel Philharmonic at the time.

Lukas Foss was conducting the Jerusalem Symphony, and I had been his secretary once in Manhattan. While I was a student at Manhattan School of Music, that was one of my jobs; I was a part-time secretary to Lucas Foss, so that was interesting too. I sang for him, and he had me sing for the radio station, and that is how I got signed up with Kol-Yisrael. I gave concerts for years in Israel. I sang Elijah, I sang Israel in Egypt. I did quite a lot of performing in Israel. I was one of the sopranos on “the list.” It is a tiny country, and they only have so many opportunities. There were maybe ten sopranos they would call on regularly, and I was one of them. They sort of parcelled them out fairly. “Well, so and so sang last month—we will let Robin sing this month. Now Robin sang … we will let Rozie …” That kind of thing. It was kind of a family atmosphere, everybody getting fair treatment. That was a little bit limiting, actually. But, still, I met lovely people, and I had a good time.
I enjoyed living there [in Israel]; I really did. I enjoyed it a lot. I was impressed by the way people took care of each other there. They were in your face a lot, and they wanted to know your business, and how much money you make and all this stuff. It was kind of disconcerting at times. But on the other hand they were there for you. There were no questions asked: you needed something—you got it.

Petnick: Like what, for instance?

Barak: Like my family on my mother's side that I was close to. These cousins knew I was getting married, and they were there for me all day. They got me the right hairdresser … and they were primping me. They were just there.

When you had a wedding in those days you would tack up the invitation at work, and then everybody would just come, and you would just order whatever you thought would be enough food for everybody. The wedding halls knew what to do. It was just crazy—it was just kind of crazy. I had to have a traditional Jewish wedding because the only way you can get married in Israel is to go through the rabbinate. I had to go through the questioning period about my menstrual cycle, and that was very uncomfortable. I had to go through a mikveh [ritual bath], which for me at the time was uncomfortable. I knew nothing about a mikveh, and I did not know what I was doing, but I got through it all and had a traditional Jewish wedding. I even called up the rabbi that I had grown up with in my synagogue in Queens. He did not remember me from a hole-in-the-wall, but he officiated at my wedding, and at least it felt like there was a rabbi I knew.

Petnick: When you say he questioned you about your menstrual cycle … what is the purpose of that?

Barak: They want to make sure you are getting married on a date when you are not in the impure part of the monthly cycle—Taharat ha-mishpacha, “the purity of the family.” The women must be abstaining in a certain time period from when they get their period to [a certain time] after. It is seven or eight days, I think. Afterward, you are not allowed to … you know. You are only allowed to have marital relations at certain times of the month, so they actually question you. What they do is they invite people to lie because nobody is going to tell the truth. What are they going to do, inspect you? Of course, I lied. I was warned about it beforehand (laughs), so everybody knows to lie. When you put women through this, what are they going to do? They are going to lie. It is just stupid. They have these strictures where you have to be married in a religious ceremony only and by an Orthodox rabbi, and most people in Israel are not Orthodox. So, of course, if they opt to play by those rules then they wind up lying. It is a thing. But a lot of people nowadays do not even put up with it; instead they fly to Cyprus to get married, or they get
married somewhere else. They do not want to go through it, but I was too naïve, and I did not know.

The *mikveh* thing... now it would have more meaning for me, but then it did not. But I have never done it again. I have not really figured out why I would do it. I thought about it once when I was ending one relationship. I guess I have found most of my spiritual meaning through connections with people and through music and through practice of ethical deeds or ethical behavior. That is where I get my meaning and my connections. Also, I have had some experiences in my life that I think I told you about that have made me feel connected to God, because I believe in God. I just feel that ritual is good for a lot of people. I think it really is helpful, and it forms you in a way. It can form your spiritual life in many ways, but I find that if I do ritual—

(Loud outside noises.) (Pause)

—just for the sake of it without feeling it on a deep level, then it feels meaningless to me, and I do not want to feel meaningless. I wonder if it is a function of people doing ritual to find a spiritual core.

Petnick: You already feel a sense of unity and connection. Everybody wants to feel that. A lot of people are not fortunate in that way, as you have been, and they seek connection in whatever ways they can, through ritual and …

Barak: Yes, I think ritual is there to bring you to that space, but I have already felt it. I have had that space all my life, so the ritual, for me, has not helped it. It is a nice thing, but it does not help it.

Petnick: What helps you? Your music?

Barak: Definitely music. That is the first thing.

(Voices in background)

I find myself moved by people who do not have to do good things, but they do them anyway because they are the right thing to do. Often I find myself getting extremely emotional when I hear stories of righteous gentiles, for instance. For some reason that affects me deeply.

Petnick: What would be an example?

Barak: Rabbi Pearce used to tell a story about Danish Jews that were spirited out of the country when the Nazis were going to come into Denmark. They just left in the middle of the night on boats. This one couple left, and they went to Sweden where it was neutral. They came back five or six years later, and they walked into the house where they used to live, and all the plants had been
watered, and everything had been taken care of while they were gone. He was telling that story, and I was just crying. It was just—“Wow.” When people take care of other people, especially in a situation like that, that is where I get very moved. That gives me a lot to hang my hat on. There is hope.

(Pause) (Silence)

I think there are practices we each have to adopt as individuals, but I do not necessarily like to be told what to do or what is going to work for me. If I walk into a synagogue and rabbis are saying, “Let's all hold hands,” I do not want to be told that. I want to be respected for my own space. I do not like being manipulated, so I tend to defy that. I want to sit in the back row. I do not want to be told to move forward. It is not that I am anti-social; it is just that I feel when you enter a sacred space you need your own space. I do not want to feel all the time that I am in some great communal soup and singing along and feeling like … I do not need to feel that. I can feel that in a camp (laughs) or someplace else. I like to be alone with my stuff and my prayers.

Petnick: It seems that in some respects that is the more Orthodox way. When I was in Israel, we visited some of the old synagogues, and I was surprised to see how they have … couches built in around the back, and you can picture people sitting together talking, schmoozing during services. I’m picturing something different than the tightly controlled “standup /sit down” type service we do in Classical Reform. (Laughs) Stand up and say that; sit down and listen to this—

Barak: Right, right. Look, there is elegance to the uniformity too, but I think there is also not as much respect for people's personal space and personal needs. If I come to the synagogue, prayer is an obligation. I want to come in because I am feeling obligated, or I am feeling like I need it. I am not necessarily coming to connect with other people all the time. That is a nice thing, and as a clergy person that is what I need to do: I need to be there, connecting. But if I am walking into a synagogue [as a congregant], I want to be by myself. So I do that.

Petnick: Let me ask you this: when you go to temple on a day that you are going to be on the bimah in your official role as cantor, and if you have had a distracting day, or a lot personal upsets … how do you transition from the life of Roz Barak and ready yourself to enter into your role as Cantor Barak?

Barak: There are days that are easier than others, obviously. I will say that it is a function of this position that early on you have to adapt to an emotional cycle that can range from the birth of a child in the morning to the death of a person in the afternoon to a wedding in the evening. You just have to sort of stay in the space of, “I'm here to serve these people no matter what …”
Petnick: That is your continuity. Life cycle events change: one is happy, one is sad, but your continuous flow is service?

Barak: I kind of learned to do that for myself, too.

Petnick: How do you mean?

Barak: If I am having an emotional time in my own personal life, I am so distracted by my work most of the time that I do not get the time to really deal with it. Luckily, though, it is a forgiving thing to be a member of the clergy in a congregation that is well served by clergy, so I have the time. If I need the time I can take it, and I have done that. When I first came out here to San Francisco, I could feel that I was not giving my son the attention he needed; I was much too overwhelmed with this job.

It was a large role, and I needed to support him and me, and I had to do my job, and I could not say, “I need to be with my son.” Nowadays everybody says they need to be with their kids. “They were with their kids” is respected. Back then, I was the only cantor, and there were only two or three rabbis running around, so (laughs) I could not really do it. It was all on me as cantor. I regret sometimes that I did not give my son more time. He grew up pretty fast. He became very independent, and he is a very smart boy, so he did all right.

But, yes. I think when I am having my own personal stuff it can be hard, but I get through it. Somehow, I get through it. I tend to tell people who are telling me to take better care of myself—you know, “Take time, it's okay,” “No, no, no, I can do this. I can handle it.”

I used to look at myself and say, “Am I a cold person? Can I just get through anything?” And I don’t think so, but I do know that there are times that have been challenging. But I have always kind of taken on the role of this vessel very seriously, and I feel like I am here to serve these people and not serve me, so I take myself out of it. I take myself out of everything. I am very, very acutely aware of my role. That is the way I function. I remember when Paul Matzger [former Emanu-El board member and friend] died, and he was so beloved. It was very hard on us. It was the first time that ever happened. I broke down, but I kept going.

I was singing “I'll Be Seeing You” and I sang it, and I got through it, but I was really shaky. Then I had to do the El Malei Rachamim [“Compassionate God, grant perfect peace...”]. I sang it, and then I said it in English, and I had to stop in the middle of the English—I could not go on. It took me a while to compose myself. That was the first time that ever happened. I usually just steel myself not to lose it.
I remember I had this funny talk with Rabbi [Joseph] Asher in his hospital room before he died, and he said, “Come here. I want to talk to you.” I said, “Okay.” He said, “You know I want the Dvořák,” which meant that he wanted me to do the Psalm 23 by Dvořák at this funeral. I said, “Don’t tell me about Dvořák. You know I don’t like that piece.” He said, “I don’t give a shit what you like, it's my funeral.”

I said, “All right, you'll get the Dvořák.”

(Uproarious laughter)

Then he died, right, and—

Petnick: A very professional conversation you had there with Rabbi Asher …

(Laughter)

Barak: Very professional. He died. And I remember I got up, and I sang the Dvořák, and right after I finished, I felt like I was rocking. Something took over my body, and I was not steady. I was not steady. I turned around, and I was not facing the congregation—I turned around to go back to my seat, and I said to Rabbi Asher, to his spirit: “Okay, you got your Dvořák.” But I remember feeling shaky, like something had happened, like something was happening to me. Yes, those things can happen, things you cannot explain. Yeah, yeah. I wouldn’t change any of that. I would not trade any experiences like that.

Petnick: I want to ask you about one more experience in Israel before we end today. I think you told me that while you were there you sang in a club—you did some club singing too?

Barak: No, no, no, no, no, no. There is a little club in Israel … I do not know if it is still there. It was called Tzavta. You go down a flight of steps in a building, and then there was this little auditorium. I think it seated a maximum of a hundred and fifty people.

Every Saturday morning there would be a little concert there, so I was asked to give a concert. What happened was I was working with a pianist while I was in Israel whose name was Ruthie Mense. She had studied at Juilliard, and she was a fine pianist. She was a really nice person, and we got close, and I was doing concerts with her; a lot of times she would play for me. Then she started saying that Leonard Bernstein was going to come, and we had to do a concert of all his music, and I went, “Fine.” We started giving these concerts of Leonard Bernstein's music. I finally said, “Ruthie, we keep doing this concert, and he is not here. When is he coming?” She says, “He's going to come.”
Then finally there was a Bernstein Festival, and Ruthie said, “We are giving the concert at Tsavta. He will be there.” I said, “Oh, my god! Oh, my god!” So we gave this concert in this little club, and there he was! The place was packed, and he was in the second row down there, and I am singing all of Leonard Bernstein's vocal music to Leonard Bernstein. And I am having a cow, but I am in heaven. I am in heaven. I am singing, and I am singing to him, and he is looking at me and clapping in my face. It was like a love fest. I was saying, “I love you,” and he was saying, “I love you” back, and we were just having a great time.

He was sitting there with a woman I knew, Margaret Carson, who was his publicist. I knew her from Manhattan School of Music. She had done some work there, and I knew her. I was thinking, “Boy, he is sitting with Maggie Carson,” and I do not know if he was sitting with his mother (laughs)—he was surrounded by these people … I finished the concert, and he was clapping away and blowing kisses at me, and I was blowing kisses back, and then I came back and did an encore of a piece that was so totally out of the realm of what I had done before. I had been singing like coloratura stuff, and all of a sudden I came back and did a mezzo aria from Trouble in Tahiti. I said, “I'm going to do Trouble in Tahiti.” And he said, “That too?” And I said, “Yeah, why not?” So I sang that too. It was just like we had known each other all … it was just the strangest thing. I finished, and he is clapping away again, and I ran backstage, and I'm hyperventilating. I am standing in front of my dressing room going, “Please, please, come back and say hello to me,” and I'm hyperventilating. And then all of a sudden he walks through, and he is by himself: he was alone.

He came back to me, and I was alone, and he throws his arms around me, and he says, “Where have you been?” I said, “Well, I have been here.” (Laughter) He said, “Yeah, and I hear you are leaving,” because it was right before I was going to leave. I said, “Yeah.” He said, “Why are you leaving?” I'm like thinking to myself, Why are you leaving? What are you telling me? But I said, “Because there is no opera here.” He said, “Yeah, you’re right,” and then he kind of sauntered off. I was like, “Wow.” I had my Bernstein moment.

Then that night there was a concert with [the] Indiana University orchestra and singers. I had sung the aria from Candide that morning, “Glitter and Be Gay,” and this other woman sang it that night because they did a concert version of Candide. So I was at the concert, and it was good, and I was all excited again to see him conducting. I was sitting there with Martin and Janet Bookspan. Martin was a commentator on radio in New York. They had heard that I had sung really well. And Maggie Carson was there, and she said, “Get in touch with him when you get back to New York.” I said, “I will, I will.” So the concert was over, and there was a big reception in the Philharmonic banquet hall, which was a little bit farther away. I went there, and I parked my
car and went into the hall. Bernstein is in the middle of the hall surrounded by all these young guys from Indiana. On one side of the hall was a bunch of Israelis standing there kind of with their tongues hanging out watching him. So I went to the other side of the hall, and I'm standing alone, and I am watching him, too. I am just standing. He saunters over to me all of a sudden, and he says, “So what did you think of the soprano?” I said, “You really want to know?” He says, “Yeah.” (Laughs) To this day, I cannot believe I said this to him: I said, “She has a good voice … she's a shiksa,” He looked at me, and he went, “You're right,” and then he walked away.

(Laughter)

That was my encounter with him, and I thought to myself, “That was really significant.” For some reason I was feeling a tremendous kinship with him on a soul, musical level. I felt that strongly, and I felt that he felt it. When I said that remark, he understood that what I meant was, “I understand you. I understand your music. We have the same language. We are in the same boat. We came from the same place.”

I think he understood it that way, too. What I was saying was, “She sang competently, but she just does not get you like I get you,” in a way. That was the language I used, and he got it.

Years later two things happened: I went back to New York, and I wrote a letter to him, and it got intercepted by his assistant, who would never let anything get through to him, and wrote me a letter saying, “Thank you very much. Mr. Bernstein has all the singers he needs,” or something like that. So I didn't get to see him at that time.

A couple of years later, a friend of mine was giving a piano recital in Carnegie Recital Hall, and my friend's lover was close to Bernstein, so Bernstein came to the recital. I saw him before the recital began. He walked into the reception area before you go into the hall, and I saw him, and I went, “Ahhh.” He was being handled; I mean there were people handling him, but I ran up to him—I had chutzpah in those days. I ran up to him, and I said, “Mr. Bernstein, Mr. Bernstein, do you remember me? I sang in Israel for you, I sang at the Tsavta Club.” And he looked at me and said: “I remember you! You were good!” I said, “Yeah.” And then they pulled him away and I never saw him again.

A couple of years after that I was working in a doctor's office, and there was a woman working with me, and we were doing secretarial work and stuff. She was new, and she told me that she had a brother who was a clarinetist. I said, “Oh, wow, where did he go to school?” and she said, “Indiana.” I said, “No kidding, when?” and she told me. I said, “Gee, did he ever go to Israel? Did he ever play in the orchestra?” She said, “Yeah, he did.” I said, “Bernstein concert?” “Yeah, yeah.” I said, “Get him on the phone. I would love to talk to
him.” She got him on the phone, and I said—I think his name was Ed or something—and I said, “Hi. I just understand you were in Israel during the Bernstein Festival.” He said, “Yeah, yeah, I played clarinet.” I said, “Wow, you played the Candide?” He said, “Yeah.” I said, “Oh, that’s so interesting. I sang for him that morning. I did a whole recital.” He said to me, “Oh, you are the singer?” I said, “What?” He said, “We had a rehearsal before the performance of Candide, and he mentioned that he had heard a singer that morning who understood every note he ever wrote.” I went, “Yeah, I think that was me.” (Laughter)

I just about fainted, and I went, “Now I have my epitaph.” That whole thing.

I do not know why he and I missed each other again. It was not meant to be because I really would have—the interesting thing is a few years after—

(Doorbell rings)

—a few years after my concert, he came out with a recording of a lot of his vocal works with a different soprano.

(Workmen’s voices)
Interview 5: May 13, 2015

Petnick: I would like to begin with where we left off at the end of interview four: you were in Israel singing for Leonard Bernstein. You were in Israel for three years [1974-1977], so would you give us an overview of Israel at that time, and also tell us about your decision to leave?

Barak: As I’ve said previously, I went to Israel having already signed a contract with Israel Opera, which turned out to be quite a ragtag operation, although it attracted some pretty famous people. Placido Domingo started there. Netanya Davrath, a soprano, whom I knew from her recordings, sang there fairly frequently. The other singers I didn’t know as well. At that time, I also had an opportunity to go to Zurich and study at the Zurich Opera, but I decided I wasn’t ready to go to Germany or Switzerland or any of the places that had any associations for me with World War II. I couldn’t deal with it at the time, so I went to Israel. I heard it was good, and I went there. And, actually, it wasn’t very good. It was a crazy place. (Laughs)

The mood [in Israel] was quite depressed because it was post war—the war of 1973 had just ended. People had lost their sons and their lovers and everything. It was sad. It was a little somber when I arrived in 1974. It was my first time there, and I had expected people dancing in the streets, doing the hora, and that wasn’t what was happening.

[Repetition deleted.]

My son Danny was born in 1975, and my perspective the minute he was born was, “Okay, my life has changed. I probably won’t become an opera singer touring Europe anymore. I have a son.” It was not what I had planned for my life. You know, it was kind of a surprise, but it was a great surprise. It was a joy to me to have a son. I settled into the Israeli housewife-motherhood role, and I had a singing career on the side, which was fun.

I got some good gigs and I was happy. I sang some beautiful stuff: I sang Bach, and I sang Purcell; I worked with the Israel Chamber Ensemble, and I sang with the Israel Be’er Sheva Orchestra. I sang with the Jerusalem Symphony several times. I performed quite a bit with the orchestras, and at one point I auditioned for Zubin Mehta, and he hired me to do The Magic Flute with an international cast of singers. Alberto Zedda, who was from La Scala, conducted. I got to sing for him privately, and he was considering bringing me to Italy for a while. I don’t know what happened, but he was a real sweet guy. And the performance was fun.
And then ‘77 was when I had the concert for Leonard Bernstein and when I met him. And so, I must say, it was manageable. There was a time when I worked in an office for a lawyer; there was a time when I worked for a tire company, while I was pregnant. I had various jobs in Israel, plus I sang. It wasn’t a great income. Things were tight. My ex-husband worked in insurance and made a living. We bought a little apartment. I lived in a town called Holon. It was sweet. It was like I had made my life there.

But around 1977, when my son was already eighteen months old, I felt a pull back to the States. I’m an only child, and I just felt my parents needed to know their grandson. He was the only thing, really, that they had to hang on to with their connection to me. I felt a need to go back. And I didn’t know what would happen with my career, and I didn’t know what would happen with my husband because he couldn’t speak English very well.

We went back and lived with my parents in a one-bedroom apartment in Queens for six months. The three of us—my husband, Jacob, and my son and I—were all piled into one small bedroom. It was a little tense, but we managed. And then we finally got our own little apartment across the street. Jacob got a job in an Israeli bank. He started out as a teller, but he worked his way up, and he eventually wound up in the international department. He was trading. Anyway, he was a bright guy, and he did well.

I was trying to jump start my career. I got a little performance work here and there—a few opera performances with Bronx Opera and some with Brooklyn Opera Company and some concerts in the park with a little orchestra. It was nice. I entered some competitions again. I had a fellowship to the Bach Festival in Stony Brook, Long Island. That was great. I had a fellowship to Aspen, Colorado in … ‘81 … I think it was. And while I was away from my family for a few months, I kind of woke up and said, “Oh, I don’t think I’m very happy in my marriage.” (Laughs) I didn’t feel I wanted to continue the marriage—it just wasn’t doing anything for me. But I was concerned about my son.

I was also working in a lot in different offices. I had had several secretarial jobs, and my last job before I went to cantorial school was working for an eye doctor in Manhattan. I actually had a lot of fun in that place.

Petnick: Let’s go back to your marriage: what was it not giving you—what was wrong with being with Jacob?

Barak: Well, first of all, we got married very soon after we met. He was a good guy. But, honestly, you know, when I was in Israel he kind of led me around and did all the business in Hebrew. Until I learned the language, he took care of everything. So that felt good, having someone kind of manage me. When we got to the States, I was the one who was sort of in charge as far as language …
and I just felt like there were a lot of things we didn’t have in common. When I could finally realize that we didn’t have things in common besides our son … you know … I was just not feeling happy. I had settled in and was acting the role—wife and mother—and all that, but I just wasn’t feeling happy. It was feeling like a burden. My son was never a burden. I adored him. Danny was my life. I had a lot of fun with him. He had a great sense of humor—he was always a funny kid so he was a delight. But I just wasn’t feeling like I was really in love anymore. And I feel sorry for that.

Around 1978 I got the job in the synagogue in Manhattan. It was called Shaarey Tefila, and it is on the Upper Eastside of New York City, on 79th and 2nd. It was a revelation. I had a friend who was a singer, and her husband was the cantor there at the time. When I came back from Israel, I called him and said, “Hey, maybe you have some work for me?” I subbed there a couple times for the soprano part. And then at one point, right before the High Holy Days, I think in ’78, the soprano went on an opera tour, and the cantor got upset and said that wasn’t part of the bargain. You had to do the High Holy Days. So he released her, and he hired me, and I became the permanent soprano in the professional quartet, which was the choir. I sang my first High Holy Day service ever in a Reform synagogue. I had never previously had much to do with Reform Judaism. It was a moving experience for me. Plus, I already spoke Hebrew fluently, which—in a way—made it kind of a natural thing for me to be doing. It was weird that I had never sung in a synagogue before. When I was at Manhattan School of Music, I used to make a living singing in churches. I knew every denomination, every piece of liturgy you could imagine. I knew all of it—all the hymns. I know the (sings) “Praise God from whom all blessings flow.” I know all that stuff—I even sang in an Armenian Orthodox church for years. It was fun. It was weird but it was fun. I mean, the music …

Petnick: You said it was a very moving experience for you. Could you please say more about that?

Barak: You know, my previous experience with synagogue prayer had only been Orthodox, and it was all Hebrew all the time and chanting all the time [demonstrates rapidly murmuring Hebrew] at top speed. Even though while I was growing up there was a cantor (a chazzan) in the synagogue who had a great voice, and there was a beautiful sound in the synagogue of people chanting and the chazzan singing … there was a lot going on there. I was too young, I think, to appreciate it, but I still have that sound in my head.

So Shaaray Tefila was a Reform synagogue, where people read in English. The cantor had been raised as a Conservative Jew, so he used a lot of the traditional stuff, plus he used a lot of elegant music that had been composed for Reform. It spoke to me as a musician, and it spoke to me as a Jew, because
he was doing beautiful work there. He was a good person, too; he was really a nice guy. And I just … I was very touched by it. I remember the first Yom Kippur. We were doing the afternoon service, which is very dramatic and very touching. It encompasses different themes from the Jewish history of oppression, and it talks about the Holocaust and everything, and I was knocked out. There was a lot of English and also Hebrew songs and prayers, and I just went off into a corner. I was sobbing. We were only a quartet, so the tenor had to sing my lines, because I had the melody. And he was like “All right, just let her be. Let her cry.” I had to get it out of my system. I was so touched by it. That’s when I “converted” to Reform.

The rabbi was an erudite guy, too. He was a nice guy and a scholar. He was great. So at that time, my impression of Reform Judaism was extremely positive.

Petnick: Do we have the service you just described—the afternoon service—at Congregation Emanu-El?

Barak: I do it every Yom Kippur. We get about fifty or sixty people every afternoon. We truncate it because it’s long, but we do a lot of it. I put it together in a book, and you know I left out some pages but …

Petnick: Oh, you’re talking about the afternoon service in the Martin Meyer Sanctuary?

Barak: Yeah, sometimes it was in Guild Hall, but sometimes we do it in Martin Meyer. It’s a very moving service.

Petnick: You became more open through the beauty of the Reform service?

Barak: Yeah, at that time it was quite beautiful. I loved the music.

Petnick: And tell us what the music was then, and who the composers were.

Barak: Well, there was a group of synagogue composers, most of whom had immigrated to this country from Poland, Germany, and so forth, during the second big wave of immigration.

Petnick: Around the turn of the century?

Barak: Around the beginning of twentieth century, yes. They were wonderfully trained musicians who were drawn to the synagogue and who wrote beautiful music. Isadore Freed and Abraham Binder and Max Janowski and Heinrich Schalit, Samuel Adler, Hugo Chaim Adler, these were all people who are known mainly to Reform cantors who study this repertoire.

Petnick: What about Lewandowski and Sulzer?
Barak: Louis Lewandowski and Salomon Sulzer are mid-nineteenth century. They were a little older, but their tunes are still with us. We sing the Sulzer Sh’má. That’s our Sh’má (sings) and the Aleinu, as well. These are tunes that are timeless; they are always with us. So that was a joy. I was in that synagogue for four years. They had a couple of turnovers with the cantorial position, and the first cantor they hired—after the one that I started with—was in the guitar ilk. That was different.

Petnick: Was there an organ in the—

Barak: Yes, there was. There was an organ, and I’m afraid that the quartet did not take well to the person that was hired. He didn’t last long.

Petnick: You’re talking about the organist?

Barak: No, no, the organist was a great organist named Laddi Helfenbein. But he eventually died, and they hired a woman named Cynthia Powell. They were both great organists. But this new cantor who came in … somewhere around 1981 or so … 1980 … he … I won’t say his name, but you know, he was just not what we were used to. And it wasn’t a good marriage. (Laughs) He eventually left, and then they hired a guy who had been trained in the Conservative movement. Very nice guy. A baritone. His wife was a conductor. He was a sweet man.

Petnick: Before they hired him they held a round of auditions, and I listened to some of them and thought, “Well, hey, how much are these people earning as cantors, and why don’t I do this?” I didn’t take that idea seriously, but then people at the temple came to me, and said “Roz, why don’t …” The rabbi came to me and said, “Why don’t you audition?” And I said, “I’m not a cantor.” He said, “So what? You know all the stuff. You sing great. Go sing for the committee.” So I sang for the committee, and to their credit they said, “We love you. You’re wonderful. Go to cantorial school. We’ll help you.” And they gave me a thousand dollars to put toward school.

I applied to Hebrew Union College, and I came in late in the [application] process. And then I had an extremely intimidating interview. I wasn’t hearing such great things about this school, but I thought, “Well, it’s a means to an end.”

Petnick: What was the full name of the school?

Barak: Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion, School of Sacred Music. Everyone was saying, “Ugh, you have to do this to become a cantor, but don’t take it too seriously.” So I had an attitude. I went to the interview, and I tell
you, it was one of the most annoying experiences I’ve ever had in my life. (Laughs)

The interview was so obnoxious, and I realize now that the dean was doing this on purpose to see what kind of person I was, really. But I remember walking out of the interview, which he conducted with me in Hebrew. He said, “Oh, you speak Hebrew. Let’s speak Hebrew.” I said, “Okay.” And we had the interview in Hebrew, which was of course obnoxious to begin with, and then some of the things he was saying to me during the interview were really irritating me.

Petnick: Like what? We have to have some examples.

Barak: Oh my God! You really want me to tell you that

Petnick: Of course!

Barak: Oh, you’re going to be shocked.

Petnick: Shock me.

Barak: So this is a rabbi, all right? An older man. He’s now dead, so I can talk (laughs). But I loved the guy. We got along great after this, but I walked into his office, and the first thing he said was, “So what do you think are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?” So I went, “Oh dear.” Finally, I said, “Well probably my weakness is that I try to avoid conflict a lot.” Well, that was all I had to say. (Laughs) Everything after that was him trying to get me riled up. So he starts in on me, “Well, I don’t think you’re very serious about this.” I said, “Why?” He said, “You never wrote. Do you have our catalog?” I said, “No.” “Well how could you be serious about something if you don’t even write for the catalog?” I said, “Well, honestly, I don’t think there was time. The rabbi asked me to come and audition for you, and I don’t think there was time.” “Well I just don’t think you’re very serious about this.” (Laughter) I went, “Okay.” And then he said, “You speak Hebrew? Let’s speak in Hebrew.”

So we’re speaking in Hebrew, and he said, “You lived in Israel? How long?” He started asking me questions, and then he said, “And you’re married, right?” I said, “Yeah.” And he said, “You’re married to an Israeli?” I said, “Yeah.” He said, “Oh, so he’s a yored.”

Petnick: A yored?

Barak: You see, a person who makes aliyah, meaning a person who goes up to live in Israel, that person is called an oleh, one who went up. A yored is a person who descends, who leaves Israel, and who has gone down. It’s a derogatory term. I
said, “No, he’s not a yored.” I said, “He’s an Israeli who happens to be married to an American who wanted to come back to the United States.

“Oh. So he’s a yored”

I said, “No, no! He’s not a yored.”

So he said, “Does he work?” And I said, “Yeah,” and I’m like getting nervous, right? And he says, “Where does he work?” I told him the name of the bank and he said, “Oh, that’s an Israeli bank—they hire yordim?” And I said, “He’s not a yored. He’s married to an American. He came here with me. He did not want to.”

I was getting steamed. I was getting seriously steamed.

So then he starts in again on, “So you didn’t write for the catalog.”

(Hysterical laughter)

Petnick:  Back to that!

Barak:  Back to the catalog! Oh! It was terrible! I’ll tell you what happened after. But anyway, finally I said, “Excuse me, may I ask you a question?” (And I was angry now.) He said, “Yeah, sure.” I said, “Is there another place I can go to become a female Reform cantor?” And he said, “Well, no.” I said, “So why do I need your catalog?” (Laughter) At which point he stood up, and he extended his hand and said, “This has been great. Thank you very much.”

(Laughter)

He walked out of there, and I thought, “Why the hell would I want to go to this place?” I went downstairs and found a phone booth—we still had phone booths back then—and I had a friend named Mary, whose father was a Protestant minister and I called her up. I said, “Mary, I think I want to become a Presbyterian. Where do I start?” (Laughter) And that was that. And then the next thing I hear is that I was accepted to the school and I said, “All right, fine.” (Laughter)

The first day we all gathered in this room, and there were eight of us.

Petnick:  What was the gender mix—how many men and how many women?

Barak:  One guy and seven women. The poor guy looked like a deer in the headlights. (laughs) I look around the room, and I’m thinking, “Wow, look at this.” Someone came in and gave an orientation. I remember thinking, “Oh no, this
is serious. My life’s gonna change.” And it was from then on that I realized the gravity of the situation.

After a while the guy in the group went to Israel for a year, and one other woman came and joined us. So then we were eight women: the first all-women class to graduate.

Petnick: Who was the first woman in America to graduate from the seminary and be invested as a cantor?

Barak: Well, the official first woman cantor who graduated Hebrew Union College was a woman named Barbara Ostfeld. And she is just a delight.

Petnick: When did she graduate?


Petnick: Ok, so seven years after Cantor Barbara Ostfeld, there you are!

Barak: Once she made that opening, there were a lot of prominent women who went through that program. Whenever we have a cantorial convention, we always applaud her, and we give her all the kavod [honor and respect]. She’s a great gal. Yeah, she’s terrific.

So … we were all thrown into that school together, and we all managed to survive. It wasn’t so bad. I learned a heck of a lot. I mean I learned mostly everything I know at that school. I realized how much I did not know when I went to school there.

Petnick: Tell us about that.

Barak: Well, going to an Orthodox cheder three days a week, with boys throwing paper airplanes, and little rabbis sitting, kind of like talking, but not really teaching that much, and having limited ability to go in depth; it wasn’t a yeshiva—it wasn’t like we were in a day school. It was three days a week after school for a couple of hours. And even though I enjoyed it, I didn’t really retain that much. My family wasn’t practicing on that level, and I felt very, very odd and out of place.

But I did learn to read Hebrew, and I did learn some prayers. I knew my Amidah, and because I went to a Jewish day camp, I knew the Birkat HaMazon. I knew things like that, but it was really sketchy. I didn’t know much about Torah. I didn’t know much about anything, really. I knew so little. I knew about the Holocaust—that was for sure—because everybody was talking about that when I was born. There were years and years of listening to people talk about anti-Semites, anti-Semites, anti-Semites, Nazis. I always
heard all that growing up. I had a strong identification as a Jewish person, and I was proud of it, but I acquired most of my Jewish knowledge at Hebrew Union College. It was intense.

Petnick: Your experience at Hebrew Union College is interesting to me and important for the historical record. I’d like to know what you remember about the courses that were taught, and I want to know as much as possible about your education and training. If you want more time to think about all that we could stop for today and those subjects could be the topics for the next interview. What would you like to do?

Barak: I can start because the most appealing thing absolutely from the get-go was learning about *nusach*, and the fact that there is such a thing, and the fact that cantors learn how to chant in different ways for different times of the day or year or week or whatever. There are actually different modes and scales and tunes that you have to employ at certain times. And who knew that? Nobody knows that cantors get trained in this because we don’t use it that much in the Reform [services]. We’re using all kinds of pop tunes these days, so it’s really just astounding to people when they hear this, and they go, “Really?” … And then to learn cantillation and that sort of thing.

Petnick: I want you to tell us everything about *nusach* and about your training. Let’s start with what is *nusach* and how it might have changed over time.

Barak: Well *nusach* is a rather brilliant system, and it creates authenticity. I mean you just know there’s an authentic feeling in a synagogue when a good *chazzan* is using beautiful *nusach*. Because the cantorial art is mostly improvisational. It’s hard to know—most of the lay people don’t really know all the time what’s going on with the cantor. (“Oh, he’s making this up.”) But honestly, a good *chazzan*—a good, trained *chazzan*—is improvising within a system, within a scale, within a mode. And also at certain points in the liturgy, you’d have to employ, let’s say, a certain melody. What it is is a way to musically/mark/the time. There’s a different *nusach* for Shacharit [morning] and Mincha [afternoon] and Maariv [evening]. And there’s different *nusach* for Friday night and for Saturday morning. There’s different *nusach* for the festivals. There’s different *nusach* for the High Holy Days. *Kol Nidre*, for instance, is *nusach*—at least it’s Ashkenazi *nusach*—I mean, Sephardim chant a different way, but you know, in Western and Eastern European *nusach*, *Kol Nidre* is (sings example). And you have snippets of melodies in the *Kol Nidre* that are specific to the liturgy being stated.

So, that’s *nusach*. You can’t change *Kol Nidre* in the Ashkenazi synagogue.

I usually say if Rip van Winklestein woke up in the middle of the forest, and he’d been sleeping for twenty years, and he walked into a little synagogue right in the middle of the forest, and he heard (sings), he would know, “Oh,
it’s Rosh Hashanah; it’s the High Holy Days.” He would know that. It’s because Judaism is so intent on honoring the time—not space so much, but time. Shabbat is a moment in time, right? It’s a time of the week when we honor that time.

The *chazzanim* of the past produced this system of marking time with melody or with mode. And what we learned in *nusach* classes in the Reform seminary was mostly stuff that had been written down. Great *chazzanim* like Adolph Katchko and Israel Alter had books and notated the *nusach* so that we would be able to learn it, because usually it was learned by oral transmission and not written down.

Petnick: So, it was generation-to-generation—there were apprentice cantors?

Barak: Orally transmitted—right, right. They would apprentice and learn it. But most of us with a Reform or secular background didn’t grow up in that tradition, and we didn’t really know it, so it was notated. Some great cantors notated how to chant these prayers for Shabbat morning or Friday evening or whatever.

Petnick: I’m thinking about Leib Glantz? Didn’t he do a lot of work with notation and analysis of the modes and …

Barak: I don’t know about analysis of the modes, but he was definitely one of the most out-of-the-box cantors out there. He was a very, very creative *chazzan*. He had an amazing voice, and his stuff is very difficult to sing. Only he could sing it—I don’t know anyone else who could sing it. It’s really hard. You know, he would just go wild.

There were some extraordinarily famous *chazzanim* of the golden age of cantors. There are some good, good videos out about that. And people would flock to the synagogue to hear them.

Petnick: So you’re talking about the years of Yossele Rosenblatt, Gershon Sirota … ?

Barak: Absolutely. Gershon Sirota, David Roitman, Zavel Kwartin, Mordechai Hershman, Moshe Koussevitsky, all of blessed memory, they were these great *chazzanim* that people would just flock to the synagogue to hear. My daddy said he sang once in a boys’ choir with Berele Chagy, who was another great one.

My father grew up also as a young boy singing in the Orthodox synagogue or going to Orthodox synagogue. He loved being in the synagogue.

Petnick: So going back to the golden age of cantors, some of the *nusach* was created or was brought to this country from the old country, right?
Barak: Oh sure! Yeah, yeah. No, they brought it here for sure. They were the superstar chazzanim. I’m sure there were chazzanim here already, but they were … it was …

Petnick: I’ve read that thousands of people would just line up in the streets. Those cantors were superstars.

Barak: They would! Even the opera singers would duck in and hear them on a Saturday morning. People like Enrico Caruso would go to the shul. I mean these men had voices that were extraordinary. But even beyond that, they had souls, you know? The voice was the raw material, but what they brought to the prayer was an expression of their souls that was so unique that the sound of their voices would create a physical response in people.

Petnick: A physical response—how do you mean?

Barak: A physical response. I think the voice has the capacity when it is infused with a spirit … a special connection to something really holy … the voice has the ability to make you … well, to tingle, and to feel something really, really deep. I think people find that in pop music, too. When you’ve got this special soul connection to your music or your prayer or whatever, it comes through in the voice. The voice gets a special sound. It’s very hard to explain this … it’s not scientific! (Laughs) It’s just a very, very strange and wonderful capacity that … I mean, the chazzan, especially. Those chazzanim [cantors of the golden age] had that ability, and it was extraordinary the sound that came out of that. And the flexibility of the voices and … it was amazing. I mean, you hear these old recordings, and you just say, “Oh my God! How did this happen? Where did they get this? Where did they get this?” It’s such an art! Such an art! And they could sing for hours! Hours!

Petnick: Apparently their prayer solos were much longer, but they have been truncated for the recordings.

Barak: Oh! Well, they were doing a full service. I mean if they were doing Rosh Hashanah, they were in there [the synagogue] all day. You’re singing all day, and you’re singing with such intensity. And you’re singing a cappella—I mean, it’s crazy.

Petnick: So people would just be in these clouds, these worlds of total sound and vibration.

Barak: Exactly. Yeah, you get that vibration. Absolutely. They were rock stars. They were rock stars. And it’s fading. It’s rare. The life of the Jew used to revolve around the synagogue. It’s not that way anymore. People don’t have the prayer competence—the Hebrew competence—the time, or the interest. It’s not the same. This country really changed things for people, I think. Those
days—I’m talking about the end of the 19th century and leading up to World War II, pre-war days—were the glory days of synagogue. And the Reform synagogues were wonderful places, too: they had choirs, organ … the music was beautiful. Often there were also cantors, but not all the time. Not every synagogue wanted to hire a cantor; however, there were cantors with lovely, beautiful baritone voices, and when the synagogues hired, it was mostly baritones that they would hire.

Petnick: So they had learned from the European cultures …

Barak: Well, it was a sort of Protestant experience. It was kind of austere. But still, the music was beautiful. There was an elegance and a reverence and an awe in the place, you know? And the rabbis then were erudite; they had booming voices, and they knew how to project and give a sermon. Those were different times.

Nowadays things have become much more informal. There are benefits to that, but there are also things that are lacking now. I was lucky that I became a cantor when I did, because there was still a great respect for the good, well-composed music of synagogue, complete with choral parts. I got to learn all that repertoire; I got to experience it; I got to use it.

Petnick: So let’s talk about your repertoire. Who were the composers that were included in the repertoire you learned at the Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion, School of Sacred Music?

Barak: All those little service books they had … Isadore Freed, Abraham Wolf Binder … you know—this one, that one.

The school had a choir made up of cantors. We sang a lot of choral music, and we gave concerts there. It was a vibrant place, and we certainly learned a lot of repertoire. I had one teacher, may he rest in peace, Cantor Norman Summers, who just threw a lot of stuff at us all the time. Always repertoire, “Here, here, here, here—take this thing—that thing … ” I learned a lot from him. I learned nusach from some of the best teachers: Cantor [Lawrence] Avery, Cantor [Israel] Goldstein, Cantor [Ben] Belfer. I had all the different nusach classes, the Shabbat, the High Holy Days, the three festivals, even daily [services]. I learned cantillation from Cantor Avery and Rabbi John Haddon. There was a lot going on. We also had to take liturgy courses and some history and some education. We delved into all of that too—it was to make us more well rounded.

Petnick: Torah study?

Barak: Not really. That I really did in the synagogue, more than anything. We didn’t focus on Torah study. There was a midrash class.
Petnick: Would you explain what a midrash class is?

Barak: Midrash is part of the oral tradition. It’s riffing on Torah. You take a little verse in the Torah, and suddenly say, “Oh!” and you make a legend up about it or something. Like, Jacob rested his head on a couple of stones as pillows. Suddenly the Midrash is something like, “the pillows started talking to each other” … that kind of thing. So that was midrash. But I didn’t stay in that class because I spoke Hebrew fluently, and a lot of the material was being presented in Hebrew, and what happened was that my classmates were struggling with the Hebrew so much that we couldn’t really get a whole lot done. I asked to do independent study, and the teacher agreed. I went off and I took the tale of Balaam and Balak [Numbers 22] and wrote a play based on midrash sources. I got an “A” and that was it. (Laughter) That was my midrash experience. I didn’t have to do too much after that because, really, if you really want to look up the midrash, the books are there. You can just open it up and find the midrash on any given verse or any given story in the Torah. So that wasn’t a big deal.

Petnick: I’m struck by what an advantage it was to have been fluent in Hebrew.

Barak: Yeah, it really was. But I didn’t know grammar, and I hated grammar. So when we had to take Hebrew grammar …

Petnick: Which is considered hard, right?

Barak: Well, it’s not that hard, but I just had no patience for it. I’d much rather just be conversational. So my grammar skills are not … I picked up the grammar by myself in the street. I figured out how to do future tense, past tense—I worked it all out. It was logical to me. I picked up the language so quickly that people in Israel did not believe that I didn’t know how to speak Hebrew before I got there. They would make fun of me, “You’re a liar!” “No, I’m not a liar. I really couldn’t speak this language previously.” I really had just figured it out. It wasn’t that hard. I still don’t know all the binyanim [roots for how the verbs are structured or built] but also I kind of do know them. I don’t know them as well as I should, but my vocabulary’s pretty good, and my conversational skills are good, and most people who are Israeli ask me what town I’m from. And I say, “Brooklyn.” (Laughter) And they don’t believe me because my accent is really strong.

Petnick: Here’s a question for you: how were you affected by being so deeply immersed in the music of prayer at the School of Sacred music? Were you changed?

Barak: Oh, I was changed. I was very changed. A whole new world opened up that I had never really been exposed to in a deep way. And I think we were just—all of us were just so excited by it, and we grew to love it.
Petnick: Can you describe it? How were you affected as a person? How did you change?

Barak: It just … I mean, I’m getting weepy talking about it. (Long pause) This just … I love music with all my heart and soul, and I listen to it for comfort, and I listen to it for different reasons. And I can be very affected by certain pieces. I could sit here and just cry watching the Berlin Philharmonic. It affects me almost on a cellular level.

The thing about chazzanut is, like I said, there’s this other dimension to it. It’s not that the music is so gorgeous or anything, but it’s the effect it has. It’s the idea the human being would spend their time singing—basically this one concept—this exalted place that you go to that is outside of yourself.

Petnick: When you’re singing?

Barak: What I feel when I do it is a big responsibility to be a vessel. When I sang opera and when I sang art song, it was a different feel. It’s all about the music and all about text and all about painting something and expressing a personal emotion about something—about love, about pain, about this or that, which is also very, very powerful to me. But there’s something about singing for a totally other purpose—a higher purpose—and something that is a responsibility, that you’ve got all these souls out there needing inspiration and needing to feel safe and needing to feel inspired about having a life of the spirit.

Some people get that through the other [secular] music, too. I think a lot of people do, but I think that there’s something about surrendering your whole life to this one concept of connecting with something higher than yourself. And when I’m singing I don’t think about my voice at all. Once in a while if it’s not working, if I’m sick or something, then kind of like I’m in a different space. But for the most part … you’re just … you feel like something’s going through you, like something is … like you’re just sort of (laughs) on a direct line somewhere, and you’re a conduit, and you have to be a vessel for something, so that people will have that experience.

And if they don’t have that experience, then I feel they’re being cheated. I don’t know why people would go to synagogue when they’re not being inspired by something. I wouldn’t go. I don’t need to go somewhere just to be in community—unless there’s some kind of crisis that the community is in; then yes, I want to go to the synagogue and be with my people. But to attend every week, and just sit in the seats and sing some trite tunes and not feel prayerful and not be inspired by something … I don’t want to go. I really … I need a place to be, too. And it’s hard, because … I’ll go on my diatribe at some point, but I’m finding that there’s just a lack of exaltedness and reverence in what’s going on now. So I feel very lucky that I had the good years.
Petnick: And the good years were?

Barak: The good years were prior to when I entered school, for sure, and probably my whole time in school I was lucky to have the great teachers and lucky not to be told that you have to play the guitar. I would have been very offended by that (laughs), and that’s what’s happening now.

Petnick: Was there an organ in this school that you—

Barak: Yes, there was an organ in the school. There was an organ everywhere I’ve trained or sung [cantorial music]. It’s true that some Jews that grew up more traditional [Orthodox or Conservative synagogues] couldn’t deal with the organ because they felt it was very Christian sounding. But I’ve grown to love the organ. It’s a flexible and dramatic instrument and it is also very peaceful. It belongs in certain spaces. I love the piano, but I love pianos in concert. I’m not crazy about pianos in worship because the sound doesn’t make me feel majestic.

Don’t get me wrong—I like the guitar. I think the guitar, at certain points, can be effective, and the music can be lovely for people. You have to meet people where they are. But as a steady diet? Nah. I like for the service to be a little eclectic, but I don’t like a steady diet of something that’s … whatever. Anyway, I just feel lucky. There were people at cantorial school who played guitar, but the music they chose was a little different back then—more folk or secular, not so liturgical.

Petnick: Let me go back to when you were taking about nusach. I want to make sure that I understand. So, you were saying that it is a precise system that determines the appropriate music for a certain time . . .

Barak: There’s an actual lecture. Every year we’d give practica—it was like a recital. One of the students gave a perfect nusach recital. It was all about the sixteen different ways to chant the Chatzi Kaddish. He showed that it was a matter of how he related it to the different times that he was chanting it. I asked him for a copy of that lecture, and I’ve given it at Congregation Emanu-El to explain nusach; I will sing it sixteen different ways. There’s a beautiful one, Maariv Shabbat—like at the end of Shabbat, at the Maariv service, right before we do Havdala. There’s a way to sing it that is so poignant (sings Chatzi Kaddish). He described it in his little lecture as he could hear the falling . . . it’s kind of a sighing . . . like we have to say goodbye to Shabbat—a beautiful way to chant the Chatzi Kaddish in the service. But like daily—in the morning—you just want to get through it (sings fast version of Chatzi Kaddish). Very simple. You just kind of rip it up. And during the High Holy Days (sings), it has the feeling of more majesty and terror, kind of . . . the Rosh Hashanah nusach. So there’s a way to describe nusach in the context of the time that it’s being . . .
the time, let’s say, that the Kaddish is being sung. It kind of makes it come together. I can’t remember all the sixteen right now, but they’re there.

Petnick: You’ve given that lecture and with those examples. Has it been recorded?

Barak: No, I don’t think so.

Petnick: It would be interesting to record that. I’d like to record that for you someday. Could we do that? That would be important for the historical record …

Barak: Well, I’d have to give credit to person who wrote the thing because I just borrowed it.

Petnick: Of course give credit, but I hope you will do it because it would be an interesting record for the Emanu-El archives and for your legacy.

Barak: Yeah.

Petnick: It would be great to have specifically you leaving a record of that nusach. Okay. So, I think we’re getting near the end of this particular section. Do you want to stop, or do want to say something else before we close for today?

Barak: No, just that it was an interesting thing when I went to the Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion, School of Sacred Music. It was a five-year program when I went in. The second year I was there, they changed it to a master’s degree in four years, so I was lucky because I got out in four years with a master’s. I actually was the first person ever to receive a master’s degree from the Hebrew Union College School of Sacred Music because my name began with a “B.” I was a B-A so I got the first one. The B-A got the M-A! Also at that time, there was no requirement to study in Israel. That program came later, so I studied in New York, which was perfect. And also there was no restriction on how big a congregation you could serve when you graduated. Now there is a tier system, same as rabbis. The system is a little different now, but back then I could go straight to Congregation Emanu-El in San Francisco only a year after being . . .

Petnick: Being invested and having not so much experience?

Barak: Right, and trust me it might have been better for me (laughs) to have a little more experience. I’d been a student cantor in a four-hundred family congregation for some years, but it still didn’t prepare me for coming to Emanu-El. It was a little intense. I had to learn on the job a lot. But in all, it was a kind of slam-dunk as far as all the luck I have had—doing a four-year program, getting a master’s, and serving a big congregation right away. Although, as I think about it, plenty of cantorial graduates were serving huge
congregations right after graduation. They were being flown all over the country, while they were students. It was great.

By the way, I wound up being in cantorial school with several people who had been with me at the Israel National Opera. There was a tenor, a baritone, and another little soprano, and we were all there together. And the gal and the wife of the cantor with whom I had sung at the Manhattan School of Music, the wife of the cantor of Shaaray Tefila when I first went to work there, she became a cantor, and the woman who I replaced at Shaaray Tifila who went off on the opera tour, allowing me to get the job, she became a cantor! (Laughs)

All the Jewish opera singers I knew became cantors! I used to say that Hebrew Union College is the final resting place for Jewish opera singers. That’s where we—most Jewish Opera singers—all wind up!

Petnick: We are going to stop here, and then we’ll begin with Emanu-El in our next session … possibly. What do you think?

Barak: I guess I said everything about Hebrew Union that I should say, except that just so much happened while I was there, and I did so much. I did so many concerts and so many things and got involved with the Conservative Cantors Assembly as well and went to their conventions and just made a lot of connections during that whole time. But we can add it next time.
Interview 6: May 29, 2105

Petnick: Today we will be talking about your time in New York, after returning from Israel and doing various things before and while going to cantorial school. Where would you like to start?

Barak: I’d like to start before I went to cantorial school. I’ve already mentioned that I had a fellowship to the Aspen Music Festival, and that I had a fellowship to the Bach Festival at Stony Brook. I also had a job working in a doctor’s office during that same time. When I got back from—I think it was Aspen—I was asked back to the doctor’s office, so I went back and worked for a few more months. Then something happened where I got someone a job there—my aunt, actually—and I didn’t tell them she was my aunt. They found out, and they got mad at me and fired her. And then they fired me!

It was the first time I’d ever been fired from anything, so I had a little ego problem there for a while, and I was sitting home, and I was a little depressed. I looked at my son who was six years old, and I came up with this brilliant idea. I said, “Danny do you want to be an actor?” And he said, “Yeah!”

I found an ad in the paper for two women that were looking to manage child actors or models, or whatever. They were just starting out, and I said, “Oh, let me give it a shot.” Danny was around six or seven, and I took him to these two ladies, Mickie and Barbara, both of whom were mothers of professional kids. I always thought Danny had a special quality about him—that he was very cute and he looked like [the kind of kid you might see on a commercial], and he also had an amazing personality, and he could sing. He was just this funny kid.

I thought it would give me something to do, so I took him to these ladies. One of them turned out to be Mickie Ziering, the mother of Ian Ziering, who was on Beverly Hills 90210. She was his mom. She was a lovely person—they were both just lovely women and I liked them right away. (Unfortunately, she passed away a few years ago.)

Mickie and Barbara signed Danny on the spot and got him a job. (In one week he already had a print job!) He modeled for Krugerrands [ads for gold coins]. He was on a cardboard display in banks, and he looked damn good, I must say! There was a very good-looking actor who played his dad, who was holding him, and it was very cute, so I said, “Boy, this is fun.” So we started doing this—going for auditions and all kinds of rounds. Meanwhile, very shortly after this began, he booked a commercial for Atari: Danny was on an Atari commercial nationwide. He kept doing this for a couple of years.

I had already started cantorial school in 1982. It started to get intense because Danny was going for these auditions, and at some point, he also booked a
Polaroid commercial, which is still on YouTube. It was a national Christmas Polaroid commercial, which was pretty funny.

Petnick: We’ll have to look at it together afterward. I’d love to see it.

Barak: Yeah, it’s adorable. We can see it on my big screen TV.

And so he kept doing that acting, and for a while, I was a stage mom when I was still in cantorial school. It was a very weird feeling because as a stage mom, I was completely ignored and inconsequential and completely disrespected by everyone; whereas, in cantorial school I was a star! So it was just sort of funny. Danny seemed to enjoy it, but he was also very sensitive, and when he would be rejected from things, it would take a toll on him.

Petnick: So, if he tried out for something and didn’t get it—

Barak: It would be really hard on him. And I wasn’t a good stage mom. I was a little bit … I didn’t like myself. I really wanted him to succeed because I thought that—

(Dog barking)

Petnick: You were talking about yourself—what type of stage mother you were.

Barak: I was not a good stage mother. I didn’t have the calm required for it.

Petnick: Well, what kind were you? Tell us how you actually—

Barak: I became one of those stage mothers you hear about and don’t like.

Petnick: Oh, okay. Describe it.

Barak: I don’t want to describe it—I don’t think about it. It was a very highly competitive atmosphere, and you were sitting in a room with other kids, and they were all going in … It’s not a compassionate place. Show biz is not a compassionate place. I didn’t like it when I was doing it. I didn’t like the feeling of it, and I didn’t like it for my kid. We did what we could. Luckily, what happened was that when I went to cantorial school, my dad did all the running: he picked Danny up from school whenever he had an audition, and he would drive him into the city, and then I would leave school and meet my father downtown. These auditions were always scheduled after 3 p.m. so kids could make them after school. I’d meet my dad at an office building, for instance. If it were at an advertising agency, I would take Danny upstairs and wait until his audition was over, and then we’d get back in the car and go back to Queens. All this was while I was studying to be a cantor.
It was all very frenetic and crazy. I feel bad that my dad had to be co-opted into this, because he wasn’t the best person to be doing this. He was kind of a nervous guy and this was hard on him. He wasn’t young, but he did it, and he spent a lot of time with his grandson that way. One of the final things that we did was that Polaroid commercial, which was one of the last things Danny did. This was in 1984. The other thing he did that year was to go on tour in the musical *Nine*. Tommy Tune directed him, and it was an unsuccessful tour. The show was a magnificent show. It was a fantastic show, and Danny had the lead boy’s role, Little Guido. And he was good in the show. He had to be, with two or three other little boys.

It turned out that one of the women in the show on tour with him was someone I had gone to high school with, Camille Saviola. I knew her in the company. I became friendly with another gal in the company who I’m still friends with, named Melody Jones, who is wonderful. I made a nice friend through that, and I reconnected with another friend, and that was fun, but the tour was difficult. I was in school, so my dad had to go on tour with Danny. And my mom wasn’t happy about that, and it was hard on my father.

But it was a short tour; it didn’t last very long. Sergio Franchi was in the cast, which made me very happy because I always liked him. He was a nice man, but again, I was invisible when I finally joined the tour at the end of it, which was—guess where? In San Francisco! The last leg of the tour was in San Francisco. They had been to Washington, D.C. and to a couple of places in the Midwest and a couple of places in the South. The show had some racy stuff in it, so it didn’t do well in some of these communities. I think a whole group of Baptists once walked out of one of the shows.

Petnick: Did it do well here in San Francisco?

I think it did okay here, not great. A lot of the character of the show was changed from the original Broadway, a lot of the sets and things like that. It wasn’t quite the same.

It’s such a highbrow show, and such shows are not always successful on tour when [they’re] that highbrow. It wasn’t *Jersey Boys*. It was the story of Federico Fellini, more or less, a kind of *roman à clef*, a Federico Fellini type of story. It’s called *Nine* because it’s based on *8 ½*, and the music is very, very sophisticated. It’s a fantastic show.

The music was by Maury Yeston—fabulous music! The lyrics were clever. It was an amazing piece. Raoul Julia won the Tony for it on Broadway. I just think it was a difficult show to go on tour. There’s a movie of it. I saw it with Antonio Banderas, again on Broadway. They pared it down a lot and made it more compact because it was a very big cast. I always say that Danny had the best of all possible worlds: he went on tour with twenty-seven gorgeous
women in various stages of undress, and he got his education very early. He did very well. He saw everything he needed to see.

Petnick: Very funny. And he was how old then?

Barak: He was eight. He was, I think, almost nine. After the tour was over, he was sad. He missed it. And then he got the commercial from Polaroid, and that was more or less the end [of his acting career]. He went for one more thing that he really wanted, and he didn’t get it. I couldn’t bear to see him so sad; I couldn’t bear it anymore, so we stopped. Also, I was winding down at cantorial school and it was just best to stop.

Petnick: Hmm. Tell us more about Danny … and what kind of person is he today?

Barak: He’s a very sensitive person. He is very sarcastic. And he’s got a Mort Sahl kind of sense of humor. He’s very, very funny, and very glib. In high school he was on the forensics team, and he was a speech champion. He won … he would do the humorous interpretations, and that was his life. Once he went to high school here, he was a changed person. He got on that speech team right in the beginning. He did debating. He did all those fabulous events. I went and judged some of them.

Petnick: Which school was this?

Barak: Washington High. There was a guy there named Sanford Chandler who had been there for years and years coaching that team. A real character, a real New York type. Danny just blossomed in high school, and that’s why he eventually took a rhetoric degree at Cal and then went to law school. He’s an attorney now.

Petnick: Is he a trial lawyer?

He really wants to do appeals more. He wants to do writing more. He’s very, very smart—really smart. But again, he’s very sensitive. And he also loves music. He likes to play his guitar. He sings. He sang with me at my twentieth anniversary party. We did a duet together. There’s a real bond with us. We’ve been bonded for years and years. I think I’m more bonded with him than anyone, probably.

His father … there was such distance. His father stayed in New York. I came here. They kind of drifted apart. They still talk, but I don’t think there’s the closeness there.

Petnick: Is Jacob still in New York?

Barak: Yes.
Petnick: He never went back to Israel?

Barak: No, he married a woman who’s also Israeli who had been living in Mexico City for many years, and they live in New York now. She’s a lovely person. He retired from the bank. He stayed at the bank all those years. He did very well there. I hope they’re having a good life. I don’t stay in touch with them.

Danny is living in Sacramento and working. He’s my pride and joy. I felt it the minute he was born that this would be the most life-changing thing I ever did. I knew that I would be responsible now for another person, and that was such an incredible realization: it just permeates your whole being. You can’t get away from it. That’s it: this is this person that is totally dependent on me, and my whole life is different now. I was an only child. He’s an only child, but the fact that, as an only child, of course, the world revolved around me, right? I mean there was nobody else, really. And now I had to take on this other human being and be fully responsible and dedicated and committed and everything, and it was a very different experience for me.

I remember thinking, how would I go on if anything ever happened to him? I just couldn’t even fathom it. It was such a huge earth-moving thing. It was a sea-changing thing. It was crazy. The feeling was crazy. I never had experienced anything like that. That was the biggest thing that ever happened. My son is really just—I don’t think he knows this, I don’t think he knows—he sort of knows, but I don’t think he really knows the depths of my feelings for him.

And I don’t see him that much. He’s up in Sacramento. We talk occasionally on the phone. He’s thirty-nine years old now: he’s a man. But it’s still … he’s just my life. He’s part of me. I’ve had a lot of fun with him! He was not a huge challenge. He was easy. Easy.

Petnick: Easy?

Barak: Because he was smart, self-sufficient.

Petnick: That’s great. So you were very companionable.

Barak: Yeah, I remember, I really appreciated the fact that he had a lot of wisdom, and insight, and almost psychic abilities. He’s very intuitive.

Petnick: So are you. That’s supposed to be hereditary. You’ve probably thought about that.

Barak: He’s very intuitive and he’s got a lot of … he doesn’t always make the right choices. I think he’s made some bloopers, but they were all his; he’s not going to listen to anyone else. He’s extremely stubborn that way. That he gets from
his father, I think. There's a stubbornness there that's like, whoa! I have to tell him sometimes, “Hey, a lot of people come to me for advice! How come if I tell you something, you dismiss me right away?” But he will ask me—when he really needs something he will come to me and ask me. And I have helped him a lot over the years, a lot.

Petnick: How is he like you?

Barak: I think even the sarcasm. I'm not as sarcastic that way, but I do get him. I get his humor. (Snapping her fingers) He gets me: we get each other right away. We play off of each other well—the sensitivity and the intuitiveness, definitely. The brilliance. I think he gets most of his smartness from his father. My ex was a very smart guy. He was very clever.

Petnick: So he continued to work in banking.

Barak: He stayed there. He's a very solid kind of guy who wouldn't take too many risks with his life.

Petnick: You said that your marriage didn’t work out—that you realized once when you were away on tour that you weren't happy in your marriage—but you didn’t say why. Would you like to say more about that?

Barak: There was nothing dramatic about it. I started to realize that I didn’t have the passionate feelings for him that I thought I should have. Being an artistic personality, I knew what that was, and I had had them in the past. I think I married Jacob because it felt safe. He was actually kind of a very distant relative. He was one of the first people I met when I was in Israel with whom I felt safe. The opera people were not safe people, and he was.

Petnick: What do you mean by safe?

Barak: Just somebody I could rely on to be there for me. And he was. And he took charge of me. He negotiated my driver’s license and this and that. He made sure we could get all our appliances without taxes. All this stuff, he knew what to do. Not that I didn’t speak Hebrew, but I didn’t speak it well enough. He was really a wheeler-dealer. He knew how to beat the system with everything. Plus, it was just the romance of being in Israel [and] meeting an Israeli. The first time I met him I think he was wearing his army fatigues—I don’t know—with the sunglasses. He was always wearing sunglasses—[there was] something very exotic about the whole thing. I had grown up with all those romantic notions of Israel, and here he was—he had just fought in the war. It was very appealing and very persuasive, and it kind of worked for me at the time. I was young and a little bit naïve. I hadn’t been out of the country. I hadn’t been away from home for a long time. And he was there. He had two brothers, but his father brought him along to meet me.
When I got the apartment in Holon, which was about a month after I got to Israel, I called his family because I had been given their name. I looked them up in the phone book. I could read enough Hebrew, and I looked them up and found them. I called up. I spoke broken Yiddish and said something to them like “Ich bin die groye Tochter fun Zelig und Leah Yanover fun Amerika ... ich bin eine zingerin fun opera!” I was making all this stuff up, and they understood me, and they said, “Oh! You’ve got to come for dinner.” They spoke back in Yiddish: “Come for Shabbes.”

So the father came over—Josef came over with his son, and it was Jacob. And then they took me to their house. We had a Shabbat dinner. I wasn’t speaking much Hebrew. I wasn’t speaking any Hebrew really, but the brothers had studied a little bit of English. Jacob spoke English, and it wasn’t too good, but he spoke English the best of all of them. So he came over, and we just hung out, and three days later we decided to get married, which was kind of crazy. Everybody there was happy.

But my parents freaked out. They were not happy. They started making phone calls, having friends talk to me, and saying, “Don’t do this!” I’m like, “Leave me alone; I’m gonna do it.” I think the more resistance they showed me, the more I went ahead and got married. I probably would have not—

Petnick:  Not surprised to hear that.

Barak:  That was basically what happened. He was a nice person. I have nothing negative to say about him. He was a good provider. He was a solid guy. There was just something that wasn’t there for me. And that happens. Those things happen.

Petnick:  I understand. All right, so going back to this time in New York when you’re just back from Israel. You’re living in Queens. Did you live near your mother and father?

Barak:  First we moved in with them, and that was okay for six months. And then we left and got an apartment in Forest Hills, which is where I had grown up.

We found a ground floor apartment in another building right across the street. It was cheap. And it was horrible, because we got flooded. We had a horrible mess, and we got out of there and moved back to my parents’ building, where we got a different apartment.

Petnick:  So you lived in the same building?

Barak:  Same building as my parents. Very convenient.
Petnick: This reminds me of how your family was situated when you were growing up, with your grandparents across the street. You repeated the pattern—living close, living nearby.

Barak: It was the same thing. My grandmother was still in her building with my aunt—they lived in the same building. And my other aunt lived in the building that I had moved next to. She lived in the building next to the building I had moved into on the ground floor.

There’s a realtor, a building developer in Queens called Lefrak, and he had all these buildings, and they were all within two or three blocks. I grew up in one of them called The Maple, and my grandmother had moved in there, and my aunt had moved in there, and then next to The Maple was The Poplar. My aunt Katie moved into The Poplar. We all lived close to each other. I could draw you the diagram!

[Description of location of the LeFrak apartment buildings deleted.]

Petnick: You were surrounded by family, which must have been comforting, after living in Israel.

Barak: It was wonderful. It was really nice. [It was] a good way to raise your son, you know, with the support of family all around him. He knew his great-grandmother. He knew his grandmother.

Petnick: Wonderful! So what else do you want to share with us about that time, about you, how you were? Kind of give us a picture, in addition to the details of this job or that job, tell us about you and that period of time.

Barak: When we first got back from Israel, I was just working—trying to keep afloat, keep our heads above water. We didn’t have much money. We were doing the best we could. As my husband earned more money, we got a little more comfortable. I was working, and Danny was in preschool—just normal life, nothing unusual. I was still trying to sing opera roles. I did a few little things, little local performances here and there, but my career just was kind of on hold; it really wasn’t going anywhere. Competitions were already drying up for me. I didn’t win things I wanted to win. When I didn’t win this one particular competition, which would have given me a recital at Carnegie Recital Hall, I said, “All right, I think I’m over this.” And that’s when cantorial school started to come into the picture. It looked really appealing at that point.

So that’s what I did. But I was just a mom. And I was a stage mom for a while. I was cooking and cleaning like anybody else. We bought a house in 1985. We bought a house in Kew Gardens Hills, right by the cemetery, very quiet, around the corner from Queens College. It was a nice little house. A year later
I moved out. That’s pretty much what happened there. I think it was a year. We may have been in there more than a year. But, yeah, it was not meant to be.

Petnick: And tell me about your Jewish life during those times. Were you an observing Jew? Did you observe Passover, High Holy Days, Shabbat?

Barak: We observed all the holidays: we always had Pesach; we always had the High Holy Days with my mother, my father. We didn’t observe Shabbat, interestingly enough, although my son was going to Solomon Schechter School, a Jewish day school. We sent him to Jewish day school because we knew he’d learn Hebrew there.

(Phone rings)

Barak: Excuse me a second. Temple is calling.

(Pause)

Petnick: We were talking about observances: you observed the High Holy Days and Pesach and not Shabbat—that’s where we left off.

Barak: I wasn’t going to shul at this time of my life. Except—well, wait a minute—in 1978, of course, is when I got the synagogue job, and I was going every Saturday to sing at Shaaray Tefila! From 1978 to 1982, or 1983, I was at Shaaray Tefila, singing every Friday night and every Saturday morning in shul. So, I didn’t go to shul, I was singing in shul.

And Reform Judaism was seeping in. I told you I kind of converted. My ex-husband didn’t come. Danny didn’t come, but Danny was going to Jewish day school. So actually Jewish-ly I was pretty set, honestly.

If you ask me, if I hadn’t been singing at Shaaray Tefila, would I have been in shul? Probably not. But I was definitely singing. I was being paid. But it was becoming more important, I think, but I wasn’t consciously thinking of being a cantor, ever. That was not part of the deal. That happened much later.

Petnick: Would you have preferred to have a career in opera rather than to be a cantor?

Barak: Opera, no. I would have wanted to do some opera, but not have a career—not have opera be my total focus. Really, I wanted to be a concert singer, a lieder singer, art songs, even. If I really want to be one hundred percent honest, I would have to say I wanted to be on Broadway, but that was not to be. I wasn’t a type. I wasn’t a type, the ingénue type. I had the voice, but I wasn’t a type. I was told that many times. I did have the face, but I didn’t have the body. I didn’t have the look. I didn’t have the constitution.
Honestly, I went to a couple auditions like those in my time, and it was too intimidating for me. You have to be made of steel. I’m not kidding. You have to be ready for rejection, and I’m just not built that way. I’m not built that way. I cannot do it. I just crumble.

Petnick:  Kind of like Danny.

Barak:  A little bit like Danny. I wasn’t built for that. I have friends who have been in the business a long time and it has hardened them. They’re good people, but they’re hardened. I could never be like that. That’s just not me. I’m much too sensitive for that.

Petnick:  Is there anything else you want to say about this period of your life? In the next interview, we’re going to go deeper into your cantorial training and knowledge, but is there anything else about this?

Barak:  I had a good time. It was family life. There was always family around. We had fun. My family was a hoot. They were funny. They were entertaining. My mom was always a bit of a challenge. I had some tough times with her. My dad was really very sweet and a very nervous kind of guy, but sweet—wouldn’t hurt a fly, would do anything for you. He was a very attentive person to other people’s needs. Not so much to his own.

My mother was a very, very strong, formidable lady. Very smart. I was caught between the two of them. It was not always easy. And when I got married, it was good to have them around, although my mom would always complain, “I’m not your babysitter.” I’m like, “I’m not asking you to be my babysitter, just spend some time with your grandson once in a while so I can do something else.” She was resentful of that a little bit. My father was pretty good about it. What he told my mother in private I don’t know. But he was okay. People were helpful. We had a little lady come by every day—a little Spanish lady—and take care of Danny before we got home from work. She was lovely.

I made a good friend in the building where I lived. She’s still my best friend. She calls me every week from New York. Twenty-eight years she still calls me every week from New York. She’s a great gal. Lauren Cohen, one of the best Weight Watcher lecturers on the planet. She still works for them.

I have a lot of friends in New York, friends I love dearly. Friends from high school, friends I’ve known for years. And I miss them. I miss them. But I talk to them, and I see them. I go back. It was just a good life. I can’t complain about a thing. I don’t look back on anything with any bitterness. The divorce was civil. We’re still amicable. There was nothing terrible. There was nothing terribly dramatic. It was okay. It was all okay.
Petnick: Good. Well thank you. I think that ends this section. We’ll stop here.
Interview 7: June 24, 2105

More about Studying and Training for the Cantorate

[Repetition deleted]

Barak: [As I’ve said] it was a very interesting [admissions] interview. But, you know, what I had already heard about Hebrew Union College was, “Take it with a grain of salt—just go, do the work, and then get out.”

Petnick: You once told me that people would say “ugh.” Why?

Barak: I wish I could remember, but I think it might have just been people’s disappointment in not being able to follow their real dream, which was opera … The people I knew wanted careers in opera, and anyone who wound up at cantorial school … well, I think they felt like they had failed in some way.

Petnick: I’ve read that many men and women who became cantors had tried to have a different kind of music career, but it didn’t work out for them: they had problems finding jobs; they had no financial security … they had a family to support …

Barak: Cantorial school was a good option for some. But for a lot of people I know, it was a big disappointment in their lives that they had to become cantors. However, I found that the opposite was true for me. The first day I was there, we had an orientation meeting—one of the rabbis at the school was giving an orientation—and I was sitting in the room with seven women and one guy; we were all the entering class. I remember looking around the room and listening to this guy’s talk, and I was just thinking, “Oh God! This is serious. This is a commitment.” It really hit me.

Petnick: I remember you saying you felt it would really change you and change your life. Tell us more about what you were feeling at that time.

Barak: It just felt like, “Oh boy, I am now enrolled in something really serious. I’m going to be interacting with people who are studying to be rabbis.” And that was a big thing, a big thing. The word “rabbi” was a big thing for me. And cantors, I hadn’t really had that much contact with cantors. This was the first time. I had one cantor in my youth at the Orthodox synagogue, and I would just hear him, but I never got to know him.

I didn’t really get very close to that community, so I didn’t interact much with the rabbi and cantor of my synagogue as a child. I was always on the fence. I
was on the outs. I wasn’t coming from an Orthodox family, so going into an Orthodox shul I felt a little bit out of place, even though a lot of my friends were going to that synagogue. And that’s why I went—because we were all in Hebrew school together. It wasn’t where I felt most comfortable, but I went, and I listened, and I prayed with everybody, and I hung out with the kids. But when I went home, it wasn’t as if we were living an Orthodox and observant lifestyle, so it was kind of odd: I was always feeling out of place. My life has been [a life of feeling] out of place a lot, in a lot of places.

Petnick: Really, how so?

Barak: I’m an only child, I was not the coolest kid, and I was overweight. I was taunted. I was attending an Orthodox synagogue when I wasn’t from an Orthodox family. I was half Sephardic, and I didn’t know any other Sephardic people. When I was growing up mostly everybody in New York [who was Jewish] and in my neighborhood was Ashkenazi, but I was closer to the Sephardic side of my family. I was much more influenced by them, so I always felt a little bit not quite with the crowd.

I always thought of myself as not that smart. I wasn’t interested in academics like some of my friends, most of whom were smart. I was into music—I was a music nerd. So I never really felt “in” until I went to the High School of Music and Art, and that’s when I felt like I belonged. That’s when I started to feel like I could fit in.

In junior high, there had been semblance of that fitting in because of my music teacher. A couple of nerds and I latched onto him and became his little devotees, and we would go places with him and sing and do all sorts of things. But it’s true that I never felt like I was part of the real crowd. And going to Music and Art—many of my friends from the neighborhood where I grew up were going to Forest Hills High School, so I lost that connection, too. I always felt a little bit like a fish out of water. Even when I was singing opera, often I would be one of two or three Jews in the whole place. There were no Jews! I sang in churches as a professional singer in New York—I always had a church job—so I was always feeling like I was the one Jew in the place. I always had a sense of being alone or unique or something, not always in a good way.

Petnick: How did it feel to sing religious music as compared to secular music? Internally, was that a different experience for you?

Barak: It was a very different experience. For one thing, your focus is completely different. You’re not singing about romance, humanly things—you’re constantly in a prayer mode.

Barak: [Studying for the cantorate] we were told right from the beginning: you are *sh’liach tzibur*. You have a function as a messenger from the public to God.
You are a vessel for them. And, that was very comfortable, though. It was weird. It became very comfortable because it took me out of myself. When I was singing I didn’t worry about hitting high notes. I was in a very different place.

Petnick: Tell us about that. This is what many people want to understand, and what I want to understand.

Barak: It’s tough to talk about because while you’re shouldering a heavy responsibility; you’re kind of the focus of everything in the synagogue; you also want to maintain a certain amount of humility. There’s a prayer on Rosh Hashanah which the chazzan sings, and it’s called Hin’ní. It’s the prayer of the cantor. It’s the prayer of the sh’liach tzibur who’s praying to God to help him (or her) fulfill the responsibility of being the vessel for the public, for taking on that responsibility.

The legal position of the sh’liach tzibur is one who prays for those who cannot pray. That’s the basic thing. If you have people in the synagogue who don’t know how to pray—mostly we’re talking about ancient times when there might be uneducated people walking into the synagogue who couldn’t read, and so they couldn’t pray their prayers—there had to be someone (a proxy) appointed to do that task for those who couldn’t pray. Since those who couldn’t read or pray couldn’t fulfill the obligation and would be transgressing, and you wanted to have them avoid transgression, you prayed for them. That’s what a cantor does, which is why there’s a problem in the Orthodox world with women being cantors. It’s because prayer is a time-bound commandment, and women were exempt from time-bound commandments because of their duties as mothers. It actually started out as a compassionate thing for women not to be bound by time, and it’s become … there have been a lot of abuses. It became a [means of] exclusion, sometimes even a violent exclusion. Some horrible things have come out of that. But women were never totally exempt from the act of prayer, nor were they denied the right to pray. They weren’t obligated on time-bound stuff. That’s why there’s a problem.

Petnick: The history of that is so interesting. People today certainly can read a prayer, and yet most people, if you ask them if they can really pray—if they are honest—they’ll admit it’s hard to pray, actually.

Barak: It is very hard to pray, especially to pray words that have been written down: the kevah, the fixed prayers. Sometimes you’re just not in a space that day to feel very grateful or whatever. It’s a discipline like anything else. It’s also a mitzvah. So you have to fulfill your mitzvot.

Petnick: The voice of the cantor, the music of the service … My experience is that services lead me from a more mundane state, in which I am mostly concerned
about my own small affairs and feelings, into a more large-minded state of awareness.

Barak: It kind of puts you in a place where you put things in perspective, even for a while, even for an hour. You’re sitting in a place where you’re feeling a certain amount of peace and safety.

Petnick: And beauty.

Barak: And beauty. You can be alone with your own thoughts, your mind can wander—it doesn’t matter. But the idea is that you’re out of the mundane world. You’re in a more sacred space. It’s good to connect with that. I think a lot of people don’t know how to connect with that anymore, or have never even had the experience of it. I guess that’s what I was feeling. I was feeling, Oh boy, here I am, for two hours a week, or whatever, I’m going to have to inspire people and be a vessel for them. And it’s a heavy responsibility.

You feel the responsibility! The first time I ever did a funeral, I was terrified! God! What if I say the wrong thing?

Petnick: What if I forget the deceased’s name!

Barak: Yes, and that has happened! There are times when you really feel very much that you are doing something so important, such a milestone in a family’s life, and you don’t want to mess it up. And after a while, the more you do it, the more practice you get, the better it gets; but still, I take those things very seriously. Weddings, you can have some fun, you can make jokes. You can make a blooper and nobody will care. Everybody’s happy, and everybody’s drunk.

You go to a funeral and it’s serious! You don’t want to mess that up. And also, you’re constantly aware that you are a role model in many ways. You have to behave a certain way. You have to wear the mantle with sanctity, and you have to be serious. It’s not a funny thing—this is not funny—people don’t look at you as a funny. You can have a personality—I’m not saying you can’t have a personality, or you can’t have some fun—but you can’t slough this off and be irreverent about everything. You have to really say, “I am a leader in this community. I am someone who people are looking up to for some kind of spiritual solace. They have needs.” I take it very seriously. I’ve always taken it seriously. From the moment I stepped into that school, and said, “Whoa! This is serious,” I began to feel that weight.

And yet, after a while, after a few years of this, it didn’t feel like a weight anymore. It felt like a most incredible gift and privilege to have spent so much time with so many people at so many important times in their lives. And that’s the thing—that’s why the singing was—it’s funny—the Cantors Assembly
came out with a new slogan: “Singing is just the beginning.” And it’s true in a
way. I always thought that was a weird slogan. I thought, “Oh, gosh, can’t we
do better than that?” Singing is just the first part of it all—you want to get that
duck in order. And then you want to move on to what is important about being
a cantor, which is to be an inspiration in some way, to be a teacher.

Petnick: You were very fortunate that your voice is so good. You probably didn’t and
don’t have to struggle much—would it be correct to say that you don’t have to
struggle much with your voice and that you have that vocal performance piece
down?

Barak: There are times when you struggle, only because you’re having some health
issues or having some emotional times in your life when your voice doesn’t
work as well, or you may have phlegm. I get a lot of phlegm, right?

Petnick: Got phlegm? Now there’s a t-shirt for cantorial students.

Barak: I gave a birthday card to a well-known opera singer a couple of weeks ago,
and it said, “With age comes wisdom. And phlegm, lots of phlegm.” I hope
she appreciated that.

Petnick: Where does one even find a birthday card like that?

Barak: I’ve got it on my iPhone. I found it in one of those [online] stores, and it was
perfect. Somehow I always find the perfect card. I don’t know why.

Anyway, there are all kinds of conditions that can cause you to have to
struggle, but [what helped me], I think, was the fact that I was so well-trained.
From such an early age, I had had serious classical training, and I focused
more on art song than opera, and that my real love and my real passion was art
song and also Broadway [musical theater], which is a more intimate art. Opera
singers always have to sing very forcefully and produce a huge sound, and
they’re larger than life. I did some opera, but I usually sang smaller roles. I
usually sang roles that were suitable for a lighter, lyric voice—like roles in
Mozart —like Susanna in The Marriage of Figaro, and things like that. So it
kept me in that more intimate, light place. When I would do my art songs …
each time I sang I had this wonderful opportunity to tell a story with a little
song. They could be passionate stories, they could be little folk tales, they
could be sweet love songs; there were all different modes of expression.
Through that, I think, I learned to be more flexible as far as interpretation,
being able to interpret all different kinds of texts. And also singing in different
styles: baroque, classical, or romantic. I could function in all those places and
in different languages, so that singing in Hebrew, since I already spoke
Hebrew, was a no-brainer.
Plus I understood every word I was singing, so it made the interpretation of those texts easier for me. The whole compendium of all this coming together: my vocal training – my love for art song — I think these things combined to make it a lot easier for me to step up to the *bimah* and really be able to dig into those prayers.

Petnick: A lot of music for Reform composed in the 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} century was more classical—

Barak: Very classical. The composers were classical.

Petnick: And yet they made it somehow also fit the Jewish sensibility.

Barak: Well, they wrote with a Jewish ear and with the modes in mind, and they made beautiful music out of these texts. And it’s a pity that a lot of that is falling by the wayside, now that the synagogues are not hiring professional choirs. Volunteer choirs can’t usually handle a lot of the music, [and people] don’t want to hear the organ anymore. The guitar has crept in almost one hundred percent now. The music is more folk and pop oriented. It’s not the beautiful, reverent, exalted stuff that came out of composers like Binder, Freed, Schalit, and Piket, who wrote gorgeous music for the synagogue. People don’t hear it any more. It’s a shame. It upsets me. It upsets me greatly. It’s spurring me on to retire.

Petnick: Let’s talk more about that when we get into the history of your experience at Emanu-El. We’ll go into that more deeply. Today we’ll stick with your education and training: how and in what ways did your education and training at the School of Sacred Music prepare you for this large role that you were to assume? How did it prepare you to be a cantor, a *chazzan*? Let’s continue taking that apart.

Barak: In a way it prepared me with repertoire, for sure. It definitely prepared me to learn to be able to chant a service in a Conservative synagogue, which is interesting because when you get out of Hebrew Union College, after learning all that *nusach*, you find that you can rarely use it again—except here and there, when you can fit it in. It’s a different liturgy. It’s a different way to pray. You walk out of Hebrew Union College intoxicated with *chazzanut*, with *nusach*. It’s like, “Ah! I’ve learned this incredible wealth of synagogue music and where am I going to put it?”

Petnick: It’s still a little mysterious to me what *nusach* is. Please further define it for us.

Barak: Okay, well, there’s that lecture I’ve already discussed, “Sixteen Different Kaddishes,” and it explains *nusach* beautifully. *Nusach* is … As I have said, the most important thing in Judaism is not space, but time. It’s not where you are, but the time you’re at, right? So you mark time in different ways: holidays
mark time, prayer services mark time … A Jew is supposed to pray three times a day. Well, in order to make distinctions between those times you use music. When we cantillate the Torah, we have musical motifs that are read through little symbols. In other words, symbols are placed in a study text of Torah, let’s say the beginning of the Creation (chants example, “Bereshit bara ...”), and not in the Torah scroll itself.

The scroll itself has nothing in it, just consonants. You have to study it first. In a study text you’re studying it before you actually read from the scroll, and both consonants and vowels are given. Hebrew vowels are indicated by dots and dashes—they are not letters.

And then in the [study text] you have also symbols above and below the words. Those symbols have musical value. They have names—the symbols have names. That’s how we learn how to cantillate, because we say the name with the melody: chants: merchah, tipchah, munach, etnachtah [See audio recording 7: 27:32]. So when you’re chanting the beginning of Genesis: “Bereshit bara Elohim et hashamayim ve’et ha’arets ...” [27:40] Bereshit bara Elohim comma et hashamayim ve’et ha’arets period. So we know that da-dum is a comma and da-dum-da is a period. Musically, that is punctuation. The cantillation has other great qualities about it that have a wonderful function, but that is musical punctuation.

Petnick: This would mean that everyone studying that passage and chanting from the study sheet with the cantillation [trope] marks would chant it more or less the same. Vocal quality might vary, but if they were all chanting it correctly, they would all be chanting it the same.

Barak: There’s our regular Torah chant, like for Shabbat. There is another one for High Holy Days using the same symbols with different musical values. It’s complicated because those symbols are uniform for every system of cantillation, but it depends on the text you’re chanting how the music sounds when you look at the symbol. It’s complicated. However, the same thing is true of nusach: nusach is not punctuation, but it is musical value for the time and the text that you are chanting.

We have in the matter of the Kaddish, let’s say, the half-Kaddish that’s chanted as a separation between certain rubrics of a prayer service, the Chatzi Kaddish. We always chant this little half-Kaddish to delineate the next section of the service, okay? Because we must make a separation between what has just happened and what is about to happen. So, we have one way, let’s say, to chant it in the morning, a different way to chant it in the afternoon, and another way to chant it in the evening. Sometimes it’s the same, but for the most part, it’s slightly different … a different way to chant it on Shabbat … a different way to chant it at the High Holy Days.
I always like to say [that] if Rip Van Winklestein woke up in the middle of the forest, and he walked into a synagogue … and he heard (singing [30:14]), he’d say, “Oh, I’ve been sleeping for twenty years, and at least I know that today is Rosh Hashanah,” because he’d know that melody. If he heard (singing [30:31]) he’d say, “Good morning,” with shacharit. If he heard, (singing [30:41]) he’d say, “Oh, Shabbat is coming to an end.” Okay, that’s the one on Saturday afternoon, Shabbat mincha. So you know where you are in time through the chanting of these certain modes.

Petnick: Oh, so those are the modes?

Well, they’re modes. They’re all based on modes. They’re all based on scales. And you have certain ways—if you heard this ending of the prayer—da da da—you’d know it’s the Three Festival of time of the year: it’s like Pesach or Shavuot or Sukkot, right? There are little snippets of melody. There are scales that are employed. There are certain melodies employed. If you’re not Sephardic, if you’re Ashkenazi, and you don’t hear (sings) “Kol nirdre …” it’s a shanda [shame]. You have to hear that melody for the Kol Nidre [service]. That’s the way it works—it’s musical marking of time.

Petnick: Please say for us in your words, what modes are.

Barak: If it’s a morning service, and people are in a hurry—they want to get to work or whatever—(singing) we sing the Chatzi Kaddish very easy, very light. It’s a very easy chant. But for Shabbat (singing Chatzi Kaddish more slowly and elaborately), it’s a little more elaborate. It gives a little more indication that this is a special day.

Petnick: Right. You know, we, most of us congregants, who have no knowledge of this—as I never did before I began to work with you—think that the cantor makes up on the spot or beforehand how she’s going to sing the liturgy that day or that evening. People don’t know about nusach and modes, and that’s why I’m querying this, deconstructing this, because it’s something we must clarify so that more of us will understand.

Barak: Absolutely, but this is a five-year course of study. The minute we walk in, we study the Shabbat nusach. And then the second year—I don’t know if it’s still true now, how they parcel it out, but for us, it was first year Shabbat nusach, how to chant on Shabbat—the second year was Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The third year we learned the Three Festivals. And the fourth year already we were doing daily nusach, in case we ever had to lead daily prayer services. It’s all tradition.

(Dog barking)
It’s all according to tradition. It’s hundreds and hundreds of years old, these methods of chanting. They were usually orally transmitted, and then eventually they were written down—sometime in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries.

Petnick: So the cantorial art was previously learned in apprenticeship—teacher to student.

Barak: It was apprenticeship. It was oral tradition. It was passed down. And cantors were very creative, and they were improvisers. They improvised within those systems, and sometimes, eventually, they would write them down. And so when we were learning we actually had books from two particular cantors. At the time we were learning from books by Adolph Katchko, who wrote his nusach down—all the prayers. He just transcribed all the music he would chant for his prayers in a big volume. We would get these volumes, and we would learn. And then we also learned Israel Alter, who was more elaborate. Katchko was simple.

Petnick: When did Katchko and Alter live?

Barak: They were all 20th century cantors.

Petnick: Early 20th century?

Barak: More or less. Not that early, but they had the benefit of finally being able to transcribe, which most cantors did not. Musical notation was not something that was done hundreds of years ago, so—

(Brief dialogue about Cantor Barak’s dog, Schatzy, sitting nearby.)

So we learned from transcribed nusach, which, again, was not always the best method, because even though we were given the framework at Hebrew Union College, we didn’t learn how to improvise. It’s true of the rabbis, too. Sermons used to be that rabbis would get up and start riffin’ on the Torah portion of the day, and they didn’t even have notes; they were just so scholarly. They knew all the commentators; they knew everything, and they could just get up and fashion a talk. Nowadays nearly everyone writes their sermon down—their little essays—and they deliver them. There’s almost no room for improvisation. It’s the same … I’m assuming there are some cantors who know how to improvise; absolutely, they still do. They have to be really secure in nusach though.

I think if I walked into a Conservative synagogue at this stage of the game, I’d be using my notes. I’d be using my transcribed notes from Katchko or Alter, or maybe Noah Schall, or one of those cantors who did transcribe.
Petnick: You wouldn’t feel free …?

Barak: Certain prayers, yes. Sometimes I still improvise. Usually on Friday nights, when I have the opportunity, I’ll improvise a Hashkiveinu [evening prayer for peace].

Petnick: I have heard you sing some beautiful renditions of Hashkiveinu.

Barak: They’ve come out pretty successful. I think I’ve maintained the nusach of it. But I can’t always be sure. I’ve definitely made up little melodies. My organist, Rodney, is always astounded. I’ll say, “Did we record that one? I’d like to remember that one. I’d like to write it down.” People come up to me and say, “Who wrote that?” And I say, “I made it up.” I enjoy doing that—

Petnick: I can see that.

Barak: Because then I feel like a “real” cantor. I really enjoy it. And so that’s what nusach is, basically. It’s a lot more complex than that, but that’s the beginning explanation of it. You’re within a framework, and you pretty much riff within that framework. But there are certain points in liturgy where you have to maintain a specific melody or a specific transposition because they wrote these rules down at some point. Now you go from Freygish [mode of the harmonic minor scale often used in Klezmer] to this, and a certain Phrygian mode [5th mode of harmonic minor scale used in Jewish music and Klezmer and Turkish and Middle Eastern music] is like Freygish—I mean, in our own terminology.

Petnick: Freygish? Phrygian? These are …?

Barak: These are scales.

Petnick: Jewish music has been always been regulated. I’ve read that during certain time periods all percussion instruments were forbidden, and other times they were used a lot. Is that right?

Barak: Only in the Temple times—only in the Temple were instruments used. Once the Temple was destroyed, the Jewish people went into national mourning, and then they did not allow instruments into the Temple after that. The synagogues could not use instruments, which is really kind of sad.

Petnick: They were in mourning, and yet it’s still hard to understand why musical instruments would be banned …

Barak: They’re in mourning. I don’t know if I buy it. You know, that was the instruction: no instruments. And then, later on, when people said, “Wait a minute now. Come on. This is a long time ago. Can we bring instruments back
in?” Then the [rabbinic] rationale became, “No instruments, because if an instrument would break on Shabbat, you couldn’t fix it.” You break a string on the guitar—you can’t fix it.

Petnick: There’s a rabbinic fantasy for you.

Barak: Well, that’s it. Even in Conservative synagogues today, there’s a lack of instruments. Some are doing it. Park Avenue Synagogue in New York always had an instrument, always had an organ. Wonderful place. But most Conservative synagogues do not. And I find it very dry. There’s a beauty to it, and yet it’s very dry. And when … you know: “How Ya Gonna Keep ‘Em Down on the Farm…” If you grow up just listening to that, and you never listen to any other music because that’s what you know, it’s okay because it’s what you know, and it’s a lovely thing. But once you hear the music of Freed, or the music of Schalit, or the music of Binder, or something, some beautiful Janowski, then you go: “Wait a minute! Why can’t we do that? It’s so beautiful.” The liturgy sounds gorgeous with that music. Why would I sing “Kumbaya” when I could sing the Mozart Requiem?

Petnick: Good question. Let’s go back again to your school where you learned to be a cantor. I have a few more questions about that, okay? The name changed—what is the full name now?

Barak: Now it’s been renamed, and they now call it the DFSSM, the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music.

Petnick: We’ll discuss that later. I’m not going to go there now …

Barak: I don’t ever want to go there now.

Petnick: (Laughs) So let’s talk more about the school when you went to it. Let’s start with the physical reality of the school. Where was it?

Barak: Right by NYU (New York University) in New York City: 1 West 4th Street

Petnick: And it’s still in the same location?

Barak: Yes.

Petnick: What year did you first go there, and how old were you when you entered?

Barak: In 1982, when I was thirty-two years old.

Petnick: When you attended how large was the student population?
Barak: Well, eight people in my class—in my year. I would say there were about—maybe thirty-five cantorial students, maybe fifty rabbincic students, something like that—maybe more than fifty; maybe sixty in all. That was just the New York campus. There was the Cincinnati campus also.

Petnick: Is New York the original campus for the study of Reform Judaism?

Barak: Cincinnati was the original, and it only has the rabbinic school, no cantorial school.

Petnick: When you were there were there also people who were studying for temple management positions? Did they offer temple administration then?

Barak: Not administration. They have now a school of nonprofit management in Los Angeles.

Petnick: Did you like studying in the presence of rabbis, or would you have preferred to—

Barak: Some of my best friends are rabbis.

Petnick: How did the cantors and the rabbis interact?

Barak: In the New York school it was better because we had to work together. In the other schools, they don’t have the experience of working alongside cantors or studying with cantors, and I think it’s had an effect.

Petnick: Can you say something about what effect it would have had?

Barak: I think there’s a certain lack of knowledge of what a cantor really is, and what they do, and what they study, and a certain lack of respect. There are rabbis that won’t hire cantors. They will convince their congregations not to.

Petnick: That they do not need someone to come in and sing during the High Holidays?

Barak: Well it’s an expense, and it’s also a—

Petnick: They have to share power?

Barak: Right. It’s really not power but just to share the *bimah*. But that’s getting a little pejorative here. I’ve got to be careful. I think there are many rabbis that are wonderfully welcoming to their cantors. There are others that are not so welcoming, not so respectful, not so keenly aware of what a cantor can do for the congregation, and [of] how when you work with an excellent partner it makes you look good. Most people don’t realize that. They’ve got a lot of ego problems. There you have it. I haven’t had that problem.
Petnick: What was overtly and implicitly conveyed to you about what the roles of the cantor and rabbi should be? Were you taught to hold your own with rabbis in a relationship of equality, or were you taught to be slightly subservient to rabbis? What was communicated to you?

Barak: We weren’t taught to be subservient. We really weren’t. And that’s the problem, because we were taught that what we do is extremely valuable. We had tremendous respect for the role of the cantor when we left school and while we were there as well. I think we felt that we wanted to contribute and be as cherished and as inspiring and all those good things … and that we really have something to offer—something to bring to the Jewish people. And that was not discouraged when we were at school. I think the reality of what happens when you leave school is another matter.

Petnick: So we’ll talk about that in the next interview, i.e., the difference between your training for the position and the reality of being in the position. Of course, it’s like this in other professions—there are great disparities between school and actual practice of one’s profession.

Barak: [In school] we got to give recitals twice a year. They were well attended. There was a lot of interest paid to us. We had concerts. We had all sorts of things we were doing, and we were busy studying. So it wasn’t any matter of one-upmanship or anything like that, or being told we weren’t valuable. It’s not that. We loved what we were studying. I got a big kick out of it.

Petnick: I am interested in … let’s say that sometimes there’s a difference between what is conveyed by spoken language and what is suggested nonverbally.

Barak: No, I didn’t feel that. There was a change in administration partway through my studies, but the person who was the head of the School of Sacred Music when I came in was both a rabbi and a cantor.

Petnick: Now, that’s interesting.

Barak: He loved the cantors. And the person who took over after him was a rabbi who I don’t believe was very committed to the cantorial school. It is my perception that this person was thinking this was a stepping-stone, and I think denigrated the cantorate in many ways. This person was not committed to us at all—this was a person who had a different agenda completely.

Petnick: And in what year of your studies did this person take over?

Barak: The third year. And we didn’t get along very well.

Petnick: Did the vocal ability of the various cantorial candidates vary, or were they—
Barak: Very varied.

Petnick: Speak to us of the variations.

Barak: Well there were people who honestly couldn’t sing at all.

Petnick: And they were admitted!

Barak: And they were! And there were people who were quite wonderful.

Petnick: Like you.

Barak: I was one of the happier ones. I got a lot of attention. I did well there. I loved it. I loved it. And I reconnected with my Judaism. I was very taken with it.

Petnick: Tell us about what it was like for you to be reconnected with your Judaism. What does that mean?

Barak: It gave me a whole added dimension to a spirituality that I always thought was innate. I had it. I had it! I had a connection somehow. I always felt there was something going on in my life that was unexplainable and very powerful. We’ve talked about my background [previously], but this kind of intensified it, and it really intensified my love for the religion and for the ethical beauty of it. And everything that I could … it was the first time in my life that I had really studied Torah and really became so appreciative of [the] text. There was so much to learn. It was so rich. There was so much beauty in it. I just became prouder and prouder to be Jewish and to be in this position of imparting it.

I think the most valuable thing I do is teach kids, because I feel like I’m giving them a positive experience of Judaism, which so many young Jews never had in my day. They were clueless, and they were not having it, and they didn’t want to be wasting their time with this [learning Hebrew and studying Judaism]. I think what goes on with most of the kids I teach, is that they really love it. It makes me so happy!

It makes me so happy that possibly I have influenced hundreds of kids this way. And they’ll grow up to be caring Jews. I’m sure we’ll lose a few, but there’s just a beauty about it. We wonder—we worry—about our future generations: will there be Jews?

Petnick: But the numbers are declining, right?

Barak: Well they say that, but I’m not sure. I think—there are so many converts to Judaism that I know of, so I don’t know that the numbers are declining. I’m all for going way out and grabbing them off the streets and making Jews out of them. I believe Rabbi Alexander Schindler, before he passed away, was
making those statements such as, “It’s time we started proselytizing.” I kind of believe it. I think it’s a good idea.

Petnick: Proselytizing? How so? That would be a big change in the Jewish world.

Barak: It would be a huge change. I think we have something to sell—I think we have something to offer. I think in this crazy turmoil we’re in today, with hypocrites and people who deny faith at all—people are running around all the time saying, “I’m an atheist.” Okay, that’s fine, but do you know what you’re an atheist from? Have you ever studied anything? Do you understand what [the] teachings of some religions can actually do to improve the world? Have you ever thought of that? Or are you just looking at the people who are messing it up? I feel very positive. I feel so positive about Judaism and what it has to offer that I think it’s a good sell.

Petnick: Interesting. My friends and I recently have been talking about the rising dominance of greed in the world. And the first thing you think about is that religious practice has declined so much throughout the Western world. So what happens when some of the restraints, which have formerly been imposed by religion on a negative human quality such as greed, have loosened?

Barak: Part of it is that people haven’t been taught to care for one another. I used to wonder why is it that socialism can flourish in Europe and not here. Part of it—I think all of it—is that Europe has been more homogeneous. People care for each other there because they are like each other.

Petnick: That’s what they say.

Barak: And here, here it’s a crazy quilt, and nobody gives a damn for anyone who isn’t like them. And that’s very destructive.

Petnick: A simple example is that I see it on the buses: an elderly Chinese person gets on the bus, and a Chinese youth or adult will offer them a seat. But when an elderly person who’s Hispanic or Caucasian, gets on the bus, those same Asians might just ignore them. And vice versa: Hispanics help Hispanics and ignore Asians. Caucasians are more apt to help Caucasians. It’s all of us acting this way.

Barak: Rabbi Kirschner gave a sermon years ago at Congregation Emanu-El, and he riffed on the passage v’ahavta l’reacha kamocha, which we translate as, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” There is a rabbinic commentary that says, “What if it means ‘You shall love your neighbor who is like yourself?’” In other words, you restrict your love and respect to people who are only like you. And that’s kind of disturbing.

Petnick: That is disturbing.
Barak: What if that’s what that really means?

Petnick: I like the idea of being kind to everyone: as it said, possibly in our liturgy, to “be kind to strangers because we once were strangers in Egypt and have been strangers in all the lands of the world since.” Since we Jews have a strong solidarity amongst ourselves, it’s important to me that our solidarity is balanced with being kind to strangers.

Barak: The commandment in the Torah is, “You shall help the stranger because you were once strangers yourself,” so obviously that negates the other thing. But, “Love your neighbor?” If it really means, v’ahavta, “You should love your neighbor, who is like yourself,” that makes some sense to me. But you don’t have to love everybody. You have to respect all human beings and be there if they are in need … I’m not sure you have to actually love everyone. I think that’s asking a lot. The Torah doesn’t even say love your mother and father. It says just, “Honor your father and mother.”

Petnick: But it does say, v’ahavta, which literally means, “thou shalt love,” right? Maybe that also depends on what the ancient or operative idea of love was. I’m sure there’s a lot of rabbinic commentary about what the word “love” would mean.

Barak: It’s interesting, because in the v’ahavta itself, (chants v’ahavata [57:30]) “You shall love the Lord your God,” but then it goes on to explain how to love the Lord your God, which is by doing the mitzvot, so “v’ahavta l’reacha kamocha” could just mean “You shall love your neighbor with kindness.” In other words be kind to your neighbor.

Petnick: When your neighbor is in need of something?

Barak: As you would wish them to be kind to you.

Petnick: Which does work out so well!

Barak: And if the world were constructed like that, it would be a really nice place, wouldn’t it? For some reason we’re just not capable of it. That’s very hard, very hard to accept.

Petnick: The myth of independence is so strong, but it’s delusion. We’re interdependent. We’re all connected to one another. We all need the same things—air, water—

Barak: You’re talking to the converted here. (Laughs)

It is disturbing about all the disparity in this particular society. It’s very hard, and it’s very destructive. And we’re not fixing it—seems like we’re not fixing
it. Everybody’s buying into it … all the bad stuff. Capitalism has a lot to do with it because it causes greed.

Petnick: It really does, but I want to pull myself out of this conversation because I know we have very little time and so much about your life to cover. Let’s go back to the particulars of your cantorial training. We were looking at some of your report cards before: do you want to talk about some of the broad areas of study and some particular subjects taught in cantorial school?

Barak: The most important things for me were the nusach and the cantorial repertoire. So we learned a lot of repertoire—more modern repertoire, [the] stuff I’m talking about, the composed music. Nowadays I’m sure they throw in more of the contemporary repertoire as well, whatever’s out there. I have a pretty extensive repertoire. I know a lot of this music—choral music and everything. I’m proud of that. A lot of my colleagues don’t know that anymore, the younger ones. They haven’t studied it as extensively.

Petnick: So, for instance, with Cantor Marsha Attie, would her recent training in L.A. to become a cantor be quite different than your training years ago in New York? Have you discussed this?

Barak: It’s quite different. We’ve discussed it. She feels that there were some holes in that [her] education. For sure, they didn’t have a lot of coaching sessions. At Hebrew Union College we had a coach each year. You always had a coach, usually a Reform coach or a more Conservative coach. You got coached in cantorial repertoire, as well as more modern composed repertoire. You worked with a coach toward a recital each year. You got an assignment. Your assignment was, for instance, “Sing a Shabbat Chanukah morning service with the proper music for it. Sing a shacharit service. Daven a shacharit service. Sing a Pesach morning …” They would give you a specific assignment, and you had to stand up and lead as if you were leading a service with your own musical choices. A lot of people would take a quartet to sing with them or just create it really specially. There were many different assignments.

I was asked to chant the liturgy of one particular poem we do on Passover, which is called Tal [a prayer for dew]. I was assigned that in my second year. I had to chant the whole piyyut plus the opening prayer—the Tal, the Avot and the Gevurot. And it was beautiful. I had never heard these melodies before, and they were gorgeous—the special Chatzi Kaddish, special Avot, and then the Tal prayers, which were just magnificent. It’s mystical. It’s gorgeous. It’s an amazing experience to be there—and not only that, it’s really something because the teachers are sitting there judging, and the students are there, and as you’re singing, they hum; they create harmony for you. It’s an amazing thing. It’s so joyful. I have a recording of it. I have my Tal practicum somewhere. I think it’s here in a box somewhere.
In addition to the musical things [in my formal cantorial training] there was also music and regular education. There was [pastoral] counseling—human relations type, of course. There was history, Jewish history, Jewish philosophy, history of Jewish music … There was a lot. Of course there were liturgy courses. And Hebrew. And *midrash*. There were things that were designed to give us a pretty broad overview of the types of things we would have to be dealing with eventually in the synagogue. But it still wasn’t enough. It still wasn’t enough practical advice for when you actually got into the synagogue and found you had a lot of issues to address that you never dreamed of. Because [when you went to a synagogue] as a student cantor you weren’t treated the same way as a full-time cantor.

Petnick: I’ve worked in law and I can tell you that you learn a lot in law school—intellectually it’s so intense—but it doesn’t begin to prepare you for actually practicing law. Probably all the professions have this problem to some degree. You practice a profession—it isn’t something that can be learned all at once.

Barak: All the young cantors walk out saying, “Call me ‘Cantor’.” It’s funny. I always wanted to be called “Cantor Barak,” and it got to be a mantra: everybody called me Cantor Barak. Then I got to the point where I had known some people for years, and I’d say to them, “Just call me ‘Roz’.” But there were some people who from the start would call me “Roz,” and I’d get all bristly.

I see that with my young colleagues. They say, I’m Cantor this, I’m Cantor that … I worked five years for this: call me “Cantor.” Or, “I worked four years.” You come out of school with a bit of an attitude sometimes. After a while, I guess, you relax, but it does take time.

Call me Dr. Barak; I have my honorary!

Petnick: Oh that’s right, you have a whole string of titles: Professor, Doctor, Senior Cantor.

Barak: I’m just Doctor.

Petnick: I have another question about your training: what did you think of the intellectual quality of it-- was it intellectually satisfying for you?

Barak: Yes. There were several professors there I really thought were wonderful. One was Dr. Eugene Borowitz—I just loved the guy. He gave me a C. I blew it. I gave one good paper and one lousy paper. He had to do what he had to do. I was just very frustrated. I couldn’t think of anything to write, so I wrote garbage. He gave me a C on that, and he was right. He was fascinating—he
was an interesting man. And we were learning with the rabbinic students as well. It was good. Very, very good stuff.

I had liturgy courses with Dr. Larry Hoffman, and I must say I learned an awful lot from him. It was a different way of teaching, and sometimes I thought it was a little frustrating, but for the most part the information was constant and valuable. That was terrific, very satisfying. And Dr. Eric Werner was a trip. He was a legend. He taught history of Jewish music. He was a legend. It was a very interesting time.

Petnick: What a wonderful experience, to be able to devote your life to learning those things, to singing, and to the close relationships. I have a couple of more questions before we close this section: Who influenced you vocally? Were there one or more persons there who helped you to develop vocally as a cantor?

Barak: My first chazzanut teacher at Hebrew Union College was Cantor Lawrence Avery. He recently passed away, and I was devastated. I learned a lot from him because he was a very fine classical singer and a beautiful musician and a full-time cantor. He interpreted cantorial chants in a different way, with a lot of elegance, a lot of classical touches. I learned most from him. And yet there was another teacher there named Jack Mendelsohn, who was a real old-style chazzan, and Cantor Israel Goldstein, and Cantor Ben Belfer. These were the more traditional chazzanut teachers, and I really started to pick up that sound and that feel. And that really rang with me because that had been in my background: that’s what I used to hear in the shul. That brought that back up for me. I could start to use that more and imitate that more and interpret it, use my own … whatever I had … my own vocal facility to employ that style more. So I could meld the two, the classical with the more traditional.

I also felt that women had to sing chazzanut in a certain way. We couldn’t possibly hope to mimic male cantors. We just don’t have the same vocal mechanisms that they do. There are things that are not available to us. It’s our vocal production: our legitimate vocal production is different from male vocal production.

Petnick: This is so interesting! What do you think is the effect of hearing the liturgy in the higher range—the soprano range—as compared to hearing the liturgy in the tenor and baritone ranges?

Barak: That’s what I’m saying: the tenor voice and the baritone voice, their vocal production is what’s called lower register. A legitimate soprano is called upper register, or head voice, and men use head voice when they’re singing their falsetto licks. Some of the male cantors will go into falsetto, and that’s where the female voice sits. A legitimate operatic female voice sits in that register. A voice like, let’s say Judy Garland or Barbara Streisand, is all belting lower register sound.
There used to be a woman named Bas Sheva. She was not a cantor, but she could imitate the male cantors because she sang in the same register they do. And she’d go (sings example), and she could do all those (sings) and do the devices that the men do that when you have a legitimate voice; honestly, you have to produce it a different way, not the same way. You can’t do that in the upper register. It’s almost squeaky sounding; whereas (sings) the male voice is very stentorian, and it has a different sound so women have to sing a little differently. They have to use devices in a different way. Also, I always recommend that for sopranos that we do not sing in the same key as written for the tenor because the tenor can go up high, and it doesn’t sound screechy. Soprano goes up high, and it starts to sound screechy. I always tell the women to take everything down a key, so that when they go high they won’t screech and they will stay more in their middle range.

You don’t want to be distracting. You want to use the best part of your voice and the least distracting part of your voice when you’re singing prayer. You don’t want people to be going: “Oy. Oh my God, no!” Or, “Don’t hit that note!” “Oh no, that note wasn’t good!” Or, “That sounds screechy.” People react to the soprano voice. They don’t always love it. Mezzo voices … everybody loves, but the soprano voice is sometimes … a little bit grating on the ear. It can be glorious, and it can be chirpy or squeaky. You kind of want to adjust. You’ve got to tweak things.

Petnick: Here’s the final question for today. I want to end with this: your investiture ceremony. Can we talk a little bit about that?

Barak: It was funny.

Petnick: Funny? How so?

Barak: I had a woman sitting next to me who was so distracting. She was a sweet, lovely person who was making comments during the whole investiture ceremony that morning. I was so distracted. I laugh about it now. I made a huge joke about it because one of the comments was so outrageous I was laughing my head off all day.

Well, first of all, it was a very hot day and we were sitting in Temple Emanu-El in New York, and it was really hot, and she was panting. She’s Russian, and she was saying “Roz, what is this? I can’t stand this. Why so hot? This is Temple Emanu-El, New York. Why do we have to go through this? Why? Why?” And I kept going, “Please calm down.”

"I can’t take it. Too hot."

I said, “Will you please shut up?” So that was driving me crazy.
And then there was a woman speaker that day from South Africa—a very prominent woman—who was our commencement speaker. She was giving her speech, and this one kept saying, “It’s too hot. She talks too much.”

And I’m saying, “Shut up!”

So this was happening the whole ceremony. And then at one point she got bored and opened the program book to the list of “To Be Invested Cantors.” Now you’ll notice on this side is the Hebrew name of everyone, and on that side is the English name. One of our classmates was named Michal Schiff. Now you’ll notice Roslyn Jhunever Barak on this side and Shoshanna Rivka Bat Zvi on the other side and so on with all the names given in English on this side and Hebrew on that. So we get to Michal Schiff, and I see her she’s sitting next to me, and she goes “Roz! Roz!”

I said, “What do you want now?”

She says, “Why Michal doesn’t have Hebrew name?”

And I said, “Michal is a Hebrew name.” Uch! So my whole ordination ceremony was calming her down, educating her.

Petnick: How about when you were called up? Did the president or the person conducting the ceremony take a personal moment with each person?

Barak: You would go up and stand with Alfred Gottschalk, who was the head of the school at the time. He was the president of Hebrew Union College. Everyone got to stand in front of the Ark at Temple Emanu-El [in New York City] with him. He put his hands on you, and poof, you were a cantor.

Petnick: Did he say anything memorable?

Barak: I don’t remember. I honestly don’t remember. It was canned. It was all very …

Petnick: Pro forma?

Barak: It was pro forma. He didn’t know me. But it was nice. It was a nice ceremony, a beautiful sanctuary. It was a beautiful day.

Petnick: How did you feel inside?

Barak: Very happy. I had been going through my divorce, and I had just been granted the divorce, and now I was being invested, although today they call it “ordained.” It was a big day. A lot going on. My whole family came, and we
went out to lunch afterwards. It was very nice. It was beautiful. It was a lovely moment, a culmination. But nothing changed right then because I had to spend another year in my student pulpit. They hired me as their full-time cantor, but I really wasn’t full time; I was part-time. I was not sure where to go next because of my divorce … my son. A year later I was here.
Interview 8: July 17, 2015

Petnick: We ended interview seven at your investiture, or, as it is now called, “ordination” ceremony, so the first thing I’d like to know is, what did you do in the interval between your investiture in the spring of 1986 and when you were hired at Emanu-El in 1987?

Barak: [During that interval] I was employed and serving a congregation in Forest Hills, [New York] called Temple Isaiah, with my dear friend Rabbi Mayer Perelmuter, who is still my dear friend. It was a small congregation, about three hundred families. Very *haimish*, very warm and sweet. Lovely little sanctuary, beautiful. It was a nice place and a nice training ground. It was my hometown, my home neighborhood.

It felt good, but there wasn’t much of a budget there. I only had a quartet on the High Holy Days, and I never had a choir. But I did learn how to run an *anshei mitzvah* class [adult bar and bat mitzvah groups] and did teach *b’nei mitzvah* [plural for bar and bat mitzvah]. They didn’t really need a full-time cantor. They had the full-time rabbi, and they had an educator. It was just a small place, and Reform Judaism in Forest Hills was still not very popular—people in Forest Hills were mostly Conservative and Orthodox.

It was small scale, and I loved it. It was great, but it came time to move on. [Temple Isaiah] had been my student pulpit for three years, and then the fourth year was the year of my being an official cantor there. I had just gotten a divorce, which had just been granted the same month as I was invested as a cantor. I should use the word “ordained” [instead of invested] because ordained is now the proper word. Ordained. We’ve been granted ordination.

Petnick: When did the language change from “investiture” to “ordination?”

Barak: Just about two or three years ago, but they’re grandfathering us in. So now we are considered “ordained,” too.

The fact that I had just gotten a divorce and my son was only about ten years old gave me pause for making any major changes. I kind of wanted to settle in as a divorced woman, a single mom, and get things like custody and all that straightened out with my ex-husband. I stayed in Forest Hills—actually, I wasn’t living in Forest Hills; I was living close by, in another area of Queens called Flushing. Lovely name. My ex-husband was living in a different section of Flushing, and we had an easy arrangement: Danny would go to him on weekends, and I would have him during the week. Danny was enrolled in a private Jewish day school, Solomon Schechter.

Petnick: How and when did you first learn about the opening at Emanu-El?
Barak: Danny’s tour with the show *Nine* ended in San Francisco in August 1984. I had a colleague out here who was employed at Rodef Shalom in San Rafael, and I called him and we had a day together. He showed me the dome of Congregation Emanu-El from his apartment and said, “I hear that cantor is retiring.” I filed it away.

After a year of being an ordained cantor in my old pulpit, I started thinking about changing jobs. I had been negotiating with Temple Isaiah about how to continue there, and it wasn’t going that well. They weren’t making me any great offers, the salary wasn’t terrific, and I needed to move on. I wanted to do more musically. They weren’t going to hire me as educator/cantor, because then I would have been eligible for a higher salary.

I started looking around, and luckily there were some plum positions coming up that year: there was a big congregation in Philadelphia; a big one in Michigan, near Detroit; a big one in Atlanta; and Emanu-El in San Francisco was still open. (Emanu-El had been looking for a couple of years and hadn’t found anyone.) There was another position in Rockland County, New York.

The one in Atlanta was challenging for me. I wasn’t really feeling it. There was a rather intense bunch of people on that [hiring] committee and I was exhausted. I blew the interview on purpose. I didn’t want them to call me back and they didn’t. And then the other place, up in Rockland County, was really a nice little congregation.

Rockland would have been ideal, and they liked me a lot. It’s just what strikes you. I went to Detroit, and I was very struck by that place. They were very taken with me also. They were making noises about more interest. I went out there. There were some problems in Detroit. I won’t go into them. They were giving me some red flags. I backed off.

Then there was Philadelphia, which also offered me a position. I was afraid that congregation it would just be a bar mitzvah factory. They said they had eighty or ninety a year, and the cantor would do most of them and teach all those kids. I thought, “I’ll be here until 11 o’clock at night. I won’t be able to see my son.” This happens to a lot of cantors.

Petnick: What happens? They get stuck in the bar mitzvah mill?

Barak: You do. You get stuck in a bar mitzvah mill, and honestly, a congregation of that size and that prominence should have had more of a cadre of tutors. I just was thinking, “Oh, this is not going to be great.” I didn’t [want it] even though it was closer to New York.
And then there was San Francisco. At first the [search] committee from Congregation Emanu-El came to New York and auditioned me. I was very taken with them. They were lovely, lovely people. They invited me to San Francisco and that was it. The minute I saw this place … the sun was beating down the day I came in … it was December or something … and it was gorgeous! It was a no-brainer. No comparison.

Petnick: I want to go back another step. You told me last week, when we talked, that it had been foretold by various psychics that you would go to California. I want to hear a lot about the audition in New York and the audition out here, but first let’s hear about how this was foretold.

Barak: I went to two psychics—the twenty-dollar psychic and the hundred-dollar psychic—and they both told me, “California. You’re going to California.” I hadn’t mentioned anything to them about California, so I went, “hmmmmmmm.” I’m always a little skeptical when something comes up really powerful like that. It’s possible that I was much more pleasant out here when I met everyone here because I figured I had the job. I’m not quite sure in what way [the psychic readings] affected me psychologically, but I will say that I was fairly confident that things were going to go very well in California. I took it under advisement.

Petnick: How did the job notice come to you?

Barak: We have a cantor’s association, American Conference of Cantors, in which the members are all the Reform cantors. This organization began back in the early 1960s or so. It’s a professional organization like any other. We have a pension plan, disability, and a placement service. Of course we have listings for open pulpits. And this was on the list, and so were the others I’ve mentioned. I just put my application in—put my hat in the ring—and sent my application along. At that point in time, when I attended cantorial school, there were no restrictions on the size of congregation you could apply to, which probably was not the greatest idea, because the rabbis had a tier system.

Petnick: Explain the tier system.

Barak: Well, a certain size congregation can hire a rabbi at a certain level of their career. So, if you’re a small congregation—let’s say a hundred families—you can have a newly graduated student. If you have five hundred families or more, you can have a person who has five or six years of experience … if you’re over a thousand families, you can only have a person who’s out of school ten years or fifteen years … You need experience, is what I’m saying, to be a senior person at a large congregation.

Petnick: Today you would not have been able to apply at Emanu-El after just being ordained?
Barak: Probably not, because I wasn’t even forty years old yet. If you’re forty years old [or older] they give you special consideration. In the case of cantors, it seems like they juggle things all the time. A lot of congregations want young cantors with guitars, so they apply for what is known as a “variance.” Even though the person may be out of school three years, the congregation may be granted a variance to look for a younger cantor. I don’t know how it all works. It was not enforced when I was in school. I had fellow students at the school who were already serving huge congregations once a month as a student pulpit. They were flying to Houston. They were flying to Washington, D.C. Usually it would be once a month or twice a month. But then they would obtain those as full-time pulpits eventually. I was eligible for everything, and I took it. I was mostly paneling at larger congregations.

Petnick: So then you were notified that the Emanu-El search committee was going to come to New York and that you were going to be given an audition.

Barak: What happened was that the Emanu-El search committee had already been searching for a couple of years and had auditioned all who were eligible. I understand they actually had made an offer to one person, an older man. He turned the job down, and so they had to start again. They had already seen everybody who had applied for their position. I was the only one left. I suddenly came into the crowd. They were being convinced to listen to the [currently] graduating students, so they were listening to people who were only one year behind me.

Usually these American Conference of Cantors auditions would take place at the UAHC building, when it used to be called UAHC (Union of American Hebrew Congregations), which was on Fifth Avenue. There was a hall there where they would hear people. But I was the only one left, and they were hearing [auditioning] students, so they brought me to Hebrew Union College, the school. I was not happy about that. I didn’t want to be lumped in with the graduating students, even though I was only one year out. I was sensitive about that. There were circumstances at the school I felt might be to my detriment. There was this one person … and it turned out to be true … that’s exactly what happened … the committee was … I think I told you this already.

Petnick: You told me this off the record, and today I’m doing some follow-up to record those stories for others.

Barak: There was one person at the school, who I shall not name, who was in a big position of influence. And also was a rabbi. So Rabbi Kirschner and the committee were of course talking to this person.

Petnick: Tell us the names of the Emanu-El search committee members.
Barak: Okay. The committee members were Hal Stein, Walter Newman, who was president of the congregation at the time, and James Schwabacher, who was a prominent member of the San Francisco community and also someone connected to the opera; he knew voices because he was a singer himself. They put him on the committee to judge the singing. They had somebody musical. And Rabbi Kirschner. Absolutely. Those were the four people to come to [New York] to Hebrew Union College. We have a chapel in the college. I had my audition in the chapel.

Petnick: Did they choose what they wanted you to sing?

Barak: No, they did not.

Petnick: What did you choose?

Barak: I’m trying to remember. I know I picked Max Janowski’s Avinu Malkeinu because that’s a rip-roarer. That’s one of those honker pieces you want everybody to hear. I know I chose Isadore Freed’s Psalm 8, which was an English piece I thought was important because it was a Classical Reform atmosphere. I honestly don’t remember the other pieces. I’m not sure they asked for any more.

They were quite wonderful to me after I sang. Jim Schwabacher came up to me and said, “You are an artist.” I felt really good. And then they trotted off, after they had heard the others.

Later that day I was teaching at Temple Isaiah. It was about five o’clock in the afternoon, and I was the only one left in the building. The phone rang, and I answered it, and I heard Rabbi Kirschner’s voice. And he said, “May I speak to Rabbi Perelmuter, please?”

I said, “He’s not here right now. Is this Rabbi Kirschner?” He said, “Who’s this?” I said, “This is Cantor Barak.” He said, “What are you doing answering the phone?” I said, “I’m the only one left here right now.” And he said, “We need to speak to Rabbi Perelmutter.” And I thought, “Good.” And I said, “Well, he just left. He’ll be home in about ten minutes. I’ll give you his phone number.” So I did, and I was sort of on tenterhooks … like, “Ｇｒｒｒｒｒｒｒ … what’s going on?”

Petnick: Because you knew there was a rabbi at the school who was not exactly on your side?

Barak: I had a feeling in my gut that something would go wrong; I had a feeling that something was going to happen. As it turned out, I got a call about half an hour later at the temple from my rabbi, who said, “Roz, this is Mayer. Who’s trying to blackball you?” He told me that the committee was disturbed by
something they’d heard about me from someone at Hebrew Union College. I think they mentioned the person whose name it was … and they were checking … Mayer said, “Of course I told them it was a lie, and that you’re absolutely wonderful.”

Petnick: Do you want to say what it was that this person said about you? What was the disparaging remark?

Barak: I found out later. Mayer didn’t tell me exactly what was said about me, but it seems … I don’t remember who told me exactly what was said, but it had something to do with emotional mood swings. It was put in a very subtle way: “Oh, I’ve heard something about mood swings with her.”

I was so infuriated when I heard that because that was just out of line, completely out of line. If I had not gotten the job and then heard this, I would have sued him. I would have sued him. And I was fit to be tied. I didn’t talk to that person for many years, until we finally buried the hatchet at some point, and now things are okay. But it was very, very hurtful. It could have prevented my coming to Emanu-El, but I believe coming to Congregation Emanu-El was meant to be.

Petnick: So when the search committee luckily checked this out—

Barak: Not only did they check it out, they realized they were being sold on someone else—another candidate. Walter Newman was the one who said, “I’ve been in business a long time. There’s something going on here.” He smelled something. He was the one who said, “Let’s check it further.” And that’s what they did.

Petnick: So it sounds like there was a rabbi at the school who not only was against you but was also in favor of someone else—tried to push someone else forward for the position.

Barak: They had decided they wanted to hire me, but they were told it would be a more fair process to bring at least three people to San Francisco for the final audition and interview. They chose two other people, one of whom was the one that this other rabbi was pushing. In the end, I was chosen.

Petnick: Were those men or women or both?

Barak: It was one guy and one woman. The woman was somewhat connected here, had some family out here, and was really, really intensely wanting the position. So much so that she wouldn’t talk to us. She didn’t talk to me for years after I got the job. But she had a successful career—she’s done all right—she’s okay. But the guy, he also … what happened was that we were all flown out the
same day, which was just bizarre. You don’t do that, but that’s how they were told to do it.

(Pause)

They brought three of us out. One of the candidates is a dear friend. At the time—was he [David Goldstein] in Buffalo? He might have been in Atlanta or Buffalo. No, he wasn’t in Atlanta. He got Atlanta after this. I don’t know where he was. Anyway, he and I were standing in the back of the Main Sanctuary, and the minute we walked in I went, “Ahhh.” I said, “David, I want this job.”

It was just so beautiful. It was so magnificent. It was so simple, and yet it was stately. There was just an atmosphere in that place with those stained-glass windows and the marble and that beautiful Ark. It was so unusual. I’ve never seen anything like that. I can’t explain it. The first time I saw it, I was just gasping. It was an exquisite, exquisite experience. You don’t see many Moorish-inspired style temples. Not in this country, anyway. So it was such an unusual thing to see: the building, the outside, the courtyard, the beautiful ceiling in the foyer, and the museum in the foyer. And then walking into that space, which is so … which is just a reverent space. It’s a reverent, but simple space. I just loved it. So I gasped, and he gasped. I said, “David, I want this job.” And he said, “Roz, I want this job.” And we shook hands. We shook hands, saying, “May the best one win.” We both had our auditions and interviews.

Petnick: Tell us about the audition.

Barak: What happened was Rabbi Kirschner came and took me into the Main Sanctuary where the board and the committee were. He walked me down the side aisle, and I promptly fell on my butt. I just went sliding. My right heel went whoop! Up in the air and boing.

Petnick: Because the floor was highly polished?

Barak: I guess so. I just landed right on my buns. And he was looking down at me in horror. “Are you okay?” I stood up, and I went to the bimah and sang *Avinu Malkeinu* and that was it. I think I sang the Freed again, the *Psalm 8*. It was just fun. I don’t even remember rehearsing. I guess I rehearsed with the organist. I’m not sure—I don’t remember all that. I do know it was just a slam-dunk audition. It went really well. Then I was invited back. I think I did the interview that day.

Petnick: So the interview was the same day, in the boardroom?

Barak: I believe it was the same day that we had the interview and the audition.
Petnick: The full board was there?

Barak: Everybody was there. It was really nice.

Petnick: Who were some more of the people who were on the board at that time?

Barak: You’d have to look it up. I’m trying to think who was on the board at that time. I think … gosh, you know how you can find out? By going to the Temple Chronicle (1986-87) and the board members will be listed on the back, so you’ll know who they were.

Petnick: Just wondered if someone stood out.

Barak: I don’t remember anyone standing out. That was a long time ago, to remember. I know Hal [Stein] was on the board. Walter Newman, of course. Don’t remember the others. There were a lot of them. It was a big board.

It was just a totally different experience. San Franciscans were different from New Yorkers, so urbane and pleasant and elegant. Very upstanding type of citizens. Not that they weren't [upstanding] in New York too, but New York is a little more informal, a little more casual. The board members at my temple in New York were just normal, everyday people, not of the stature of the board members out here. These were really, really heavy-hitter people. They were highly assimilated, and it wasn’t going to be the same kind of Jewish experience here, that was for sure. It was going to be quite a different experience here.

Petnick: For the record, we should describe something more about the Emanu-El board and the Emanu-El membership at that time. What kind of people?

Barak: Well, at that time, there were a lot more native San Franciscans. There were families who had been involved in Emanu-El for generations.

Petnick: Right, because Emanu-El at that time would have been about one hundred and thirty years old?

Barak: Not one-thirty—about one hundred and thirty-seven years old [1850-1987]. It’s an older [congregation] with a very patrician lineage.

Petnick: Explain why you describe these families as “patrician.”

Barak: They were the founding families of San Francisco.

Petnick: The founding Jewish families?
Barak: The Jewish families: you had the Sterns and the Haases, the Dinkelspiels, the Zellerbachs, and the Schwabachers. You had the German Jews who made this town—really contributed—and were assimilated into the wider social circle of San Francisco. They were well heeled and had founded and operated a variety of businesses—banking and financial services—Wells Fargo, Levi Strauss, etc. You had families that had been established for many, many years and had, of course, accumulated lots of wealth.

What I learned early on was that this was not a board that had issues. In many boards—temple boards—you find people who don’t have as much power [as the board members in San Francisco] in their personal lives or professional lives, and they wield it in the boardroom. And sometimes they can be very nasty, especially if they have a beef with one of the clergy or something. They can really take it out on you. That happens a lot.

Whereas, what I found about the Congregation Emanu-El Board of Directors was that these were people who didn’t have those kinds of issues. They were people who had plenty of power in their lives. They would just come in and say, “Hear, hear! Tell us all the good news this week, this month.” The board meetings were at 4:00 p.m. on a Thursday. This was unheard of. Most boards meet in the evening. And there are meetings every evening of the week, and people are exhausted. At least the clergy was exhausted. In this temple, they were just happy as long as things were humming along and working well.

Rabbi Kirschner had his grip on things very nicely. He was a very fine administrator, and things were running smoothly. The programs were going well. Lectures were going well. The worship was beautiful. And his sermons were fantastic. The education department was starting to recoup its losses from earlier years. It was quite fun and beautiful. We had a good time. We were giving pageants, and we were having a great time. It was a smooth-running machine.

One of our rabbis, whom I love dearly, used to say things in public like, “It was a sleepy little congregation before I arrived.” And I used to say, “Oh come on, it was no sleepy congregation. It was very vibrant, but vibrant in its own way, in its San Francisco way, in its elegant way.”

When Rabbi Kirschner would make a sermon it would be electric in the sanctuary. When I would sing and when the two of us were together, it was fantastic. People were flocking to the temple … in their own way.

Petnick: How about your predecessor, Joseph Portnoy, who was the cantor before you? Did he help select you for the position?

Barak: No, Cantor Portnoy didn’t have a role in this; I don’t think he was brought in to be part of the selection. I do not recall if he was at my audition. I do
remember meeting him at some point, probably when I was hired. I remember him saying to me, “See you around, kid. You don’t need an emeritus hanging around,” for which I was very grateful. But also, I kept saying, “No, I like you. Come back! Let’s have lunch!” That was kept to a minimum—we met for lunch several times, but it wasn’t frequent. I certainly liked his wife, Ruth Portnoy, very much, and his sons.

Petnick: What was it like for you, coming from a small congregation, to get started at Congregation Emanu-El, with its enormous sanctuary and gigantic organ? Tell us about the organ, the choir, directing the choir. You took a huge leap.

Barak: It was a huge leap, but I was ready for it. I had a lot of repertoire. I kind of threw it at them right at the beginning. I said, “I want to change this and change that.” I wasn’t doing anything they were doing. I just said, “I’ve got all this stuff I want to do,”—lovely choral pieces and pieces that might not have been in their repertoire previously. I was a soprano, and most of my predecessors were baritones.

The organist at the time was a little put off. He had been hired by Ludwig Altman. This was not right—they should have waited. They should have hired him temporarily and waited until I came on, but they let Ludwig hire the new organist. I’m not quite sure what the criteria were. The new organist was a nice man, but he wasn’t my soul mate, and eventually, I replaced him. But it was okay for the first couple of years. I was getting situated. I definitely changed the repertoire.

Petnick: Oh, I see, Ludwig Altman was still living [when you were hired].

Barak: Yes, he was. He was delightful. Rabbi [Joseph] Asher’s office was below mine, and I used to stop in and schmooze with him, and then Ludwig would come to my office up above and talk to me, and he would be practicing at the organ. Just a delightful man. I loved Rabbi Asher and Ludwig Altman. They were so delightful. They really were. Rabbi Asher came to my first service. I saw him there kind of laughing a lot, and I didn’t know what that meant! And then, maybe two days after the service, I knocked on his door to say hello. And he said, “Come in dear, come in.”

Petnick: Was he an emeritus rabbi at that time?

Barak: Yes, he was an emeritus at the time. He said, “Come in dear, come in.” So I go into his office, and he sits me down. He says, “Sit down, sit down.” And I said, “Okay.” And I was scared. And he said, “I want to talk to you.” And I thought, “Uh-oh.” And I said, “What did I do?” He sits down and he looks at me very intently, and he says, “I have to tell you something: You - are - good!” I said, “Thank you,” and he said, “Don’t say thank you. Do not thank me. You are very good.” And then he started to talk to me about my music and
everything. It was delightful. I fell in love with him. He was such a great guy. And Lud would come in, and after he’d finished talking with me, he’d say, “That was a good schmooze.” And then he would walk out and play the organ. It was delightful. It was so nice being around these men.

First of all, I’ve always gotten along incredibly well with old German men. (I don’t know what that’s about.) They don’t have to be Jewish or anything. But old German men always had an affinity for me and I had an affinity for them. For some reason we always got along. It was just my karma, or my gestalt, or whatever. And here were two more old German men that I was just “grokking”—I was just really getting along great. I fit in perfectly there! It was just perfect.

Rabbi [Robert] Kirschner and Rabbi [Yossi] Liebowitz were a bit more challenging. I had come to the congregation as the new cantor, and Mark Schiftan had just come as the new assistant rabbi. He was ten years younger than me, and we kind of walked in together not knowing what to expect.

Petnick: How old were you?

Barak: I was about thirty-seven, and he was about twenty-seven. He was married already, and I was divorced, and somehow we just hit it off together. We became very close, like brother and sister. We went through a lot together. We kind of hung out a lot and tried to get the lay of the land together. What happened was Rabbi Kirschner was writing his doctoral dissertation and didn’t really have time to supervise us. He shunted us off to Associate Rabbi, Yossi Liebowitz, and that was unfortunate.

I came to Emanu-El thoroughly thinking I would love Rabbi Liebowitz because I had heard such nice things about him. It turned out that … I think what was going on was some sort of intimidation. I think he was very threatened by the appearance of two new people because there was an interesting trio of clergy composed of Rabbi Kirschner, Rabbi Liebowitz, and the executive director, Irwin Wiener. The three of them had a thing going, especially Yossi and Irwin. Yossi and Irwin were like father and son, practically. They were so close. Kirschner was the foil. He was in there, too. And they would always go out to lunch. They were always like the three musketeers. And then Mark Shiftan and I suddenly arrived. Also, Yossi liked playing the guitar and singing and being Pied Piper, and he wasn’t so happy that I was there.

Mark was a young, nice looking, well-put-together rabbi, and I think Yossi was just not comfortable with either of us, and his behavior began to reflect this discomfort. At times he was extremely unpleasant to me. I’m not sure what went on with Mark. I don’t think Mark was too happy, either. So Mark and I hung out together. However, we did all go out to lunches. We did spend
time together as a group, but I was having a rough time, and I know Mark wasn’t happy, and so we just clung to each other. There wasn’t really much … Rabbi Kirschner would call me to ask how things were going, or give me a review of something, or tell me something, but it was clear that he had … there were some issues with him as far as his temper.

Petnick: Kirschner, you’re talking about?

Barak: Yes. It was a little intimidating. One thing I remember was that there was a point in time when I was extremely lonely. Well, let me tell you what happened: I arrived in San Francisco by plane, and my furniture hadn’t arrived yet. My car hadn’t arrived yet. Nothing was ready. I had rented a big apartment down in the Marina. Yossi picked me up from the airport and drove me to the apartment and put an airbed in my bedroom and said, “Well, here you are,” and left. I had to sleep on that airbed for two nights or three nights, and it was leaky, and it was awful. I just remember it being my first night in San Francisco and crying because I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know what to do! Luckily, I lived close to Lombard and Chestnut streets, and I could go out and get some food, but it was a very unpleasant experience.

(Pause, for sound problem—loud talking in background)

Petnick: So, Rabbi Yossi Liebowitz delivered you to a vacant apartment you had rented. There was nothing in it. They had an air mattress in there for you. It sounds like he was not very comfortable.

Barak: It was cold. Freezing. There was no heat in the room. July 5, 1987. It was cold. There was an air mattress, and it was leaking. And I was just very dismayed. It was not what I expected after the way I’d been treated during the hiring process.

Petnick: A big let down, I can understand. I’d like to ask you a few questions about the terms of your employment. How long was your initial contract?

Barak: I think the initial contract was two years. At the time, the salaries were what would seem now quite ridiculous. I had asked the maximum they were offering because I said, “This is an expensive city.” So they agreed, and they promised they’d bump me up after two years, and they did. To their credit, they did.

Petnick: Did they help in other ways?

Barak: Not at the time. I was renting, and there was no help offered. The rabbi had assured me they would get me a house at some point. There was an interesting story around that. But I was assured everything would be fine. I was okay.
Petnick: The salary was adequate. You knew you’d get more in two years. After two years, when you signed your next contract, was that a ten-year contract?

Barak: I don’t remember. I was mostly given three-year or five-year contracts all through. The interesting thing was that Rabbi Kirschner told me, after the first contract, that I would be given tenure. He told me that, but nobody else told me that. So I was operating under the assumption that I had tenure. I was told, “Oh no, you don’t have tenure.” It was all very confusing. Let’s put it that way. He told me I had tenure after two years. That wasn’t true. I was fairly certain because he had told me that I did, so I told other people. And then I had to say, “Well, I guess I was wrong.” It wasn’t nice, but all kinds of things were going on with [the] rabbis at the time.

Petnick: What was going on?

Barak: Well, with the associate rabbi, things were very unpleasant. I previously told you that I once went into Rabbi Kirschner’s office and told him I was feeling very lonely. I hadn’t made too many friends, and didn’t have family in the area and being single was challenging. I started to cry, and he just sat stone-faced and looked at me with this very cold expression, and he just said, “So what do you want me to do about it?”

Petnick: This is Kirschner?

Barak: Yes. So that was a lesson.

Petnick: And what was the lesson?

Barak: Don’t tell your senior rabbi stuff! Don’t get a personal relationship going with him because it’s not going to work. That’s why I grew closer to Rabbi Mark Schiftan. I felt really that he was my partner in whatever at that temple. I was very fond of him. My relationship with Yossi, the associate rabbi, was complicated.

Petnick: Going back to your contract: tell us about your job description, your duties.

Barak: I was given a lot of leeway to create things, but Rabbi Kirschner made it clear he definitely wanted some kind of a show. That’s where I had to work with Yossi. We wrote a pageant, and I more or less produced it and got all the forces together and got everyone in on it. We produced this totally goofy show at Chanukah time.

The theme of the year, which I had never experienced before, was “At Home in America.” It was all about the Jews and their good fortune in this country, so I decided to do a play about the Maccabees in a time travel spaceship. They land in the United States, and they start to experience the whole history of
Jewish people in America, and how great it is here ... We wrote a script and it was really cute. I did some history lessons about the first Jews in America. We had kids in this thing. We strung up balloons in the ceiling of the Martin Meyer Auditorium that were going to come down at the end, just as Kate Smith’s recording of “God Bless America” was playing. It was kitschy, but it was adorable.

Kirschner went crazy—he just loved it! He was standing there in the middle of all the balloons going, “Wow!” People were clapping. It was so much fun.

I had a film clip of Two Years before the Mast showing Jewish admirals in the American Navy. It was hilarious. I had Neil Diamond singing “Coming to America,” with all these faces of famous Jews on the screen—Harpo Marx, Barbara Streisand … We worked it out—it was a multi-media thing. Judi Leff was involved at the time, and Mark built us a spaceship made out of cardboard boxes, aluminum foil, and dry ice in back of it.

It was hysterically funny. It was a riot! It was the funniest looking thing you’d ever seen. There was just an atmosphere about it of joy and happiness. The balloons were strung up, and they came down at the right times.

And after that, we were like, “Okay, we’ve got to do another pageant,” and we did do them for about three or four years in a row. Judi and I wrote the next two. And we got all the kids—the kids sang and did little parts—just terrific! I was in charge of pageants, more or less.

I started the anshei mitzvah class the first year I was there, and I started the Selichot service. I had done an adult bar mitzvah ceremony in New York, so Bob [Kirschner] said to me, “Why don’t you do that here?” (They had started adult bar/bat mitzvahs in New York before I got there—I didn’t create that, but I had worked on them.) The rabbi asked me to teach the adult bar mitzvah class, and I agreed. It was a no-brainer for me. I started it up right away. I had sixteen students the first year. Of course I had all the bar/bat mitzvah children. There weren’t that many back then, maybe ten each year.

Petnick: So it was not a bar mitzvah mill at all. Ten kids each year is easy. How many do we have each year now at Emanu-El?

Barak: Now we have about seventy or eighty. I’ve always liked the philosophy here: we keep it as a service—it’s not worship the child—it’s worship God.

Petnick: I enjoyed listening to the recording of your son’s bar mitzvah in 1988. It seemed to me to be the normative bar mitzvah. The parents—you and Jacob Barak—placed your son in the historical and religious stream of Judaism, and that’s what it should be, rather than to stand there and say, “You got an A in this …”
Barak: You play basketball.

Petnick: Kvelling over your children in a public forum.

Barak: I keep saying, “Let’s go back to the old way,” but it’s gone too far.

Petnick: What was the size of the congregation in the late eighties?

Barak: I think when I came here it was fourteen hundred, and it’s twenty-two hundred now. For a while, we were approaching three thousand. We were up to twenty-seven hundred at one point.

Petnick: A lot of people think that you were the first female cantor at Emanu-El. You are, and you are not. Can you explain?

Barak: I’m the first official female cantor, not only at Emanu-El, but also in San Francisco. The truth is that back in the nineteenth century there was a woman named Julie Rosewald. She was a resident of San Francisco who had emigrated from Vienna with her husband, Jacob Rosewald. He was a musician, and she was an opera singer. She had grown up in a Jewish household and, I believe, had a good background in Judaism. She attended the synagogue in Vienna where Salomon Sulzer, the famous composer, was cantor. She knew the liturgy. She knew a lot of the synagogue music of that day.

But mostly her field was opera, and she was a fine singer. She had an international career, and now she was living in San Francisco. She started singing at Congregation Emanu-El while Max Wolff was the cantor. I believe he brought her in to do solos and such. Then Max Wolff took ill, and she helped out. Then Max Wolff passed away.

I guess the congregation was so taken with her that they said, “Why don’t you just do this [lead the music here].” She did it for nine years. They called her “Cantor Soprano,” but they never acknowledged her as a full member of the clergy or as their cantor. It wasn’t proper at that time for a woman to serve as cantor, so that’s why it was not official. But she did everything the cantor would do, at least as far as singing and directing the musical programs. I don’t know about teaching or other things [that are often considered cantorial duties]. She still had her opera career going. Emanu-El wasn’t a full time position for her, but she was definitely leading the liturgy.

Petnick: She would be thought of more as a lay cantorial singer today?

Barak: Soloist. She was a “cantorial soloist.” But for that time period, Reform or not, that’s a pioneer—that is someone who actually functioned as the cantor of Congregation Emanu-El. And she was probably the first woman ever to do that in America. It’s definitely a reflection on this community—on the San
Francisco community—about how liberal they are and how accepting. And forward thinking.

Petnick: And she led every Shabbat service, and she led all the High Holy Day services?

Barak: That’s what I believe. There’s a lengthy article about her in the *American Jewish Archives Journal*. Tremendous article, like a dissertation. Quite an article.

Petnick: Were you told about her?

Barak: Never. I never knew about her. There’s no picture of her at Emanu-El on the wall. There is a mention of her in some of the early chronicles of Congregation Emanu-El. Those are not the publication, the monthly *Temple Chronicle*. I’m talking about lay people who chronicle the history of Congregation Emanu-El. [Some of their work is in] very old volumes that are falling apart and are stored in the Temple Emanu-El archives. Julie Rosewald is mentioned in those archives, and they mention her with great admiration.

Petnick: But she’s not mentioned in *Visions of Reform*, the book that celebrated the 150th anniversary of Emanu-El.

Barak: She’s mentioned neither in *Visions of Reform* nor *Architects of Reform*. She was not given any official credit for what she did. I can only assume that the focus was on the rabbis at the temple. The more prominent male cantors were mentioned, but not really celebrated like the rabbis. Some of the rabbis were colorful figures, so historians focused on that. But she is definitely … I would love to see her picture up on the wall next to Max Wolff because she really took over for him. It would be right to give Julie Rosewald her due.

Petnick: Tell us about the wall and the photographs and what you are referring to here.

Barak: Outside the Reuben Rinder Chapel [at Emanu-El], there’s a huge wall of pictures of staff and present clergy, and then a whole gallery of former servants of the congregation: presidents, rabbis, and cantors. Some of them are already fading and quite antique looking. Archaic looking. The wall goes on for quite some length, and she is not there. Yet we do have pictures [in the archives] of her in her bustle.

Petnick: There’s a beautiful picture of her that was published with the article you mentioned.

Barak: I played her when we did our cemetery event. I was standing at her grave at Home of Peace Cemetery. There’s a very simple monument. It’s very pretty, very elegant, very simple. It just says Julie Rosewald. It doesn’t say anything
about her, about what she did. It’s kind of sad, because she really contributed
to the life of the temple.

Petnick: She must have been a very, very good cantorial soloist if they kept her at
Congregation Emanu-El for nine years.

Barak: I’m sure she was a wonderful singer. The thing that kills me about it was, her
name was Julie Rosewald, and my name was Roslyn Jhunevever. And I always
thought, “Boy, what’s going on here? It’s very weird. She’s got the ‘Ju Ro’
and I’ve got the ‘Ro Ju’.” (Laughter)

Petnick: There are three rooms that are now used for services at Emanu-El: the Main
Sanctuary, Martin Meyer, and the Rinder Chapel. When you first arrived was
Martin Meyer an auditorium, or had it already become a sanctuary?

Barak: It was an auditorium. It seated about seven hundred. It had a stage. We had
Friday night services in the Rinder Chapel. They lasted, exactly to the minute,
one half-hour. Services started at 5:30 p.m. and they were over at 6:00 p.m.
Boom. With sermon and all. It was about twenty minutes of liturgy and a ten-
minute sermon. Very, very exact. The prayer book was Service of the Heart.
It’s a brief service but very lovely. I would just sing, and Rabbi Kirschner
would speak. We’d be out of there in a half-hour. It was a pleasure. People
knew [they could rely on it], so they would make their dinner reservations and
everything. The Rinder Chapel seated eighty comfortably. After I came we
were packing them in—about one hundred and twenty in there—and they
were also standing in the outside vestibule, and they were also going up to the
choir loft. Rabbi Kirschner said we needed to redo Martin Meyer. Around the
end of 1990, the plans were started to change the Martin Meyer Auditorium
into a flexible-space chapel. Now it’s a chapel-space for worship, it’s a place
for concerts, lectures, and whatever is needed. It’s a lovely space. It really is.

Petnick: How did the music you presented in those years differ from music that Cantor
Portnoy presented?

Barak: I’m not sure what Cantor Portnoy presented. I haven’t heard any old
recordings. I think we tended to sing in the same style—the well-composed
synagogue music. I didn’t start off singing Debbie Friedman, you know; that
came later.

Petnick: In the service, was there was very little response? The congregation didn’t
participate much, is that right?

Barak: The congregation did responsive readings, but they wouldn’t sing much.
There was an occasional tune they knew. An opening tune they’d sing along,
but that would be about it.
Petnick: When I listened to your son’s bar mitzvah tape that was recorded in 1988, it didn’t sound like there were that many responsive readings. It sounded like Rabbi Kirschner would read, and he read at greater length than our rabbis read today. Was that typical?

Barak: It was mostly an English service with me singing in Hebrew. There was almost no Hebrew [for the congregational parts]. There wasn’t any Hebrew—we never said any of those prayers in Hebrew. Never chanted the V’ahavta. Nothing.

Petnick: And people didn’t wear tallit.

Barak: No, that wasn’t the thing at all.

Petnick: Rabbis did not wear yarmulkes.

Barak: No. They did not.
Interview 9: July 31, 2016

Petnick: We are recording at Congregation Emanu-El today rather than your home. Let’s begin with where we are right now, the office of the cantor. Tell us about this office—your office.

Barak: This was not my original office. My original office was above this one; it was upstairs. It is in the Main Sanctuary, toward the front of the Main Sanctuary where the Ark is. There is a level behind the Ark that has the organ and the choir loft, then off to the sides of that are two offices, and then there is a staircase going up with two more offices.

(Pause)

Petnick: That is where your old office was?

Barak: My old office is right above this one, yes. This office was occupied by Rabbi Emeritus Joseph Asher, when I first came here, which was really quite pleasant because I would come in through the backdoor here and stop in at Rabbi Asher’s office, and we would schmooze a little bit, and then I would go upstairs. It was very nice. It was a lovely office. A wonderful lady in the congregation, Leona Greendorfer, had sponsored a little renovation before I came, so I had a lovely office upstairs, but it was not as convenient because the choir loft was down on this level where I am now.

Rabbi Asher passed away—and I must say his office was decorated very, very … kind of old style with maroon colors and velvet drapes. I am going to say this: it looked a little bit like a funeral home. It was a little bit … not my style. It was haimish, it was warm, but it was just a little bit old style. After Rabbi Asher died we had an assistant rabbi in here named Gayle Pomerantz. She, I think, was only here two or three years, and when she left I asked to be moved down here, so I could be closer to the organ and the choir.

They granted that request, and after about a year of living with the maroon and the rather gloomy look, I transformed this place. I decided that since I work with a lot of thirteen-year-old kids I would color the office peanut butter; so my office looks like peanut butter. (Laughter) I found some nice rolling chairs for the kids to roll around in, and I just kind of slowly decorated it myself. It is monochromatic, but it is cozy and comfy, and I have always enjoyed being in here. It is one of the larger offices in the temple, so I always feel kind of important (laughter) when I walk in. I have a nameplate on the door. I have a lot wall space, so there are a lot of hangings in here: all kinds of certificates, and documents and diplomas, plus some nice pictures, and some artwork, and of course, my little keyboard. I went and got a special music stand because I wanted something fancy.
Petnick: What kind of keyboard is that?

Barak: The one in here is a Kurzweil. I used to have a Roland in here, and there is also a Yamaha. We have bought a lot of keyboards; we have always needed many, many different instruments here.

What I love about the office are these built-in bookshelves, which are just magnificent. They are floor-to-ceiling, and they have a ladder that you have to climb up to get to the top. I do not go up there very often. It is a little daunting. There is an incredibly large closet, as well, where I have always stored a lot of music and books. And that is pretty well cleaned out now, as I get ready to retire.

I enjoy this part of the building. It is quiet, and it feels very private and comfy. I have my own entrance from the street, so I do not have to walk up a bunch of stairs if I do not want to. It is nice. I have my own bathroom out there. It is kind of run down, but it is what it is—it is really old. The nice thing is that I am right near the choir loft. Recently we moved all my music files to right outside of the office, and now the whole hallway now is filled with music. I just love it that way; it feels like a little library out there. I have quite a collection. I could fill the New York Public Library with my music collection.

Petnick: Is the music collection yours, or is it part of the Office of the Cantor—does it belong to the temple?

Barak: I brought a huge music library with me and, of course, collected a lot while I was here. At this point I honestly do not know which part of my library the temple purchased, and which part I personally purchased, but I would say it’s about half-and-half. This is a really comfortable space. I have had my dogs in here, and the kids love coming here. It is a nice space to bond with the children, in a way, because it feels very special back here.

Petnick: You have a key. You can come in through your little gate and go right into your office, which is right on Arguello Street at ground level.

Barak: It is street level. It takes a while to get the perspective here.

Petnick: If you do not come in this way, you have to go all the way around, right?

Barak: Yes, but for security reasons the kids cannot come in through the gate. Sometimes I let them leave through the gate, but it has become complicated over the years with kids not closing the gate after themselves. They usually come in from the front courtyard, and then they have to go upstairs to the fourth floor behind the library, through the door to the sanctuary, walk across the balcony of the sanctuary; come all the way around. Once you show them the actual perspective of this—that it is just where the temple Ark is in the
Main Sanctuary—they get it. It is not that hard to figure out, but it just seems complicated at first.

Petnick: The first time you do it, you need the printed directions they give you in Reception, and you go upstairs and downstairs and move along corridors and in and out of two sanctuaries; I guess it’s complicated because the temple is built on a hill. It’s like being on a treasure hunt.

Barak: It is like a treasure hunt.

What is cute here is that I am right down the hall here from the entrance to the organ pipes—right on the same level. There is a door, and you have to climb up and then go through. One day I found a note on the floor by the chamber that was one little kid to another little kid saying, “Ooh, go in here, it is really cool.” (Laughter) Then we had to put a lock on the organ chamber door so that kids would not be running around in the pipes.

In fact, one of my organists set up a little office for himself in the organ pipes. He had a little lamp, and a desk, and a file. Charles Rus—he was amazing and such a unique individual. I adored him. He was an amazing player and musician. He had a different kind of soul. He actually used to spend Friday nights—I do not know how often he went up to the dome—somehow he figured out how to get up to the [temple] dome, and he would go up there and stay overnight there. He asked our executive director at one point if he could rent the space. He wanted to live up there. That was kind of unusual. There is no bathroom up there, so he would have to keep climbing down that labyrinth of stairs to get to a potty.

Petnick: Let’s talk more about some of your memories of this room—meetings that you have had, or experiences … bitter, sweet, and so forth, in this room. What are some the important meetings that you have had in your office?

Barak: I have met with wedding couples, and with many bar mitzvah students here. I think it feels like a safe place. Mostly I have had good times here—mostly it has been joyous. I cannot ever say that there was anything painful in this room, except for one time when a couple came to see me, and they were the one couple that I would not marry. That was kind of a heavy-duty experience, and that is the only memory I have of anything—

Petnick: Without saying their names, of course, can you say why wouldn’t you marry them?

Barak: They were an interfaith couple, and there was a lot of stress and tension around that. They had not resolved it, really. They are married now, and they have kids, and I think they are happy. But at the time when they were
planning the wedding, I was feeling like I was being compromised about a Jewish wedding, and I was not willing to do that, so I suggested counseling. They did go for counseling, but in the end, they were married in a more neutral space. [They had] a more neutral-type wedding, which was fine. But it was painful for me, because the man was a student in my adult bar mitzvah class, and I had a lot of fondness for him.

Petnick: Do you teach the *anshei* mitzvah—the adult [bar/bat] mitzvah classes—in here?

Barak: No. We have met here on occasion—when it was a small class and when I did not have a space. Class normally met on Sunday mornings, which is when the building is full. Overstuffed. For the last few years we have been meeting in the library, but it is always a scheduling nightmare—getting one class in, another class out. We are just very limited with space here. It has always been challenging. If I have a small class, I can occasionally hold the class here in my office. I have held classes at my house when we have been challenged for space.

Petnick: It is one of the crazy contradictions: we have an enormous temple and yet when you go to do something, it is hard to find room.

Barak: It is very hard. Temple Emanu-El was probably not planned for this number of congregants; we did not plan for twenty-two hundred families. We probably planned for a thousand, and even then we were challenged with space. The religious school grew so quickly in the nineties and a lot of issues with space developed here, a lot of issues.

Petnick: When you are working with a bar or bat mitzvah student, he or she comes to this office, and this is where they learn their chanting and their Torah portion, and they discuss Torah with you and so forth. Tell us about some of those meetings and what it is like to work in a close, one-to-one way with students.

Barak: Each kid is such an individual. Most of these kids are incredibly … they are just such unique souls. They are very smart, for the most part. Some of them are so polite you just wonder, “Wow, who are their parents?” They are amazing. Some of them are very cheeky; some of them are funny. We have had a few artistic types.

I have seen some kids who have given speeches at their *b’nei mitzvah* that I think would rival any rabbinic sermon I have heard, and then there are others that were a little less so. There is something about the thirteen-year-old soul that just clicks with me. I seem to do the best with thirteen-year-olds. I can also do well with five-year-olds, but I do well with thirteen-year-olds. I must have had something happen to me when I was thirteen that arrested my development (laughs) because I have a good understanding of where they are
at in their lives. It is a crucial time—they are just on the brink of maturity, and they are going into this new phase of their lives, and they get it, and they understand. They have a spirituality, and an awareness, and a sensitivity. If you get them, and you treat them well, and you teach them right, and you have integrity yourself, you make a nice Jew.

I had a kid once who said, “I don’t believe in God.” I said, “Okay.” “I don’t have to have a bar mitzvah. I don’t believe in God.” I said, “All right, all right, you do not believe in God. Do you believe you have to be a good person?”

He said, “Yeah.”

I said, “So you are Jew. We don’t ask you what you believe—we ask you how you behave. Judaism is not about your belief system; it is about your behavior.”

They get it, and they respect that. I have some good talks with them. One kid was a special guy. He was just kind of a goofy soul. I was trying to put my finger on him, “What’s the deal with him?” One day it just hit me, and I said to him, “Are you going to be a cartoonist when you grow up?” (Laughter) He said, “My dad’s a cartoonist.” (Laughter) It’s like, “Whoa.” I just got a hit on him. I just said, “That’s it!”

Some of the kids have been hilarious. Our Main Sanctuary is physically cold. It is freezing, right? You go in there, and your toes fall off. We have this little ceremony where we give a book to the kid who is going to have a bar mitzvah next year at the same time. We ask the current bar or bat mitzvah to hand the book to the next bar or bat mitzvah for next year. The rabbis usually say to the kid, “What do you want to say to this child as they study this year?” The usual response is, “Study hard, don’t be nervous, work hard, practice … ” Blah, blah, blah. There was this one kid (she was so cute), and the rabbi gave her the book and said, “What do you want to say to little Shmuley over here?” And the kid stood there, and she was thinking and thinking. She is holding the book, and she is thinking, and then all of a sudden she pipes up and says, “Wear a sweater.”

(Laughter)

You cannot buy this stuff—you cannot make it up. I have had some howlingly funny moments with these kids. They are just delightful.

I was once on the phone with someone I was having an argument with because he had messed up an important project. I thought he just did not care. He was doing a terrible job. I was on the phone, yelling at this guy: “You messed up. You …” Ya-da-ya-da. One of my kids walked in, and he is just standing there staring at me, and I am like, “Uh-oh, what do I do now?” But I could not stop yelling because I was really mad. So I just kept going, and
finally I hung up, and I said, “I am sorry you had to hear that but I had a real problem there.” The kid looks up at me, and he goes, “Wow, Cantor Barak, you are a real hard-ass.” (Laughter)

I said, “You bet I am—so you had better do your work.” It was just very funny. I used to keep a little rubber hand under a table—I think I had a table over there once—and I put a little rubber hand under it, and kids would come in, and I would say, “You see that kid? He did not work very hard.” (Laughter) We have fun. I make a lot of jokes. I make the kids laugh, that is the way to do things, humor—the best way to work. I just have a good time with them, and I really nurture them, I think. I love them. I just adore them. There are one or two kids that have probably challenged me, but for the most part I just want them to have the most positive experience. People of my generation grew up having a very negative experience in synagogue. They felt put upon. They did not really know why they were doing what they were doing, and their parents were not really practicing any Judaism at home, and they felt it was hypocritical—

Petnick: For girls there was not even an opportunity to have a bat mitzvah.

Barak: The girls were upset because they could not have a bat mitzvah; the boys were pissed off because they had to have a bar mitzvah. It was like “Why am I doing this? I don’t want to do this. It means nothing to me …” It is not until they grow up and have kids of their own that they realize the importance of this tradition and passing it down. I have had a countless number of fathers come in and say to me, “I had a bar mitzvah once. I never went back.” I used to think, “What is the deal with that?” My theory is that they realized the hypocrisy—thirteen-year-olds are very savvy—they saw the hypocrisy of it. They did not understand why they had to go through this meaningless ritual—this religious ritual that they were not connected to because their parents were not—

Petnick: Is that the hypocrisy—that they are doing something that they are not connected to?

Barak: They were not connected to this. Why would they want to go learn Hebrew when they had school and sports and everything else? And their parents were not part of the equation. They were not taking part in it. They did not care. They just send the kid off. The kids are going, “I’m not coming from a family that is practicing Judaism, that cares. We eat pork. Why am I doing this? Why am I wasting my time?”

Even after they have the bar/bat mitzvah and have a party—and that is nice—it is like they never go back to the synagogue. I think a lot of times they turn their anger and frustration on Judaism and synagogues instead of on their parents because it is a safer thing to do. Instead of being mad at the parents for
putting them through this without ponying up their own souls to this process, they turn their anger and frustration on synagogues and Judaism and never learn anything about all that we have to offer. That is so sad to me.

I think that things have changed. I think the religious schools now are very cognizant of involving the families—very important to have family education along with the kids. I have had a lot of parents come and have their *anshei mitzvah* because now they want to learn, too. Their kids are studying for their bar mitzvah, and now they want to do it too. They want to feel that.

Petnick: Beautiful!

Barak: The real problem was education. I chose to go to Hebrew school—my parents gave me the choice—so for me it was not so terrible, and I enjoyed it. I am glad I went, obviously, but there were kids in my class in Hebrew school throwing paper airplanes. They grew up in more observant families … so I do not know how they turned out.

Petnick: You said the problem was education. What do you mean by that?

Barak: Jewish education for kids traditionally was just very pedantic, very dull. You learn to read Hebrew, and then you start reading Torah. There was not a lot of creativity around it and sensitivity to the child and the child’s needs and what the child can understand.

Petnick: It did not used to be about that at all.

Barak: But it is also the matter of—we are not just telling little fairytale stories here. This is a way of life. This is something that you do with your family. It is a different atmosphere when you walk into an observant family home. The whole home is permeated with Jewish, Jewish, Jewish. Your whole life revolves around this.

Petnick: And everybody is doing it together. You keep a kosher home together.

Barak: Everybody does it together, and there is joy around it. Of course, there are family dynamics and complicated stuff, but there is joy around the idea of being Jewish and keeping *mitzvot* and doing all these family things together—Shabbat, every week. It is a different atmosphere.

When you grew up secular in America, but you happened to be Jewish … you had other things to do. And this was not paramount. This was not important. This was not top of the list. You knew you were Jewish because you ate bagels every Sunday, and you knew a few Yiddish words, and there was definitely a Jewish personality. At least on the East Coast we knew who was
Jewish and who was Italian; you could tell the difference. It is sad that families … People do not make the commitment.

It is interesting … I used to think Jews were just like Armenians. I sang in an Armenian church for years in New York—in the big archdiocese—whatever they call it—the big central Armenian Orthodox church in Manhattan. I experienced the Armenians as very much like Jews. They were well educated, they were business people, and they had good family traditions. They were really committed—they were so committed to educating their children in the traditions and the language. It was so important, so vital. Not that they came to church: the church was practically empty every Sunday. But the Armenian culture was so precious to them. I used to think, “Boy, they are just like us, except they are not.” (Laughs) They aren’t Jewish, but they are just like us. I got along well with Armenians.

Petnick: They had similar practices and intentions.

Barak: Yes. But at times it felt like they were more committed to staying Armenian than we are to staying Jewish.

Petnick: How has that changed or not in the years you have been here as cantor?

Barak: I think people are comfortable with being Jewish but not thoroughly committed to being educated Jewishly. We have sort of a core group of congregants that come to everything and want to be educated and come and drink in the offerings here. There is a lot of adult education, a lot of Torah study here, but those activities and classes have never attracted the kind of numbers you would think a congregation this size would attract. If Torah study has twenty people on a Saturday morning that is huge here, whereas—

Petnick: Out of a couple of thousand people who belong?

Barak: Yes. If you go to some smaller congregations, like on the East Coast, with a rabbi who is a very fine teacher—just like we have here—you will find forty or fifty people sometimes in Torah study, while the congregation is only five hundred families.

I just think Emanu-El is a very civic-minded, very philanthropic, very generous, but very secular and assimilated community. They love their temple, but it is not number one on the priority list. I always kind of thought, “I wonder what number we are down on the list?” (Laughs) You see our members’ names in the symphony and opera programs and so forth. They are very civic-minded and very supportive of San Francisco and San Francisco education and arts.
You see the members everywhere. They do contribute to this temple quite generously, but attendance at services … not really. Major commitments to the temple? Not as much as could be. Some people, yes. But not everyone and not a lot.

Petnick: They come for yahrzeits and for the High Holy Days?

Barak: Yes, the basics. We have our core people that come all the time. That could very well be true of many congregations, especially urban congregations. But I think in some places where Jewish communities feel a little more threatened more people attend, you know what I mean? Maybe in the Midwest or … or suburbia. In suburban congregations people tend to go more frequently.

Petnick: I think attendance may be influenced by the number of secular activities that are offered in the city and maybe the parking …

Barak: And you are talking Northern California. I have said for years … the rabbis were always mulling over how to get more people to come on Saturday morning and … I have been here twenty-eight years, and I am saying, “Lake Tahoe, folks.” Saturday morning … Saturday … a weekend in San Francisco? People are in Tahoe. People are out of town. People are enjoying life here. (Laughs) They are not going to sit in shul.

Petnick: Sonoma. So many of the members of the congregation have houses elsewhere, and Thursday afternoon or Friday morning … gone!

Barak: When I first came there were about a hundred people every Saturday morning that came [to services], and there were very few b’nei mitzvah. There was a core group of people that came to services, and they just got more and more elderly. Rabbi Pearce would say they are sort of dying off, and we were not really going to have a Saturday morning service [anymore]. Exponentially the number of b’nei mitzvah grew, so we kept having Saturday morning services.

Petnick: When they built this temple and created the Main Sanctuary, did they think they would have many for Shabbat services? How many people used to come? In the old days, Shabbat services were in Rinder, right?

Barak: The Friday night services were in the Rinder Chapel. Filled. There was comfortable seating for eighty. By the time we were ready to transform the Martin Meyer [Auditorium into the Martin Meyer Sanctuary] there were about a hundred and twenty. Some people were standing in the foyer in the back of the Rinder.

Petnick: No doubt the increase in attendance was at least in part due to your having joined the clergy here as cantor.
Barak: Some people were in the choir loft. It was packed. It became necessary to create another [sanctuary] space.

Petnick: Are you credited with the growth of the membership?

Barak: I hear that from time to time. I cannot verify it. I do not have statistics on it. Many people tell me that they have joined because of me. They have told me that privately. I am flattered and I am very honored by that, but I do not like to tout it. It does not feel right to go around saying that. I do not think that is the right thing for me to do. But I am happy. If it is a way to get people in shul, I am darned happy.

Petnick: Religious music can be very attractive and bring people in. If it is the wrong for them music … it can turn them away.

Barak: Yes.

Petnick: Let me go back to working with the kids. They have a guide rabbi for their bar or bat mitzvah?

Barak: Now they do, but that was not always true. I used to run the bar mitzvah program myself.

Petnick: Tell us about the changes in the program.

Barak: When I came here it was the cantor’s duty to train the kids.

Petnick: Completely?

Barak: Yes. I am trying to remember what the deal was with speeches. I do not remember, but the speeches were not very extensive, they were mostly a short “thank you” speech. There was a set formula for the bar mitzvah ceremony itself. There were readings that the parents [of the bar or bat mitzvah] did each week; they were very nice, and they were very brief. There were no speeches from parents.

Petnick: We’ve talked previously about Danny’s bar mitzvah- his service was beautiful.

Barak: Yes, it was lovely. It was formal. It was controlled or contained. Everybody knew what was going to happen, and yet it was a beautiful ceremony. We used the Gates of Prayer, which was the former prayer book. Now we are using Mishkan T’fillah. The organ and the choir were there every Saturday, bar mitzvah or not, and the kids were basically trained to do several verses of Torah. There were no aliyyot [family and friends called up from the congregation to recite the Torah blessings]. Only the child did the blessing over the Torah and chanted about ten verses of Torah.
Petnick: How many [verses] do they chant now?

Barak: Depending on the abilities or the timeframe, anywhere between six and about eighteen or so. We do not like to go much longer than that. Now we have aliyyot [relatives and friends being called to the bimah to recite Torah blessings], which we did not have then.

Petnick: Those aliyyot extend the service?

Barak: They do extend it. It used to very compact. As you heard, Danny was the only one who had his aliyyah.

Petnick: And what did you say, and what did your ex-husband, Jacob, say? It was highly formalized.

Barak: Yes. We had cards to read: “In this happy moment of launching you on the path to your manhood, I pray that I have performed the duties of a Jewish mother as stated in our scriptures.” It was a formula on a card.

Petnick: It is tied to [the actual bar mitzvah].

Barak: Yes, it was completely appropriate.

And then Jacob said the Shechecheyanu, and that was just beautiful. It avoided having some of these speeches that go off on a tangent for minutes and hours.

Petnick: I never realized before how much the old ceremony ties the ceremony of the bar mitzvah to our religion; whereas, these days it has become so personal.

Barak: Bob Kirschner used to say, “This is [to] worship the God of Israel, not worship the child.” And he was really committed to that. Under him there would never be a five o’clock in the afternoon service on a Saturday. That, a lot of congregations do, and we still do not do it. They have like these mincha [evening] bar mitzvahs that only the families come to, and they are all dressed in evening gowns. That is a pretty common thing now. In fact, when I go to Dallas, I believe that is what is going to happen there as well. (Laughs)

Petnick: Why are they dressed in evening gowns?

Barak: Because people want to [have the bar mitzvah] late in the afternoon on Saturday, so they can go off to dinner and a reception. We have stuck to our guns here: we kept the five-thirty [service on] Friday; it was over at six o’clock on the dot, and people were very happy with that. It was a very peaceful service. It was a lovely service. The acoustics in the Rinder were beautiful. The Saturday morning service was more majestic with the Torah. We never marched with the Torah, by the way. Everything took place up at
the upper Ark. We took the Torah out of the Ark. We would read from up there. We did not go down to the lower pulpit.

Petnick:  And the Torah was not paraded around the congregation?

Barak:  No, it was not. That started later.

Petnick:  But I think I remember that from my … childhood …

Barak:  Most congregations parade with the Torah, absolutely. We did not. I think it just has to do with the fact that our Ark was so high up, and it was just unwieldy to walk with the Torah down those stairs. It really is. I always worry about it.

Petnick:  To go back to the kids coming in here one-by-one individually to have their time with you, tell me what you teach them, what the rabbis teach them …

Barak:  Now the rabbis work with them on their speeches and their Torah portion—understanding the Torah portion, creating a speech, learning about the texts and the commentators.

Petnick:  But you used to do all that?

Barak:  No, actually, I do not recall that we had those kind of elaborate speeches at the time. That came in with Rabbi Peretz Wolf-Prusan, when he sort of took over the bar mitzvah program. Basically, the kids said thank you, and they did not give any particularly scholarly—

Petnick:  They did not give a d’var Torah?

Barak:  No, it was not really a d’var Torah [a commentary on the Torah portion just read]. I trained them in their Hebrew, and I rehearsed them. I did all that with them, and the rabbi was the rabbi. (Laughs)

Petnick:  And you make tapes [of the blessings and Torah portion] now; you are recording digitally—

Barak:  Yes, I always made tapes, cassettes. We had cassettes then and now they are antiques. Now the kids have iPhones, and I record their Torah portion in their iPhone. It is perfect. For a while I used the computer. I had a program that would make an .mp3 file, and I would send it off to them. Prior to that I burned CDs for them. (Laughs) I upgrade my technological status each time. (Laughs) Over the twenty-eight years, things have changed. The iPhone is the best thing now, or any smartphone. I can record into any smart phone. It is perfect.
Petnick: So you have become pretty close with the kids?

Barak: Yes, as close as I can be. I see them for about five or six months every week for about twenty minutes, but they are also getting so much other input here. They have a tutor to teach them Torah portion reading, so they learn the Hebrew first, and then they learn the chanting. They meet with the rabbis every couple of weeks. It used to be just me, and it was lovely. The parents would give me these lovely gifts—it was so nice. Now it is just not the same thing, but it is still very lovely. I still see the kids.

Petnick: There is a program for the performance of mitzvot … don’t they have to do a certain amount of community service to become a bar or bat mitzvah here?

Barak: It is a very big program now where the kids have to do eighteen mitzvot before their bar or bat mitzvah. They have to get forms signed. They have to come to services and get their forms signed. They have responsibilities now.

Petnick: Explain what it would mean to do eighteen mitzvot.

Barak: The kids choose what they want to do to give back to the community: they go out and help make meals for the homeless, or they go to an old-age home and visit the residents, or they deliver something … It is a project that we ask them to do because now they are entering the stage of their life where they are obligated to do mitzvot, and so we make them do it.

Petnick: Before we leave this room, just a few more questions: what is one of your happiest memories of something that occurred here in your office—in the cantor’s office?

Barak: I actually did a wedding ceremony in this room. It was the father of a boy I had prepared for his bar mitzvah and who is also a friend of mine. He married this lovely gal, and they had to do it [the marriage ceremony] right away because it was the end of the tax year or something. (Laughs) It was for tax reasons. We had a very quick ceremony in this office, which was lovely. It was just delightful. I was very happy. That I remember.

And my dogs. I remember my dogs here. I have had Mazel in here, and Bijou grew up in here. In fact, when she was a little bit rambunctious, I kept her right outside in a little yard out there because she could run around and play with her toys. She would yippity-yap, and people would stop by the gate and look at her. She was a puppy and she grew up out there.

Petnick: Has Schatzy, your current dog, been here?

Barak: Schatzy has been here but not too often. I am afraid to bring her now because there are all these papers around and things that I am packing up, and she will
just eat them. Schatzy has not been here very often, but everybody knew Bijou. Bijou was very loved. In fact, the kids would write in their [bar mitzvah] “thank-you” speeches, “Thank you to Cantor Barak and her dog, Bijou.”

(Laughs)

Petnick:  You have told us about a happy time here but how about a … not necessarily sad … but thoughtful, or … something the opposite …

Barak:  People have come in here to talk to me about serious things. I remember after the Kirschner thing—I am not sure if I was still upstairs. No, I was not, I was down here—and after the Kirschner “debacle,” I will call it, some people came in and wanted to talk about it and were distraught. I have done some counseling work here, and then, of course, meeting here with the families who have just suffered a loss—those meetings occurred frequently here. I can say that that has been sobering. I have the families come [to my office], and I sit with them, and they tell me about the deceased. I craft eulogies here. I do many eulogies. I have a stack this big [indicating]. I have done [many] funerals here.

Petnick:  I knew that you did funerals, but I just thought you did just the music.

Barak:  I have done many funerals by myself. I have run the show, yes. I find that to be some of the most pleasing—in a way—work that I do because it really gives me insights into people, and I learn their histories. I saved all the eulogies. I saved them all because I just feel like … when I sit with these families I kind of take on … not the grief … but I take on the history, and I feel like I am channeling the person. As they talk I feel like I get this really wonderful picture, and I can kind of internalize the person. I always find that writing a eulogy for me is very special.

There was a man who passed away. I had been fond of him and had had a personal experience with him being very kind. I remember saying some things in the eulogy—and it was a very powerful eulogy, actually. Rabbi Pearce and Rabbi Cohn came to the funeral, and they sat on the bimah with me. The funeral service was held in the chapel at the cemetery, and I asked them to be there, and they wanted to be there, so they came. (They might have done a reading or two.) I gave the eulogy, and Rabbi Cohn came up to me afterward and said, “Did you write that?” (Laughs) I said, “Well, yes.” She said, “Where did you get that from?” And I said, "I wrote it.”

She was really stunned because it was good. I think I write pretty well. I have given some good sermons, too. I still have them. People would tell me that they were very fine. What is good is I do not have the pressure of having to do it all the time. When I do it, I know that it is something I can devote my time to and really give a lot of thought to. They have been pretty effective. I always
tell everybody, “Look, I do everything the rabbi does, only I sing. You get more bang for your buck.”

Petnick: You get the song, too! I am going to pause this in a moment, but before I do, think if there is anything else that you want to say about this room and your term of office. You have been here for twenty-eight years …

Barak: Now that you are pointing it out, I am getting a little bit misty thinking about leaving this room. I love this room a lot. I have not loved it as much in the past couple of years because we had a problem. It was pretty icky, and they had to clean out all the mold. Then the temperature in here is always kind of dicey: it is either too hot or too cold. There were times when I just would not come into work, and I would just work from home. I said, “Until you figure out the temperature in that room, I don’t think I can be in there.” I have separated a little bit from it here and there, but I have always loved being in here. This was always my little sanctuary—my little sanctuary off the Main Sanctuary. I love going into the Main Sanctuary and just looking at it.

Petnick: It is so close by. We are going to record about another day, so I think I will stop here unless you want to say something else about this room. Are you finished?

Barak: Yes, I am done. I am done.

Petnick: We have finished talking about the office of the cantor, and now we are going to talk about the physical characteristics of Rinder Chapel. Tell us about Rinder.

Barak: As I’ve said, when I first came to Congregation Emanu-El, the Friday night services were held in the Rinder Chapel. It is a very long rectangular room with a lovely bimah and lovely wood-carved Ark. It was blue velvet inside the Ark, and there were two Torahs in there. It is a small space. There is an organ loft up above, in the back of the chapel. When I am standing on the bimah I can see the organ loft and the organist can see me, even though there is kind of a filtery-kind of screen up there. [The organist] could see me, so we had contact, which is not true of the Main Sanctuary, where the organist and I have almost no contact, except for a camera.

The pipe organ in Rinder is smaller than the organ in the Main Sanctuary. I understand that it was Ludwig Altman’s favorite organ. He loved practicing there. When I recorded my CD, I recorded part of it in there because of the acoustics. The acoustics in there are magnificent. When you are standing on the bimah in front of the Ark there is a domed ceiling and it is just—it is incredible. You don’t need a microphone in there. It is just beautiful. The sound carries beautifully. I really enjoy the sound in there.
Petnick: When you said “CD” Are you talking about your album, *The Jewish Soul*?

Barak: Yes, part of it was recorded in there.

Petnick: Which songs or prayers on your album were recorded in Rinder Chapel?

Barak: The very first piece, *L’Dor Vador*, and anything with organ, was recorded in the Rinder Chapel. It was very warm.

Years ago, when we had the Friday night services in Rinder it was dimly lit, but you could still see the prayer book. There was just an atmosphere in there on a Friday night. It was so peaceful; it was so sweet. It was just sweet. You could see why people wanted to come. It was just a lovely, lovely sweet feeling. When they speak about the “glow of Shabbat,” you think of being in your house with candles lit and just a pretty light as the dusk is falling. It felt like that in there—it felt like that in there. There were beautiful wooden pews on either side and an aisle down the middle. I remember thinking, “Wow, I died and went to Heaven. Here I am. It is Friday night. It is five-thirty.”

Where I came from in Forest Hills we had an eight o’clock service that would not end until nine-thirty or ten, and then I would go out to dinner because I did not get a chance to eat before service. That was a very late night, and then you had to get up the next morning and do services again. Here [at Emanu-El], it was five-thirty and so well timed. The *Service of the Heart* prayer book is a British Liberal [Judaism] prayer book, and the service is kind of truncated, but it still gets to the meat and the heart of things. I sang maybe maximum fifteen minutes worth of music, and maybe five minutes worth of actual liturgy that was responsive reading or whatever, and then a ten-minute sermon. Exactly ten minutes. The rabbi was exact; it was ungodly, almost. Boom, on the dot of six o’clock that service was over, and everybody knew they could have their reservations made, and go out to dinner. It was really timed and really exact, and it was very predictable. That was nice, it was a routine. And then I would go out to dinner afterwards.

I think there was a little *oneg* [Literally “delight.” Refers to the food put out after Shabbat services]. Just wine and something, whatever. It was not real food. I do not think it was real food because there was no room to do that.

I do not remember where we had … the building looked different. We did not have the Martin Meyer Sanctuary. The Martin Meyer was a big auditorium; it was not a chapel, so there was not a reception room for it. There was a front hall when you came into the synagogue that had our gift shop. It was a very different configuration. I think there might have been some little …

Honestly, I am just so blanking on that—whether there was a real table of stuff out there. Probably something, but people would run to dinner—they
wanted to go to dinner. It was probably challah—I remember there was probably challah.

Petnick: Perhaps they set up challah and wine on a little table when you first come out of the chapel, near where the prayer books are. They have the prayer books over on one side, and they have a table with challah and wine sometimes these days.

Barak: They did not do that because people were actually standing there; it had started to get so crowded. The Rinder was always full. We always had eighty people there every Friday night, until we started having a hundred and twenty people.

We had to start adding chairs in the aisle because it was getting so packed in there. People loved that room. They had gotten married there, they had had brises there, they had celebrations there, and it was a beautiful room. I loved that room. I was not as happy when we moved to the Martin Meyer. It was lovely, the Martin Meyer, but for me it did not have the intimacy … And I know now that [most] people have only experienced the Martin Meyer and do not really know the Rinder anymore. The Martin Meyer Sanctuary is where they now have the intimate experience, but I do not find it intimate. I found the Rinder very intimate and very special.

Petnick: What about the Martin Meyer Sanctuary on a Shabbes morning?

Barak: On a Shabbes morning I like the Meyer.

Petnick: The natural light coming in and the golden oak pews and the children’s hangings near the altar … ?

Barak: I agree. And it is [generally] appropriate for the size of the congregation, too, because not as many people come. I will say that when there is a bar mitzvah and a nice crowd in the Main Sanctuary on Saturday morning, nothing can beat that—nothing can beat that. But, yes, I enjoy doing minyan services in the Martin Meyer on a Saturday morning when there is no bar mitzvah, if I have to lead it. It is nice in there. It is a good feeling. I like reading Torah from there. It is a little more informal, but it is still very nice.

Petnick: Rinder Chapel was named after—

Barak: Cantor Reuben Rinder, who was cantor for fifty-three years: 1913 to 1966.

Petnick: Tell us what you know about him.

Barak: What I know about him is that I really wish I had known him.
Petnick: Did you know Rose, his wife?

Barak: Rowie Rinder. Yes. I met her, and then I attended her funeral. It was sad because not that many people knew her anymore; not that many people came. But, yes, I had met her. I went up to her apartment, a sweet lady. She was elderly. As I recall she was in a wheelchair. They were just very beloved, the two of them. They were very much a part of the fabric of this congregation. He was really known as a pastor. People adored him. He was a very gentle soul.

Petnick: Cantor Rinder was at Emanu-El for so many years. How long?

Barak: Fifty-three years. But I just found out—and I am very proud—that as of right now I am the second-longest-running cantor in this history of this temple. Rinder is number one, and I am number two. Joe Portnoy, I think, was here twenty-seven years, and I am twenty-eight. So, yeah! The other cantors were not here for as long a period—

Petnick: There have only been five or six cantors?

Barak: Yes, six. I was the sixth. Max Wolff was a cantor and Edward Stark.

Petnick: Daniel Levy, I think, was an educator who led services and performed cantorial duties …

Barak: I do not remember his name.

Reuben Rinder was known to be heavily involved with the arts community of San Francisco. He was sort of an impresario; he helped launch the careers of Isaac Stern and Yehudi Menuhin. He helped get sponsorships for these artists. He was very beloved for that. He also did not sing. He lost his voice and stopped singing somewhere around 1940 and nobody cared—he was still Cantor Rinder; he was still the pastor here.

Petnick: Apparently, during his non-singing years, they composed special music for him and they would write in a special a recitative part for him?

Barak: Yes, he would recite only. There were people in the choir loft who were not necessarily even Jewish who would take all the solos in the service. Stanley Noonan was a well-known baritone—or bass—and he would sing all the solos, which is kind of unusual—but there you have it! The choir was always wonderful, always made up of some of the finest singers in the Bay Area. They used to talk a lot about one soprano, Luana DeVol, who went off to Europe and became a big opera star, but she used to sing here. When I came, there were several wonderful singers here in the choir, and some of them are still here. (Laughs)
Petnick: Interesting. I was reading parts of the oral history of Ludwig Altman, which is, again, at The Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley. That is where I read that Cantor Rinder lost his voice and how various works were commissioned and that when Rinder would commission a work … because he commissioned some great works …

Barak: He did. Rinder commissioned the Bloch [Sacred Service] and Milhaud, the Ben-Haim. Then when Cantor Portnoy came he continued with a couple of other more contemporary type works that did not, unfortunately, go over as well. (Laughs) Marc Lavry, I think was … I do not know if that was Reuben Rinder or Portnoy, but Mark Lavry’s service is very lovely. It does not get performed enough. Sergiu Natra’s service is rather odd—difficult, kind of hard to relate to.

Petnick: You just mentioned Menuhin and Stern, two famous names. Were they or their families members of Emanu-El? Tell us what you know.

Barak: I do not remember if they were actually members. Isaac Stern has a biography that was written by him and Chaim Potok. Isaac Stern came here and was walking through the building and reminiscing. He never acknowledged much about this congregation. I am not sure what that was about.

Petnick: But he was helped by Cantor Rinder?

Barak: He certainly was, and also Yehudi Menuhin was helped by Cantor Rinder. Those stories are in Visions of Reform and Architects of Reform. You can check that. I just know that when I first came to Congregation Emanu-El, anyone who ever spoke about Cantor Rinder always spoke with great love—everyone except one person, who was my predecessor. It seems that Joe Portnoy came here—he was young, and he had a beautiful tenor voice—and Reuben Rinder would not leave. (Laughs) He just kept hanging around. He would say things to Joe that lessened his confidence. He told Joe that he should not be a tenor. “You can’t be a tenor and be a cantor; you have to be baritone.” Joe started pushing his voice down to sound more like a baritone because he was very impressionable. He really resented Reuben Rinder greatly for having done that. Joe said to me when I first walked into work here, “See you, kid! You don’t need an emeritus hanging around.”

I could not be more grateful to Cantor Portnoy. I never expected that. I expected he and I would have a good relationship and a close relationship and did not expect him to just walk off into the sunset like that. I told him, “Oh, come on, let’s be friends. Let’s get together.” “Nah, you don’t need me around.” Then he told me the story later about what Reuben Rinder did. He had a very different take on Reuben Rinder than other people. When you are ministering to people it is a different relationship than when you are actually working with them. (I imagine everybody would agree with that.) It was
different. I have heard stories out there you would not believe about people and their colleagues. Things have gone down between colleagues that—you would not expect of people of the cloth to behave this way, but they do, to their colleagues. Yes, that saddened me. But, still, that does not take away at all from what Reuben Rinder’s impact was on this community, which was powerful. He was very well known.

Petnick: People are complex. The fact that they may have some difficult qualities or negative qualities does, in my mind, not negate all the other wonderful things about them.

Barak: I am going to say this, and it is going to sound terrible, but I find that a lot of men who have had lengthy careers in one place and are very invested in them are reluctant to separate. They have a lot of trauma around it and do not do well leaving. They always want to be remembered and always want to make sure the loyalties remain. I have not found that as much with women. I think women have a lifecycle [sense] that is a little better at times. We know when to move on. We know when we want to do other things. I think women are a little more adaptable. I think men invest a lot, especially when they have been high-profile figures. I have seen that before with lots of clergy.

I am sorry. I will probably be attacked for saying it. It is not sensitive, and it is not politically correct, but I think men and women function very differently. I have had no problem saying, “I am ready to retire.” But I have seen men who would never say that. (Laughter) They would just, “What?” In fact, there are men that are coming up to me—my colleagues—and saying, “You are retiring? Why would you do that?” Ya-da-ya-da-ya-da. I am like, “Why wouldn’t I do it?”

Male cantors, yes, are saying to me, “What? How could you retire?” I am like, “What do you mean? How can I not retire? It is time to move on in life. There are other things to do.”

Petnick: We have not talked about how you made the decision to retire and why you are retiring.

Barak: Because I always had it in my mind that when I am sixty-five I am going to retire. One woman cantor I look up to did that. If I remember, she was sixty-five when she retired, and I thought of her as a role model, and it made sense to me. As long as I am financially viable and can do it, I feel it is the right thing to do. I cannot see myself being a seventy-year-old woman and still doing this.

For one thing, the Reform Movement has changed so drastically as far as musical styles and worship that me being out there with grey hair and slinging a guitar and singing Hine Ma Tov just seems ludicrous to me. (Laughs)
cannot do that. If I were *davenning* in a Conservative shul and really doing the old-style stuff, maybe … but this is a different world now.

Petnick: We are going to talk about that in a future interview in great detail.

Barak: Our former placement director at the American Conference of Cantors would do these presentations at conventions talking about what congregations are looking for, and the first thing she would always say is, “They want perky. Perky. You have to be perky.” (Laughter) Well, that is the end of me. (Laughter) I gave up perky forty years ago. I used to be perky. Then I percolated. (Laughter)

Petnick: Are we finished with everything you want to say about Rinder?

Barak: Yes, the Rinder Chapel to me was a beautiful space, and I have really been grieving the loss of it because it is just not the same. I do not even want to do ceremonies in there now with the green chairs. I just do not want to do it.

Petnick: They took the pews out. I have to tell you, as a congregant I agree that the room was really beautiful, warm, and wonderful, but the old pews were so unbearably back-breakingly uncomfortable.

Barak: Yes, I know, I know. They could have been made more comfortable. We had cushions on them, and you were not meant to be in the Rinder Chapel for two hours. It was a thirty-minute service, right? You could deal with it.

Petnick: By the time your back started to hurt you were out of there.

Barak: You were out of there. But, look, we always needed more space here to do things, and I guess that was the practical consideration: you make it a flexible space. It just feels like people changing diapers in there … There is a lot of kids’ stuff going on in there now, a lot of baby stuff. Food all over the carpet … It just does not have … it has lost—

Petnick: Well, that is the problem with flexible space. I feel that way about people drinking coffee and eating in Martin Meyer. It does not make sense to me. It shocks me when it is not treated as a sanctuary.

Barak: It has lost its specialness: it was special, and it has lost its specialness, and it upsets me. It does not matter how it happened—that is not important anymore—it is just that it happened. I was very distressed [when they changed Rinder Chapel to a multi-purpose space], but I could not do anything about it. (Laughs)

Petnick: The last thing I want to talk about today is Martin Meyer. I would like to record on another occasion, maybe the next time, your thoughts about and
experiences in the Main Sanctuary, the choir loft and at the Ark and so forth. Do you have anything more you would like to share about the Martin Meyer Sanctuary?

Barak: Martin Meyer was originally an auditorium. We did some concerts in there. We actually used it—

Petnick: Excuse me, tell us who Martin Meyer was, the man for whom the auditorium/sanctuary was named?

Barak: Martin Meyer was a former rabbi of Congregation Emanu-El in San Francisco in the thirties or forties. He was an interesting character. I believe he committed suicide, as I recall. They did name that auditorium after him. It was a very unattractive auditorium. It was kind of like a school auditorium. It had a stage. When we were doing some work in the Main Sanctuary for a while and taking out the asbestos and stuff, we did services in there. It was okay—it just was not special. It did not feel special; it did not feel like a holy space. It was Rabbi Kirschner’s idea to transform it into a chapel and flexible space. They completed the work after Rabbi Kirschner had been let go here, in 1992. It was quite beautiful the way they transformed the space and made the reception area. It is a lovely space, and what I love about it is you can do concerts and all kinds of things in there.

Petnick: Your “Music at Meyer” series is held in Martin Meyer. How are the acoustics?

Barak: They are not bad. I always got along just fine with an organ or a keyboard and a microphone. Now it is all these wires and amplifiers and mixers and … I just find it loud now. I do not know why we need to make that much noise in there. I am an acoustic musician; I am not an electronic honker. I was classically trained; my voice carries in there, and as long as there are not a whole lot of instruments blasting away, I am fine. I was never comfortable singing in the microphones as they are set up now. It did not feel right. I like the pulpit. I like the one microphone in the pulpit, and I thought that was fine—it did not bother me.

The only thing I am not crazy about in that room is the Ark. There was never an attempt made to make a beautiful Ark for that room, so we used the old Ark from when it was an auditorium, and we had that Ark. It is kind of an old, very, very outdated-looking piece of work and a little unwieldy. It actually moves. (Laughs) It is on rollers or something, so it moves. Yes, I wish we had a more substantial Ark. The funny thing about that Ark is you can roll it backstage. We used to have Donald Pippin—his little Pocket Opera performances—in the Martin Meyer, and the singers did not know what that was. They would go backstage and put their backpacks in the Ark. They really did not know … (Laughter)
So that Ark is a little bit of a non-entity now. The other thing is they have no hardware on the Torahs. I am used to seeing Torahs that are really dressed up beautifully with silver, and crowns, and breastplates. We are very limited. There is silver in our archives, but they do not use it in the Martin Meyer, and I am not sure why. Maybe they are afraid it will get stolen because you cannot lock that Ark. But it just seems—it is kind of depressing, actually, when you open the Ark (laughs), and it is just these little mini-Torahs in there with the little blue covers and no silver.

Petnick: They are not dressed up.

Barak: They are not dressed up, and they should be dressed up. They are supposed to look like the high priest—that is what they are. The crown is for the crown of the high priest, and the breastplate symbolizes what the priest wore. It is supposed to reflect that, and we never have any silver on those things. It is just … this is Congregation Emanu-El, and we should have some bling, and there is no bling! (Sighs)

Petnick: During the summer and at other times in the year when lots of people are away and the congregation is small, it just feels warmer and nicer to have the services in Martin Meyer, ya think?

Barak: Oh, yes. And we have had an afternoon service on Yom Kippur in Martin Meyer for many years, and then I think we also had it in the Guild Hall a couple of times. (The last few years have been in Guild Hall.) It depends on whatever else is going on in the building where we wind up. I will not be doing it this year. I am letting Cantor Luck do the afternoon service, and I will be doing a teaching session.

Petnick: But you are going to do the final service?

Barak: Yes, I will do the Neilah and the rest of the services.

Petnick: Do you have any more to share today about Martin Meyer and memories of any particular ceremonies or events or … ?

Barak: The thing I loved about the Martin Meyer was the idea that I could do the children’s services once a month. We had a children’s choir. Each Friday was assigned a different theme. I think first Friday may have been the children’s choir. Second Friday was maybe the jazz service—no, second Friday was maybe the volunteer choir. Third Friday was the jazz service. Fourth Friday was me alone. I loved that because it gave me something to look forward to each week.

Petnick: I liked those services.
Barak: It was wonderful. The jazz service was so terrific, and people were just grooving.

Petnick: This was about ten years ago?

Barak: It was less than that. We were still doing jazz three years ago. I had great musicians. Just a wonderful feeling in there, people loved it. They were just singing along, grooving. It was so great. The little kids’ choir that I had for a while—they learned all the Friday night liturgy, and they were only like six years old.

Petnick: That was a treat!

Barak: They sang *L’cha Dodi*, they sang *V’shamru*, they sang everything. They sang solos. It was so special to have those kids because I knew those kids now knew every piece of the Friday night liturgy.

Petnick: Do we have recordings of those services?

Barak: We have some recordings of one or two things like that. We did a very special service once with the kids, and we have that—we have it on video, in fact. There would be the volunteer choir, of course, and once a month they would sing with me. Then there was the one night when I kind of did my own solo gig there, which was fine. I just loved the variety of that. I loved that every week we had a different kind of feel. People loved it. The music was fairly the same … except for maybe jazz … once in a while we would do something different. But for the most part the tunes were very familiar, and people could sing along all the time. Just to see the kids up there was … And that was all in the Martin Meyer, so it was very special. It was very special. That space was very conducive to having a volunteer choir and a children’s choir. The acoustical problems in the Main would have been too much. The jazz musicians did not want to go into the Main Sanctuary at all.

Petnick: Okay, I would like to stop here. [Sometime soon when] we record we will go to the Main Sanctuary …

Barak: Yes. Okay, great.
Interview 10: August 3, 2015

Petnick: We agreed that today we would talk about a beautiful essay, “The Vocation of the Cantor,” that was written by Abraham Joshua Heschel. You gave me a copy when I first met with you and said, “This represents how I feel about being cantor.” So let’s talk about it [and return to sacred spaces at Emanu-El a little later] in this series.

Barak: What really struck me is the amount of respect that Rabbi Heschel gave to the office of the cantor. Obviously he had heard some great cantors in his time, because it [cantorial music] really moved him. I think he realized profoundly the function and the effect that the cantor has on the congregation.

I don’t think a cantor is much different from any other artist who stands in a public forum (or on a stage) and communicates a text and the musical composition around the text and who moves you and who can reach into your soul. Knowing how people have reacted sometimes to the music in the synagogue and my singing … Believe me, it honors me greatly the things people say to me—many of them say that they get goose bumps, or they feel a connection to something very deep. And it’s hard because when I hear such things, I’m moved, and I feel honored, but I try to slough off such praise because I know if I’m going to do my job effectively, I have to remain humble.

Humility, to me, is extremely important in the office of cantor because so many cantors tend to focus on their voice or on a sound system or on something instead of what is important here: you are conveying a message. You are making a plea, you are expressing gratitude—you are expressing love—and that almost has to be an out-of-body type of thing, where you’re in a very different space.

Heschel’s essay expresses that. Heschel says when you stand before the Ark everything else has to melt away: you are now a total vessel for faith and spirit and gratitude and all those things to which you just have to surrender yourself.

As I’ve said before, the office of cantor—sh’liach tzibur—was created as a legal position to pray for those who couldn’t pray. It’s a proxy position—that’s what it is. You’re a proxy. Because if a man—and it is always men because women have no legal obligation to pray—was not able to fulfill the obligation of prayer every day, he would be guilty of transgression. There were many who couldn’t pray: they didn’t know the language; they couldn’t read … whatever. This proxy person was created to lead the congregation in prayer and to pray for those who couldn’t pray. It’s a legal thing. It’s a proxy thing. It’s a very noble thing. It’s an important thing! Imagine the person to whom you assign power of attorney to make decisions for you when you are ill and dying—that is an important legal position. Now imagine the position of the person authorized to pray for you, and that is sh’liach tzibur!
In time, congregations and their leaders began to think, “Let’s get someone who will inspire us, too.” So people with beautiful or pleasant voices were chosen, and also righteous souls. Supposedly pious people were chosen, although I think the egos took over at some point, very often. But to me, it’s certainly a noble position to be in and a very important responsibility. The voice is an important part of that. Sure, you want to hear a beautiful voice, and you want to hear beautiful melodies to inspire you, but you also want a person who can remain in that very pious state. And I will say for me that’s not always the case.

We’re all human, and there are days when I don’t feel like doing it, and there are days when I don’t think I feel like doing it, and suddenly I do it, and it feels wonderful. There are days when it’s more complicated and harder, and there are days when it’s easier. But for sure total presence and surrender are what we strive for. And I’ll tell you, I’ll take a person with a less beautiful voice who has all those qualities of humility, and who takes care with the text and really throws himself or herself into it. I’ll take a person who takes on the great responsibility for what they’re doing, rather than a person with a spectacular voice who honestly doesn’t move me. And it’s hard—let me tell you—to find the perfect match. It’s very hard. I’ve met a few, and they’re wonderful, but it’s very hard because we’re all human. We are all subject to the same pressures and daily little challenges that come up. It’s hard sometimes … even the most pious people … even the most religious people I know… have trouble.

Petnick: They have trouble bringing their body and soul to the text, on demand?

Barak: There are days they just don’t want to pray, but they have to because they’re obligated. So they’ll do it. We say the more you do something … the easier it gets.

Petnick: And has that been true for you?

Barak: Well, I think like anything else the more you practice something, the more you engage in it, it becomes almost automatic after a while. It’s not a difficult thing for me anymore to stand at the bimah and deliver the prayers. Of course, if my voice isn’t working, like today—I’m kind of hoarse—it’s a challenge, but even then I try to rise above it in some way.

Petnick: How do you prepare, on a Friday, when you’re going to be the cantor for the Friday night service?

Barak: You know what? I don’t prepare much. It’s been challenging. My real love for the synagogue is in almost [the kind of] spontaneity that I grew up with—[in which] everybody knew what they doing: they were davenning together with the cantor, and the cantor was leading them. He would improvise here and
there, and he would do the same thing [as the congregation was doing] sometimes, and there was a dynamic that [would happen] that was very beautiful and very automatic. You just know what you’re doing, and you keep the flow going, and the excitement builds. Some of the excitement would build with the sermon or with the bar mitzvah … [Those] would be the high points. But the davenning, you just did it, and some days it was exciting and spectacular, and some days it was a little more routine.

I think we get bored and distracted easily in our society, so we’re constantly trying to reinvent the wheel: all these meetings and all these preparations and all these “Let’s do it this way today …” It’s very distracting.

The Reform Movement has turned the office of rabbi into a worship leader, which is not the way it was. Traditionally, the rabbi delivered a sermon. The rabbi was an adjudicator and a counselor and a scholar! And the worship leaders—the chazzanim—were always cantors. And that makes sense to me because a cantor is an artist and worship is, in a way, an artistic endeavor. You want to inspire people: you want to have a flow.

Cantors are in a different time warp than rabbis. Rabbis are usually in a hurry. They want to get everything over with. They’re watching the clock. My experience of working with certain rabbis has been that they’re constantly turning the pages while I’m singing a prayer, and they’re not in the prayer with me. They’re turning pages looking for what’s next. They move things ahead, and they rush ahead. And it’s just like, “Can you just sit in the moment?” As artists, we just want to sit in the moment—we just want to enjoy it. We want to let it hang there. It has to be kind of timeless. I was finding this kind of disconnect between rabbinic sensibilities and cantorial sensibilities, and I think that’s where a lot of the tensions come in. And it would be nice if we could all do some work around it, [to find] how to make that work for both cantors and rabbis because it just causes a lot of tension.

Petnick: What are your ideas for how that could work better?

Barak: There needs to be a lot more dialogue, but I don’t think there needs to be constant planning a service so that everybody and his mother is involved in it. I would ideally like to see the cantor lead the liturgy and the rabbi give a brilliant sermon, and that would be it. And read the Kaddish [mourner’s prayer] list and boom! I don’t mind rabbis reading liturgy if they really know how to read, and if they take their time, and if they’re not in a rush—that’s a pleasure to me. I’ve worked with several rabbis who were like that, and it’s really, really delightful. But I’ve always felt, based on some of the cantors who have come before me—their voices were beautiful, they knew how to read—they knew how to deliver text—let the cantor do that job—what’s wrong or threatening about that? Let the cantor do the job of worship!
Of course nowadays rabbis have gotten away from even the prayer book. They just sort of introduce prayers with these little pithy introductions that sometimes … You know, sometimes you hear a rabbi who can do that brilliantly, just brilliantly, and sometimes it is just kind of … blah.

Petnick: So these are the remarks they make before telling you, for instance, “Turn to page eighty-seven in your prayer book.”

Barak: Sometimes the readings work better than some of those … what they call “iyunim,” which are meditations or introductions [to the prayers]; I find they’re sometimes a little trite. Sometimes when they’re used, it looks like they’re talking at people instead of in dialogue with people. Sometimes it feels silly to me and interrupts the flow. The prayers should flow.

Petnick: I remember some very lovely Friday night services that you and Rabbi Cohn and Rabbi Pearce led services together. And there was a sense of flow, and it didn’t feel like you were interrupting one another.

Barak: It used to feel like that.

Petnick: It was when you were robed. Those were some truly beautiful services.

Barak: I miss my robe. I miss the robe. I think it gave a certain neutrality and a certain … I won’t say authority, but it gave a gravitas. When you wear the robe, it says “Okay, I’m not just like you in this moment. In this moment I’m here to perform a function and to be a symbol of something for you.”

That may sound haughty, but I feel like it works for people, actually. I think people want to look up to their spiritual leaders and say, “This person is different—is set apart from me in that they’ve accepted this role. They’re going to teach me, and they’re going to pray for me and with me.” And the robe was a symbol, and now it’s just, “Oh, we’re just one of you.” I think that’s a function of our—not mine—but the rabbis’ and the newer cantors’ discomfort with the role, not really wanting to wear the mantle all the way. That’s a pity, and it often shows in behavior as well: there’s too much familiarity. There’s too much backslapping. I think we’ve lost the seriousness of the position. A lot of [clergy] will argue with me and say, “You don’t get it. We are just like everybody else.” I say, “No, you’re not. People expect more of you. And you should be able to deliver that.”

Petnick: All this reminds me somewhat of the Sing-It-Yourself-Messiah … But more importantly, here’s something: when I interviewed Rabbi Pearce recently, one of the things that came up in the interviews was his discovery when he went to interview rabbinic students at your school, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, that a lot of people who are studying to become rabbis don’t believe in God.
Barak: I think if you don’t believe in God and you become a rabbi … it’s as much as if you’re an Orthodox rabbi who eats bacon on the side. I mean, there’s a *traif* [Yiddish for non-kosher] quality about it. There’s a *traif* quality.

I don’t want to judge anyone for his or her beliefs, and I’m sure there are days when God looks like a really … difficult thing to grapple with. Absolutely. I think everyone goes through that. But if you don’t surrender yourself to the idea of a higher being, or something that had a hand in all of this … If you don’t have at least the humility to say, “I don’t know,” and you make a blanket statement that there isn’t … [that God] does not exist … then how can you stand on the *bimah* and sing *Adon Olam* [Master of the Universe] with integrity? Then what are you talking about? At least say, “I’m sort of agnostic today.” Or leave it fluid: “Each day I think something different, but I still accept that I’m here to acknowledge that there’s something greater than me.”

I just have a problem with people who are constantly saying they don’t believe in God. All right, fine. At least say, “I don’t know if there’s a God or not.” Just have that ounce of humility to say, “I don’t know.”

You don’t know jack if you’re standing there saying, “I don’t believe in God.” To me, it’s the same statement as, “There’s no such thing as evolution,” and, “Only God created this,” and blah, blah, blah. It’s the same thing. It’s the same amount of arrogance.

Petnick: You’ve mentioned that there were days when you feel more closely connected and days, maybe, that you don’t. Are there days when you feel especially connected? Do you have times and periods in your life when it becomes kind of dry for you, and you don’t really feel connected? How is it for you? You’ve been doing this for twenty-eight years.

Barak: Life goes in cycles and waves, and there are times when you’re dealing with disappointments or things going on in the world that you can’t fathom. How can people be so cruel? How can these things happen? And then there are days when it’s just peachy keen.

But I remember when I was singing in a church once in Forest Hills, where I grew up. I had a little church job for a while in a community church. It was very Protestant and very perky, and the messages were always, “God is good!” “God is great!” I would sit there and think, “Gee! Golly! What a bunch of pabulum! There are a lot of problems in the world. Why don’t you ever acknowledge that? You’re just standing here going, ‘God is good, God is great—Oh! We’re so happy. Everybody, you should love everybody.’” I’m thinking, “Nah, God may be good, and God may be great, but there are problems. How are we going to work on those? How are we going to solve that?” That’s why I came to be so connected to Judaism, with its acknowledgement of all the bad and the good and the bitter and the sweet. It’s
up to us to perform our *mitzvot* to make this a better place. God’s a busy guy, or woman. God created this, and I think God had a definite hand in it and is letting us roll with the ball and has given us a set of instructions. And we’re screwing it up. And God may be very pissed. I don’t know … it’s all a crapshoot. You just have to ask these questions every day.

I think there are days when I may have a pain in my foot, or something’s just not right, and it’s harder. I just go into auto pilot mode. And because I’m a well-trained singer, and because I honestly do respect the text a lot, I can still make it work. But it may not be as gut-level as I’d like. And there are days when I don’t even know why, but suddenly I’m feeling really inspired and really juiced, and every time I say a certain word I’ll get teary-eyed. You don’t know … you don’t know …

There are bar mitzvah ceremonies, for instance, where the kids just move me. Especially the Russian kids because they are the first kid in the family to have a bar mitzvah. The whole family’s sitting there, just glowing. You can see the hopes and dreams on their faces. I lose it every time. It’s that human thing. I think it’s the human thing that moves me more to be inspired, [more] even than just the concept of, “Here-I-am-praying-to-God-Who-I’ll-never-see-and-never-know-personally.” But I feel that there’s something out there for me. I feel I’ve had a lot of connection in my own funny, silly way, and that it’s usually with a lot of humor. I feel like there’s a lot of cosmic jokes that are played on me regularly. I wish I could document them. I wish I had catalogued them because they’re hilarious! Funny things always keep happening.

Petnick: I understand what you mean, but can you explain for the record why you mention the Russian families?

(Pause)

Barak: These are the people who had not been permitted to worship as Jews. They were oppressed in Russia. They were subjugated, in a way. There was prejudice. They were discriminated against. It was horrible, their treatment in Russia, and they finally managed to emigrate. Every time one of their little kids steps up—and it’s the first kid in the family to have a bar mitzvah—you just know this is extremely special and extremely touching. I spent a lot of the early nineties doing this with these Russian kids, and I was crying every time. Every week I was crying. We even had a couple of autistic kids that went through the bar mitzvah program, and we’d lose it. Helen [Rabbi Helen Cohn] and I once stood there crying our eyes out together when this one kid was marching with the Torah. We were blown away. These things happen. It is this human thing. It’s these human, beautiful things that can happen,
especially when you’re living in a world of such turmoil. Suddenly there’s a ray of hope, something that touches you.

I will say, it’s been rich; I’ve had a very rich and full experience of other people’s lives, which is interesting. My own life was boring. I was a single mom. I didn’t have time to do anything but go to the temple and be the cantor.

Petnick: Doesn’t that also depend on your idea of life? In a broad, open view “your life” encompasses and includes many different lives.

Barak: That’s what I’m so grateful for, that I’ve had that opportunity. And I know my colleagues feel that way too, that we’ve all been involved in people’s lives in some way. We’ve had an impact in some way. We’ve been in their lives at very significant times. The most glorious thing of all about this profession is having the opportunity to be that way and help people.

I remember reading a text once by Albert Einstein that said, “We are here for the sake of others.” I don’t think a lot of people realize that until it actually happens to them. Once they’re doing it, it almost becomes an addiction. You have to keep doing it. I think of those hospice workers. Why would anyone want to do it? Look at the impact they have. Look at the beauty they bring to the most precious moment—the ending, the transition to death. I’ve been there for some of those moments, and they are profound; let me tell you, that is a profound experience. And the hospice workers do it all the time. And you’d think they’d be very depressed people, but I don’t think so. I think they’re very holy people.

Petnick: Share some of your experience visiting or being with people who are transitioning out of this world. What was that like for you?

Barak: I’ve had it with my own mother.

Petnick: Was she sick for a long time?

Barak: Not a very long time. She had a condition for some years with her liver. She knew she wasn’t going to be around forever, but she controlled it with medication for many years. And then the disease finally spiked, and that was it. And then it started to spiral. She was eighty-six. She was okay. She lived a good, long life. She didn’t expect to live that long, and she did. She had a lot more left in her. She had just remarried, and she was happy. She wanted one more year, and she didn’t get it. But I was very pleased to be able to spend the last few days with her. She got very sick very quickly, and so she wound up in the hospital. Nine days later they transferred her to hospice, and four days later it was over. It was a very quick thing. And my dad, too.

Petnick: Were you present when she left her body?
Barak: No, I had come back home around eight o’clock at night. At ten o’clock they called me. I wasn’t there. It’s very possible she didn’t want me there, because sometimes when someone wants to die they may want to be alone. It happens a lot.

But I was in the room for one lady—who was a lovely lady—who was very ill, and I was called to visit her, and her daughter was there, and she passed right after I sang to her.

Petnick: Amazing! What did you sing?

Barak: I sang Psalm 23 very quietly, and I held her hand. And then I heard two little puffs. Her daughter wasn’t paying attention. She wasn’t looking at her. I saw two little puffs of breath, and I saw no movement, nothing. And I thought, “Oh my.” I didn’t want to tell her daughter. I didn’t want to alarm her, and when the daughter finally saw it, she said, “I don’t think she’s with us anymore.” And we called in a nurse, and she verified that the woman had passed. I still get chills thinking about it. She waited until after the song was over. She waited until after the Psalm. And she just went out. The daughter even said, “You took her to the next place. She went with music just like she would want to go.”

Petnick: How fortunate!

Barak: It was a beautiful thing.

Petnick: Was this was at home or in a hospital?

Barak: In a hospital. But she—I don’t know if she even—I think she heard me. I’m pretty sure she heard me.

Petnick: They say that people often can hear when they’re unconscious.

Barak: They hear. I verified that with one person who had been unconscious for a while. When he woke up he said it was like he could hear everybody.

(Phone rings) (Pause)

Barak: Just that being with people at that stage of their lives … I remember being with one younger woman, [a] much younger woman, who was passing away. She was terminal, but she was still sitting up and talking—it wasn’t like she was lying down the whole time. I had a whole talk with her about her life. It was a great thing, and then she passed away two weeks later. I remember thinking [I was] really privileged to be able to sit with her. And there was another elderly lady I adored, and I got to meet with her, and she was lying
down, and she had this luminosity about her. She looked so beautiful, and she passed away about a week later.

These things, you see, it makes you lose your fear of death. It makes you feel this is just one part of the journey, that there’s another stage. I remember my mom sitting up at one point—she was just in that weird interim state that people go into when they’re dying, and she just sat up in bed, and went, “I see a wall of brightly colored flowers.” I thought, “Wooh—that’s what’s waiting for us on the other side, I can deal with that! I’ll get my gardening tools, and let’s go.”

It’s an interesting position to be in. People probably think, “Who wants to be with dead people all the time? Who wants to do funerals?” I used to think, “Who wants to do funerals?” But once I started to do them, I felt that this is something I would want to do a lot, and probably I will continue to do it.

[I’ve done funerals] many times, too numerous to count. I can’t remember every one. As much as I love doing weddings, I feel much more powerfully moved by the experience of being with a family in grief. Being able to contain everything. Being able to feed back to them everything they’ve said, all their feelings and emotions, and let them sit with that. And react to it. It’s comforting.

Petnick: There’s much emphasis in our Jewish experience on lifecycle events and the whole idea of life cycle. Death, of course, is part of that cycle. If you only officiate at one thing—just weddings or just births—it might create a certain, possibly unbalanced sense of things, but if you are involved in all the lifecycle events, it might create a deeper, more complete understanding, ya think?

Barak: If there’s anything that can plug us into “miraculous”—because most of us don’t believe in miracles—if there’s anything that can bring us to a feeling of the miraculous, it’s the experiencing [of] that whole spectrum of life. You feel it when you give birth, for sure. And then as you continue along you have to constantly be in a state of gratitude for the gift of consciousness and emotion and all that goes with that, and connection to family, and wonderful relationships with other people in your life. Even the bad stuff, even the tragedies and the sorrows, it all goes into making you a deeper person, with deeper understanding. And then having to deal with illness or something makes you stronger sometimes. If it doesn’t destroy you it makes you stronger. And then learning how you can affect others and help others …

I wish people all over the world would stop focusing on the petty stuff and look at the bigger picture. We have a planet that’s dying, and we have people who are in need of so much, and we have an animal kingdom that needs to be preserved, and we have things that are so beautiful here. And if we don’t
I just saw a movie with David Olick the other day called *The Giver*, and it kind of affected me. I thought it was a weird story, but it was interesting. It was all about a totalitarian society in the future that’s being totally controlled, and all their emotions are being taken away so they [can] function every day. Everybody’s very placid and very pleasant. And everybody wears the same stuff and looks the same. It was all sort of a black and white movie because there’s no color, but one guy is given a special task of being the repository of memory or something like that, and he gets trained by another guy who’s going to retire soon. He learns everything, and he reads books, and he is given the opportunity to feel emotion, and he stops taking his daily shots that take away his emotions.

He’s the one who feels pain, and he’s the one who feels pleasure. And he can’t deal with it. He has to get away from that society and find a way out. It was a fascinating movie because he was the one who was really living; everyone else was just existing. Anyway, that’s a different subject, but it really affected me.

I just want to pay homage to the idea of feeling and acknowledging everything that is given to us and being grateful for it and accepting that there is a cycle. All these people who want to live longer, I’m saying, “Are you crazy? What’s the deal with that? Why do you want to be a hundred years old if you can’t even move?”

There’s a time for everything. Ecclesiastes: “To everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven.”

Petnick: Rabbi Pearce told me he would sometimes visit frail elderly in their late nineties who were dying, and some would still be holding on and saying, “Why me, why now?”

Barak: Hello! Because.

Petnick: Because. Right.

Petnick: I want to go back to some questions based on Heschel’s essay. I love the opening question: “What does a person expect to attain when entering a synagogue?”

Barak: Uh, please, ask them. (Laughter) I would hope they would feel—I would hope they feel something.
Petnick: Do you think they enter to feel something? Do you think that’s one of the motivators of why people come to services?

Barak: I would hope so. I would hope that they come to either feel comforted or feel peace or feel some level of connection, or feel some joy, but in moderation and not to be manipulated into it, but to sit back and feel it and experience something. And too often now I just see people not being allowed to feel, but being told how to feel. “Clap your hands.” “Sit together.” “Hold each other.” “Put your arms around each other.” What is this direction? Why can’t people just walk into a space, hear prayers, maybe pray along, maybe not?

I know when I go into a synagogue and sit in the back row I just like to be alone. I don’t want to be clapping my hands and putting my hand on somebody’s shoulder. I don’t know, maybe some people need the feeling of creating community, but I think when they walk out of the synagogue, and they’re alone again they probably say, “Hey, wait a minute. That was kind of a smokescreen. I’m not in community now.”

I don’t know. I don’t know. I think every person is such an individual. You do survey after survey, and you get the same results, basically. One third of the people love it. One third of the people hate it. And one third of the people couldn’t care less: they’re just there to perform a function—they have to say Kaddish or something. I don’t get it. That’s why it’s just like, “Give me the old time religion.” You walk in, you pray, have nice music, have a great sermon. Let the people go and have dinner.

Petnick: “Let my people go!” Let my people go have dinner! That’s great.

Barak: I tell you, these little half-hour services in Rinder Chapel were perfect. They were perfect!

Petnick: Heschel says the right Hebrew word for cantor is baal tefila, “master of prayer.” Do you want to talk about what baal tefila is, and how it differs from sh’liach tzibur? Are these different terms for the role of cantor?

Barak: Well, let’s start with chazzan, which some people say comes from chazzon, which means “vision.” There’s a little bit of dispute about what it means. Then there’s baal tefila, which means, yes, “master of prayer.” I’ve heard people called baal tefila who just lead the prayer, and they don’t necessarily have to be masters. They have to know the prayers, but they’re not great singers—they’re just lay people who can lead the congregation in the absence of the chazzan. They do a fine job, some of them. Some of them don’t! I’ve heard some pretty bad ones, as far as their voices at least. I don’t want to listen to that. And then sh’liach tzibur, as I’ve explained, is the legal term: the public messenger, so—
Petnick: When Heschel talks about master of prayer, baal tefila, he is talking about such a big role: he is saying people come to synagogue, and they’re in their individual selves, and the voice of the cantor has to bring people together as a unity—as a congregation—and then bring this unified congregation before the Divine.

Barak: Right on! (Laughs)

Petnick: Do you have a sense of that when you’re right in the midst of the service?

Barak: Look, there are people who come in and are annoyed by my presence and are annoyed that they have to listen to me.

Petnick: Why would they be annoyed?

Barak: Well, because they don’t want to be that passive—because they’ve gotten used to the more informal service of singing along all the time. At this point now, that’s probably the majority: “Oh, I don’t want to listen to that—that’s a performance.”

And I can’t argue with that. I’m sure there are people who do perform that way, and it becomes irritating, and you don’t feel included, or you don’t feel empowered to pray by just listening to a person’s voice. That’s then incumbent on the chazzan, or the baal tefila, [to pray] in such a way that they can still listen to you and be inspired and yet still feel empowered and connected and able to sing and join in. I hope that I’ve accomplished that. Because when I first came to Emanu-El, nobody sang. After a couple of years—once I started the volunteer choir to get people to know the melodies better, once the people’s voices were heard—then the congregation felt empowered to sing. We have a congregation that sings all the time now.

My favorite thing was the jazz service where I would use familiar tunes, and I would riff, and the congregation would be singing the melody, and I’d be riffing over the melody.

That was divine because I had a choir there for me, and they would all be singing the tune, and I’d be just riffing away, and it was like everybody was in that thing together. And that was a joy, and you could see people really kind of into it. They were just grooving on the experience. I think it felt prayerful, too. It didn’t feel disrespectful. In fact one person came up to me afterward and said, “Thanks for the chazzanut.” And I thought, “Wow, I improvised, and it was fun.”

So I think that nowadays—I’ll tell you the truth—when I see a band up there on the bimah, and people doing all these arrangements of music, I feel like that is a performance. I don’t see the difference between one voice singing
and giving a performance and a whole ensemble giving a performance. Even if people sing along, it still feels like there’s a concert going on. I’ve heard that—some people have said that to me—“It feels like a concert.”

Very often when I see people singing along to these very trite tunes, it feels like I’m in kindergarten. “Let’s clap hands and just sing this little tune.” It doesn’t feel like prayer to me. I would say right now that’s the majority [of the] experience I’ve had with this kind of worship: it doesn’t feel like prayer to me; it feels like a *kumzitz* [slow, campfire type songs]. Or, I will say, that when they removed the pulpit from the *bimah*, I just lost all connection to my role as cantor. It just did something.

We always had a pulpit. We had a beautiful table. And the worship’s been transformed now: the pulpit has been removed; there are music stands; there’s a heck of a lot of wiring all over the place—monitors and instruments that are being plugged in; there’s a sound mixer … there’s all this stuff. We never needed all that. It’s a small hall! It’s an overwhelmingly loud and intrusive experience for me. The music can be nice. The music can be lively and fun and everything, but is it prayer? I think there’s a difference there.

Petnick: Heschel says—of course he’s writing from a different time, before amplifiers and sound mixers and so forth—that optimally prayer is song; song is prayer.

Barak: Song enhances prayer. Let’s put it that way. I don’t know if it’s the same thing. It enhances it. I commissioned a song for my twentieth anniversary—Jimmy Roberts wrote me this wonderful song called, “I Sing, I Pray,” and I’m going to sing it again at my retirement party. One of the best lines in the song is, “Prayer gets the message out, but singing sends it faster.” It’s express mail!

Petnick: Great. Do you have anything else that you want to say about this?

Barak: Well, the Heschel piece inspires me greatly, and I think it’s beautifully written, and I don’t think anyone takes it seriously anymore. It is such *hoch* [high] language. It’s written with such eloquence.

Petnick: And such wisdom.

Barak: Wisdom and beauty. And it focuses so much on the office of the cantor. It speaks to people. It doesn’t speak to the powers that be in the synagogue. It almost intimidates and frightens. I don’t think it’s being given much weight anymore.

Petnick: Essentially what he’s talking about—he’s using the role of the cantor to say this—he’s talking about relinquishing or letting go. And that’s the nakedness before God.
Barak: And that’s frightening to people.

Petnick: Not to bring the personality and all that I-I-I! To leave the whole basket of I-me-mine someplace else. And to be empty.

Barak: And how many people can do that?

Petnick: How many people want to do it?

Barak: How many people can be emptied?

It’s sad because I’ll tell you, you listen to those old chazzanim from those recordings, and you know they were coming from a place that was so deep, and so different from what we experience today.

Petnick: They really were. Their lives were so totally different than our lives today. When they went into those long nigguns—those wordless repetitive songs … I’ve experienced this myself, while working with mantras or chanting or singing for a long time—you go into another state. Sound vibration is extremely powerful.

Barak: Did you find that Ornette Coleman article I told you about?

Petnick: Not yet, I will find it soon.

Barak: Look for it.

Anyway, those golden age cantors really went out there to where you lose the sense of personality—the sense of self. Such music transports you to another world. You make that kind of music—can’t go in the other world with all this I-me-mine baggage.

Petnick: I’m going to turn this off. I think we’re probably finished. Any concluding remarks? Maybe you have something else you want to say?

Barak: No, things have just changed so drastically, and it’s sad to me that the uniqueness of the synagogue has changed. And maybe it’s more what people need now—what they want—but it doesn’t have the same, as we say, ta’am—taste of what feels truly, uniquely Jewish in worship. It’s been completely …

Petnick: Homogenized?

Barak: Yes, it’s homogenized. And it’s very sad to me. And that’s all I have to say.

Petnick: Thank you very much for speaking from your heart.
Interview 11: September 30, 2015

Petnick: Today we are in the Main Sanctuary at Congregation Emanu-El in San Francisco. I have a brief introduction to the history of this building that I want to read into the record:

In the early 20th century, the leadership of Congregation Emanu-El sold the Sutter Street temple, and chose architect Arthur Brown, Jr., to design a new temple at 2 Lake Street. Brown was an excellent choice. His stellar career includes the design of important Bay Area structures: San Francisco City Hall, the War Memorial Opera House, the Bay Bridge, and many beautiful buildings on the Stanford and UC Berkeley campuses, including the very place where this oral history will be deposited, the Bancroft Library at University of California, Berkeley. He designed Temple Emanu-El, which is a bold, Byzantine-inspired building with a 150-foot dome that can be seen throughout the city. The cornerstone was laid in 1925. The interior of the great dome contains the Main Sanctuary where we are now recording.

All that being said, I’d like to start with a question from Rabbi Helen Cohn, a former associate rabbi at Congregation Emanu-El: “The Main Sanctuary is an awesome space that can inspire moments of transcendence: how do you feel in the Main Sanctuary?”

Barak: I feel sanctified by this space. There’s a deceptively simple feel here. I know that the architectural lines are borrowed from the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul— I’ve been there, and I see the resemblance. When you look at the space, it seems inspired by an Oriental kind of culture. The outside, the foyer, is just the prelude to what comes inside: out there you see the beauty of the arches and the beautiful blueness of it, then again the marble and everything that just sort of makes it gleam, but in a subtle way. And then you walk into this space, and it’s just striking. It feels awe-inspiring to me.

The first time I ever saw it, I just gasped. I was standing at the back with another candidate for the cantorial position, and we … both of us … our jaws just dropped. And I remember feeling right away that, “Yes, this is the place where I could feel worshipful.” I had been in other spaces. I had taken other interviews, and I didn’t feel that way. I may have felt warm; I may have felt that the other places would have allowed me to be on the East Coast, closer to my family, but when I walked in here, I felt awe. And that’s what I need to feel when I worship.

I think [that is] probably because my Orthodox synagogue growing up was very haimish—it was homey—but it also had a height to it and a feel about it. Maybe I was a little girl so I felt that it was higher than it was, but there was a feeling of height. Even though it was a smaller space, there was a feeling of sanctity there as well— even though it was much smaller, and it was Orthodox,
and it was a very different worship experience. But then when I became a professional singer in New York and spent a lot of time in churches, I was always impressed by the magnitude of the space and the feel and the vastness of them. So this place, Temple Emanu-El, combines that feeling of the magnitude with something that I felt in the Orthodox synagogue.

I know that people don’t consider this a warm space; I guess because there’s marble and travertine and all these things that make it look a little cold. But when I look at it now, it looks much smaller than it did when I first saw it. It feels much more comfortable, and it just feels like Classical Reform Judaism, with all its respect and reverence and formality. I know that this represents the Reform San Francisco Jewish community in a way that left its stamp on it. It has a landmark quality about it. I feel this was constructed with an amazing amount of love and care. And it’s not ungapatchka [Yiddish, meaning over-decorated; tastelessly ornate], as we say. It’s not rococo (laughs) or baroque. You know— not an overdone place. You walk in, and you just feel … I feel very peaceful in here. Always have. I always felt like this was my space. I was meant to be here.

Petnick: Well, it’s very beautiful—the grandeur, the height, and the structural lines. Actually, sitting here near the bimah and looking out, it looks so much warmer than it does when you sit out there and look toward the bimah. When seated in the congregation you’re facing white marble, which is beautiful, but on a non-sunny day or at night it looks and feels cold. But sitting up here behind the pulpit, and facing the beige tones walls and the beautiful wood of the pews, it has a much warmer feeling.

Barak: Yeah, it feels small to me. It feels like my Orthodox shul in Queens.

On Yom Kippur this year, suddenly, in the morning services, the sun came in, and it was just right on my face. And it just—wow! This is where I’ve been for twenty-eight years, with this sun streaming in and—this incredible feeling; it gives me great warmth. And the rainbow … the rainbow shining in [through the stained-glass windows]. The rainbow in the Bible is a sign of the covenant that God will always be with us—that God will never destroy the earth again after the flood. There’s just something about that rainbow streaming in through that window that just reminds me of that. It gives you hope, you know.

Petnick: I like the windows having abstract designs rather than figures.

Barak: Well, I think they respected the restriction of not having images. There’s another synagogue in town that has many, many images that—even though it’s a beautiful space—when I walked in there I was kind of taken aback; this seems to me more appropriate for our faith.
Petnick: I always feel honored and privileged to be a member here. Is there something, either up here on the *bimah* or in the space in its entirety that you tend to focus on? Is there something for which you have a special affection?

Barak: Well, this isn’t the original *bimah*. The original *bimah* was only this part up here. The pulpit was there, and it was kind of a narrow space, and we were very high up above the congregation, and it felt a little imperious, actually. And then the decision was made to start bringing the clergy far into the congregation and closer to them, and so this apron was designed, and I love it. I love it because for me, it’s musical. I feel like you can have musical forces here.

Petnick: Plus, as you move into the congregation, it would seem that it’s more in the spirit of *sh’liach tzibur*, in that you’re the messenger of the congregation positioned more or less in the congregation, or at least not so far from it.

Barak: Well, you’re definitely closer. You’re closer, and there’s more contact, and people can walk up easily—come right up for an *aliyah*.

Petnick: Did the change in the *bimah* grow out of the ideas and discussion during Synagogue 2000?

Barak: I think so. I think it definitely had an effect on what we wanted to present here, and how we wanted [services] to feel.

Petnick: So, we talked a little bit when we first came in about the stained-glass windows, and maybe we should say for the record that there weren’t stained-glass windows originally. Would you tell us about that?

Barak: The windows were amber-colored glass, which I’ve been told created a different feeling in here. The Haases and other temple families were behind the commissioning of Mark Adams to do the stained-glass windows—you might want to check in the temple archives to find out which families exactly … I know it was Madeleine Haas Russell and … and there was someone else. [Mark Adams, who won the commission after Marc Chagall was too ill to accept it, created the two windows “Water” and “Fire.” Madeline Haas Russell and Walter and Elise Haas donated the windows. The stained-glass windows were completed circa 1973. –Ed.]

Petnick: Another interesting feature of the sanctuary is the ciborium—a tent-like structure supported by pillars, which forms a sort of marble canopy over the Ark. Had you ever seen a ciborium before coming to Emanu-El?

Barak: No, never had. The Ark at Emanu-El is unique. That you have to go so far up another flight of stairs to get to the Ark is different. I’ve never seen that anywhere else. And that Ark itself is completely just astounding …
astounding! It was crafted in England, and it’s solid brass. It’s so magnificent. It’s a tourist attraction. People come in here, and they want to see the Ark.

Petnick: Really? Just regular tourist people who are visiting San Francisco?

Barak: Yeah, sure. They’ve never seen anything like it. It’s completely unusual. It’s also a little unwieldy: it’s very hard to take the Torahs out of there and put them back in. You must be tall and strong. I did it for years, until my shoulder gave out (laughs), and now I can’t do it. Now we find strong people to do it. If you’re short … forget about it. But it is so stunningly beautiful to see it that it’s worth the trouble. (Laughs)

Petnick: What about the Torah scrolls in this Ark? Do you know anything about the history of any particular Torah scroll?

Barak: I do not know the history of the scrolls. I imagine our archivist would know that.

Petnick: So looking out at all the seating, I think you once told me there are about 1700 seats here in the Main Sanctuary.

Barak: There were. I think we removed about five rows in the front when we changed the configuration, so it’s about 1,600. Maybe a little more, give or take.

Petnick: So you are the sixth of all the cantors …

Barak: I think so. But I thought there was another one whose picture maybe isn’t on that wall. I just counted them on the wall, and it looks like I’m the fifth, but maybe one is missing.

Petnick: Well, it depends how you count them. Not counting Marsha Attie, but previously, there were nine people who have performed in a prayer-leader role for Congregation Emanu-El, and of those, I believe six would qualify by apprenticeship or investiture to be called “cantor.”

Barak: Well, there was Julie Rosewald, who was not an ordained cantor.

Petnick: Right. So she’s one of the three. The first person who served in the position of leader of services was Max Wolff; he was a reader and not a cantor.

Barak: Okay.

Petnick: And they had Daniel Levy, who …

Barak: Yes. Daniel Levy, I think, was the first actual cantor here, unless …
Petnick: Apparently, he was not really a cantor, either. I’ve read that he was teaching in the education department here, but he had a beautiful voice, so he performed some cantorial duties.

Barak: Yes, but you know, in those days there was no certification process. People were just apprenticed to other cantors, and then they became cantors.

Petnick: Good point. So, the first person who is credited as being the first trained cantor would be Alexander Weisler.

Barak: Okay, yes … Weisler. Good.

Petnick: He came from Europe and was an apprentice of the great composer, Salomon Sulzer, one of your regular guys.

Barak: Right. And he’s not on the wall. (laughs)

Petnick: Okay. So that’s the cantor who is missing from the collection of photos on the wall.

Barak: That’s the person I missed. He’s not on the wall. I think the first one on the wall is Max Wolff.

Petnick: Right. Okay, so it’s Weisler, then Wolff, and then the next cantor …

Barak: Stark [Edward J.]

Petnick: Stark, then Reuben Rinder, Joseph Portnoy …

Barak: And myself.

Petnick: Okay, so then the three cantors of the Lake Street temple are: Reuben Rinder, Joseph Portnoy, and you, Roslyn Barak—is that right? Plus Julie Rosewald, who, as we’ve discussed, was not a cantor but who led all the temple music here for nine years. Is that right?

Barak: Yes.

Petnick: Okay. So, we’ve clarified that in the history of Congregation Emanu-El there have been nine people who have led services, and of those nine, six are considered cantors by apprenticeship or investiture/ordination. Of the six persons considered cantors, three have served here at the Lake Street temple. You were the sixth of six cantors and the third of three. Let’s move from the past to the future: who are your successors?
Barak: Well, Marsha Attie has been here for maybe sixteen, seventeen years already. She was a cantorial soloist, and she was ordained as a cantor only a couple of years ago. Now she is a co-cantor here. And Cantor Arik Luck just came on board. He is co-cantor with Marsha now, so they are going to be working together.

Petnick: Cantor Barak, in order to organize the many questions I have for you today, I thought we could look at some of the elements of the Classical Reform service, and that maybe you would talk about them. We’ve discussed the liturgy and prayer books previously, so the five elements I’d like to discuss now are: the organ, the choir, the congregation, the cantor, and the musical compositions. Would reviewing these five elements create a good way to talk together now?

Barak: Absolutely.

Petnick: So let’s start with the organ. What can you tell us about the Main Sanctuary organ?

Barak: The organ in that space is a four-manual Skinner organ. Skinner was a very famous organ company. We have about 6,000 pipes, I believe, behind the scrim … Honestly, for technical details about the organ you should ask Rodney Gehrke. He knows much more about organs than I do, but I do know that it is a very, very fine instrument. Except that it’s been kind of doctored over the years. I know Ludwig Altman did some major work on it, and scaled it down to more of a baroque organ sound. He put more reeds in, I think, to have a more Jewish sounding instrument, which has frustrated some of the organists who have come afterwards, who are used to grander instruments. There’s been a lot of diddling back and forth about what stops to take out, what to put back in. There’s still a lot of work to be done on it. I did hear Ludwig Altman play the organ here.

Yes, as I’ve told you, he used to come by and practice all the time. I gave a concert back in 1988 or so, which was a commemoration of Kristallnacht. I did music of the European synagogue, and Ludwig, God bless him, got up there in the organ loft and played an instrumental version of Kol Nidre that they used to play in the Berlin synagogue where he used to play. It was the famous Neue Synagogue in Berlin—and I had never heard anything like it. It was exquisite. It was one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever heard.

I don’t think it was recorded.

I just could kick myself that I didn’t make some sort of recording of that. It was just divine, what he did. And he had a very special sound.

I know that the organists that have come after him have wanted to build the instrument up again. I think maybe it would be a good idea to talk to Rodney...
Gehrke about the details of that because I know that there’s a lot missing up there. (Laughs) But we did have a renovation of the console. The Schoenstein Company built us a new console shortly after I came. The Shensons [Drs. Ben and Jess Shenson] contributed for that, and they have a new console that’s supposed to be more digital … I’m not sure what’s going on up there. You’d better talk to Rod. It’s a very nice instrument now, but it needs work.

Petnick: You said they added more reeds to give it a more Jewish sound, would you please explain that.

Barak: I think so. I believe so. I remember Lud [Ludwig Altman] felt that instead of big bombastic stuff and more strings, it would be more authentic to have reed sounds—clarinets, flutes and that sort of thing. I think so, but I would like … I don’t want to—I hate to put that on record if that’s not true, so I would talk to Rodney. But I believe that he liked a reedy sound in the organ.

Petnick: Okay, so let’s move on to choir: you direct two choirs—the professional choir and Kol Emanu-El, the volunteer choir. Let’s start with the professional choir. How many people are in it—can you tell us their names?

Barak: Well, I want to say that I did direct them much more often in the past, but Rodney has been so amazing with my choirs that I have pretty much given over those tasks to him, and he’s done amazingly well. The professional choir always had six people in it, as far I recall. There were always six, and that was for Saturday morning, and they sound like there’s a lot more people up there because they’re professional. We have had some fabulous voices. I’m trying to remember everyone. When I first came in … Dale Richards is still in the choir from when I first came in … he’s been here about twenty-nine years. And then Tom Hart was singing here and is now permanent. Originally he was subbing, but now he’s been permanent for a long time. We’ve had a succession of tenors … the tenors come and go. Right now it’s Eric Morris. Our alto is actually a member of the congregation—Linda Liebschutz. And our sopranos are Mimi Ruiz and—we have two swing sopranos, Gail McGowan and Christa Pfieffer, one of whom also sings alto. So, there’s actually seven, but two of them switch off. And I don’t know what I’d do without them; honestly, I’d be so limited in my repertoire if I couldn’t use the choir because there’s so much written that’s so beautiful for synagogue choirs and cantors.

I was reading something the other day from Visions of Reform that Fred Rosenbaum wrote about twenty years ago. He wrote that the future of the choir at Congregation Emanu-El was not certain because it may be inhibiting the congregation to sing. And I’m saying, “That was twenty years ago, and the choir is still here. Good.” So I feel like I’ve had some effect.
Anyway, on Saturday mornings nobody’s going to sing. It’s all bar mitzvahs. We have families coming from all over the place, and guests, and nobody sings. Half of them aren’t Jewish: why expect people to sing along? This is not exactly the warm fuzzy service on Saturday morning. When I first came here there was only one Saturday morning service in this hall and it was attended by regulars. There were very few b’nei mitzvah back then, so it’s changed completely.

Petnick: Yes, and what about the volunteer choir?

Barak: I started the volunteer choir in 1992. I think there were about twenty people who signed up, and they were adorable. They were all different age groups, and we’ve had a really good time. I taught them a lot of music that would be very accessible to the rest of the congregation, so by virtue of the volunteer choir—they kind of trained the congregation to sing along. I used a lot of tunes that would be participatory singing-oriented, so the repertoire was different. It wasn’t as complicated as what I give the pros, but it was very lovely music and a little more contemporary, and it encouraged the congregation to sing along.

Petnick: How so?

Barak: They would sing once a month, and they would go back into the congregation the rest of the time, and the congregation learned to sing. The choir was a big influence on the congregation.

Petnick: Do you know the names of the people in the choir today, or people who served for many years in Kol Emanu-El?

Barak: You know, it’s interesting. I’m not sure if anyone is still there from the “good old days.” I must have lists somewhere, but several people are no longer with us, like Golda Kaufman and Esther Mann. There were very few men. Dick [Richard] Nathan was in the choir for many years. Steve Ruben is in the choir. He’s been around for a long time. Al Zemsky’s been around for a while in the choir. We’ve got some other newer people, and actually the last few times that I’ve used the volunteer choir, I actually pumped them up with some pros, and they sound pretty darn good. Marilyn Mercur’s been in there a while … Robin Reitzes, definitely, and Carol Coles. But there were other people in the beginning … Rochelle Anixter used to be in the choir … I think some of the oldies are coming back for my October event. Some of them are going to come back and join us, so that will be nice to have a little reunion. And then there’ll be pros, and there’ll be volunteers, and there’ll be cantors, and there’ll be everybody just kind of flockin’ the stage. It’s going to be fun.

Petnick: I can’t wait to see it.
Barak: I can’t either.

Petnick: Robin Reitzes asked me to ask you: “Why, in such a large congregation—we have maybe a couple thousand members—is it hard to get more people to be in the volunteer choir?”

Barak: That’s a good question, and I think it might have to do with the fact that we’re urban.

Petnick: How do you mean?

Barak: I think a lot of urban congregations have more trouble attracting people to this kind of intense volunteer work where you have to be around, you have to do stuff … I think it’s a little easier in the suburbs. Things happen later in the suburbs, like after dinner. Here we don’t encourage that, so … (Laughs)

Petnick: So what time is choir rehearsal?

Barak: It’s usually 7:00 to 8:00 pm on a Wednesday night before the Friday service, but I’m not doing choir practice now, so it’s sort of on hold for the time being. I hope Cantor Luck will resume it. But it has been very hard, and it is a commitment. That’s it. It’s a major commitment where you really have to show up and rehearse and do the work and then show up for the service; so of course when you have a small number of people in the choir, if any of them drop out for whatever reason—they can’t make the service, whatever—it really has an impact. And I found that with my children’s choir as well. So it’s tough. It’s tough getting a volunteer choir up. It really is. Maybe it will be easier now—I don’t know. There’s such an influx of younger people in this congregation. But it’s been very tough over the years. People just aren’t interested in singing. I don’t know what that’s about. They don’t mind sitting in the seats and singing, but they don’t really want to be on stage and singing. It’s is an odd thing—I put ads out … I’ve put things out like all kinds of solicitations—“Come Join the Choir! It’s good for your health. It lowers your blood pressure.” Nobody responds.

Petnick: Hmmm. Tell us about rehearsing and directing a choir …

Barak: You know, it’s a very different dynamic with a professional and a volunteer choir. For one thing, the professional choir can sight read. You hand them the music, and they read it. The only thing you need to do is tweak dynamics and phrasing with the professional choir … and words. Just to make sure the words are pronounced properly. I’m very proud of the fact that my choir members know how to pronounce Hebrew very well. I’ve worked on that for a long time, and they already know the words. They’re top-notch. And the music is different because the music is four-part, usually. It’s almost always four-part, and it has more complex harmonies. Sometimes we do things here
that are rather stunning, musically ... more classical. And the volunteer choir, they’d have to work for weeks on something like that, if not months. So, volunteer choir gets simpler music. Also I work with them on words a lot. There’s a lot more questions—there’s a lot more misplacing of music. We have to hand out duplicates every week. It always happens. There’s a lot of repetition. You have to repeat a lot of things—and I don’t want to sound like this is terrible—it’s just a fact of life. Professional musicians act in a different way. They have a different focus. It’s like if you’re the doctor, or if you’re someone who just walks in off the street with a scalpel—it’s not their profession, it’s not what they do daily and make money out of and all that.

Petnick: They are professionals and have to be careful and attentive in their specialty.

Barak: That’s right. Every one of them has their own niche in life, and they’re perfectly wonderful at what they do. And music is just something that they like to do. It’s like a hobby, so it’s a different feel. And also it’s volunteer, so we’re not paying them, so they’re not under any obligation to show up. So there’s a lot of repetition of phrases, harmony—getting people to get the harmonies together, a lot of going over the Hebrew. There’s less complexity in the music. It’s a little more tedious, but it can be a lot of fun because people are just so happy to be doing it. And the pros ... it’s their job—even though I will say that the pros here don’t treat it like a job—they’ve always treated it with tremendous respect. They love being here—they just love being here. I’m so impressed with that. They’re incredible people.

Petnick: What I’ve heard is that the people in the volunteer choir really love it when you come in to direct. They say you bring a whole different energy to it and that it’s a lot of fun for them. Apparently they like you to be there.

Barak: Yeah, and I’ve fallen off over the years. On Wednesday nights, it’s been a little more complicated. I come in when I can, but I’ve usually given it over to Rodney because I don’t want to interfere with his work, either. I feel like he does great work with them, so I want to let him be choir director. It’s okay. He’s good!

Petnick: What would you say are some of your great musical successes that you’ve put on with the professional choir; maybe something that was very complex, or just turned out to be stunningly gorgeous?

Barak: Well, we did a couple of commissioned works. We did the Steinberg *Sacred Service* here. At one point we did the David Schiff *Sacred Service*—years ago, many years ago. This was a long time ago.

Petnick: Steinberg *Sacred Service*?
Barak: Well, yes. I commissioned Ben Steinberg’s *Avodat Hakodesh* and he wrote me a service, and we did that. And David Schiff’s *Avodat Hakodesh* was performed here years ago. That was a Friday evening service. There were other concerts that we did at various times that the pros participated in, and also the recording that I made, which I had the pros do. I had two recordings—one with volunteer choir and pros, and the other with just pros. So they’ve been very active here. (laughs)

We haven’t done as many concerts in the last few years. The sensibilities have changed. But we did have many concerts with U.C. Berkeley and their orchestra and chorus. And I’ve done oratorios here with various societies. We did Handel—we’ve done *Israel in Egypt*, we did *Judas Maccabeus*. I don’t think we did *The Creation*. We did a lot of different performances here. We had to construct a stage and everything, so we could get the orchestra … and Berkeley came over—Cal came over—and did several other performances by themselves. They did *Chichester Psalms* here; they did *Tehillim* of Steve Reich. We did a lot of concerts here, many concerts here that were really successful and beautiful. We used to have organ recitals. The AGO, American Guild of Organists. Northern California Chapter, had their meetings here at times. We did a lot here, and there are programs I’ve saved from those times.

Petnick: We’ve now talked a little about organ and choir; the third element is congregation. So thinking about the congregation … I know you’ve seen the makeup—the demographics—of the congregation change greatly over the years. Looking out in the sanctuary from the *bimah* today and imagining some of the changes over time, what can you tell us?

Barak: Well, for one thing, I look out now at High Holy Days and I see all the empty spaces where people were that I remember, and it’s a little sad. We used to have assigned seating each year. I know that the One Pass system is much easier on the staff, but there was something to be said for the assigned seating because people would see each other every year, and greet each other, and say, “How’re you doing?” They were so happy to see the same people they sat with every year, and I know that a lot of them really miss that. And then there are all the congregants whom I miss. I cannot tell you how many memorial services I’ve done over the past twenty-eight years, and I would say for the past ten years, it’s been much more intense, and it’s been very sad for me.

Petnick: Yes, because the people who were a little old when you came here …

Barak: They’re gone. Some of them weren’t even old. I go out to the cemetery and I say “Hi” to them because I know where they’re resting now. It’s sad to lose that many people. When I came here, it was about 1200 to 1400 members—I can’t remember the exact number—but it was smaller. It was vibrant. It was a very San Francisco crowd. It was distinct that way.
Petnick: How so?

Barak: It was a different feel in the city; there was a different feel here …

Petnick: What made it distinctly San Francisco?

Barak: Well, there were many native San Franciscans, and they had a certain culture, and they had certain sensibilities. They had a pride in the city and a way of … just an atmosphere here. As I’ve said before, there was elegance—there was refinement. I always said that some of the men that were on the board, I just called them gentlemen. It was just gentle. They were straight shooters and good people. And the women were all very dedicated to the sisterhood, and there was a lot going on: wonderful fashion shows and house tours and luncheons. Some of the women would have luncheons in their homes. It was lovely. They all knew each other, and they’d all grown up together, practically. Some of them even may have come from somewhere else, but were quickly integrated into San Francisco life. It was very different from New York—the feel was different.

Petnick: I’m from the East Coast myself and I agree, but can you say anything that describes how “the feel” is different?

Barak: Well, this is a very assimilated community. These were not New York Jews, okay? New York Jews were … they were from shtetl backgrounds, originally, mostly from Polish and eastern European backgrounds. But these San Francisco Jews were mostly from German backgrounds, with some eastern European mixed in. It was a different kind of outlook, and they were very assimilated into San Francisco culture. They were active on various boards and civic enterprises—things that were not involved with Judaism at all. They were proud to be San Franciscans. There were a lot of people here who were on the San Francisco Board of Education and the board of the San Francisco Symphony and the board of San Francisco Opera, which were all San Francisco-specific civic activities. Congregation Emanu-El was a source of pride for them, but I don’t think it was the top of the list.

Petnick: So, things haven’t changed much in that way?

Barak: No, that hasn’t changed. But what has changed is the make-up of the city, which has many more people streaming in from outside who haven’t grown up here, who don’t have as much investment in this place as those who really grew up here and think of this city as their city. It just feels different. It feels different.

Petnick: It was exciting when I worked with Judi Leff, and we were searching in the temple archives, and we found the original founding documents of Congregation Emanu-El. I enjoyed seeing the signatures and names of some
of the families who are still members today—Dinkelspiel, for instance, and others.

Barak: Oh, it’s amazing. I’m not a native San Franciscan, but I feel tied to this community and to those people. Over the years, things have changed here, and I haven’t connected as much with the younger community. It’s just been a different … since the preschool’s blossomed and the b’nei mitzvah program has become so huge, a lot of people have chosen to have their ceremonies in the Martin Meyer Sanctuary, so I didn’t get to know the kids. You know, at one point I knew every kid here, every bar mitzvah. I was involved in their religious school more, and I had my children’s choir. But those things changed over the years. At first I was sad; it felt like I was missing something. And then I got used to it. You know, you get used to everything. I just cherished the kids that I did have, and just hoped that people knew who I was. I find that a lot of people do know who I am, and I was kind of surprised by that. Even the young adults, you know, I was just, “Wow, you know me?” “Of course we know you.” “Okay. That’s sweet.” And then I got to interact with the Young Adult community a bit. I did a few programs for them, and I took a whole group of them to the opera several times, and that was a lot of fun, a lot of fun. That was very valuable, I think.

Petnick: I saw some of those photographs …

Barak: Yeah. It was great. We went to Marriage of Figaro, and I took them to several other operas. We had dinner beforehand, and I explained the opera to them. It was great.

Petnick: I know that you are an adored person, but nothing is ever one hundred percent, so tell me about the feedback that you have received about your singing and your cantorial services: did you ever get any negative feedback? Tell us about the range—the spectrum—of responses you receive.

Barak: Honestly, if there’s been negative stuff, I’ve never heard it directly. There have been one or two people over the years—I swear over twenty-eight years—who seemed to have taken an instant dislike to me, and I couldn’t figure out why. But I dealt with it. I just sort of … well, you can’t please all the people all the time. But honestly, my relationships here have been pretty solid. I think I’ve enjoyed a lot of good relationships, and I’ve only heard the positive things.

Now, with colleagues, I’m sure there were many issues around music and participation and all that sort of thing, but I never heard anything about my voice not affecting them. I always heard that they loved my singing. I think, perhaps my appearance, and my tendency to be kind of a little bit inflexible in my musical choices at times, and my sticking to my guns on certain things has possibly either offended or disturbed some people who want a different feel.
But luckily, we had other options. And I think that kind of calmed things down … If they wanted to go for a different option, they could, and that’s fine, but you know, for me to reinvent myself or do something that I wasn’t comfortable with, was just not how I feel good.

(Someone enters the room. Pause in the interview)

Petnick: We’re back on. So, it’s been said that in congregations throughout the country that the locus of authority has shifted over the decades. Going back maybe to when we were young, the locus of authority was largely with the rabbis and the cantors, but increasingly, congregants have gained more power, more authority. How has that felt here?

Barak: When I first came here, most of the authority was from the senior rabbi, Robert Kirschner. You could feel it very strongly. He was absolutely the center, the core. The board was made up of people who were fiscally conservative and responsible, and they pretty much took responsibility for things that they knew about—which was, I think, mostly the finances, the building, and so forth. But when it came to worship or education, they always relied on the people who were involved in that—the clergy—to do their jobs, and they just mostly wanted to hear the good news. So we would give a report each month, and they were very supportive and lovely. And then at some point there was a new program started to train laypeople to be more involved. That was [former executive director] Gary Cohn’s doing.

Petnick: How did that work out?

Barak: I’m trying to remember the name of that program. I think it’s in Visions of Reform. It was like a whole training program, and a lot of people started signing up for it. It was an attempt to prepare the next generation of leadership, so people would understand all about the temple. I think that was a very positive thing. I think it’s good that the congregation knows what’s going on in the temple and has opinions. But then there’s always that tension at some point of, “Well, now the laypeople are telling us stuff, and we don’t want to do it.” (Laughter)

But it never really turned into anything too contentious. I think it was a positive step, and—oh, it was called “Leadership Emanu-El.” That’s what it was called, and I think it was good. I think it spurred a lot of people on to do other more serious programs like Wexner [a graduate program in Jewish studies] and all that. I think it was a very good growth thing for our temple. Now we have a board that’s a lot more educated, I think, in what goes on around here. And people actually attend services …

Although I will say that when I first came here, the president attended every Saturday morning service and sat on the bimah. That practice has dissipated,
which is disappointing to me. For a long time, there was a sign-up sheet going around the board … you know, everybody would pick a Saturday that they would show up and sit here. And we wanted it to be each week because we had a bar or bat mitzvah. We wanted the president to sit with the bar or bat mitzvah, or the board member to sit with the bar or bat mitzvah, but that just fell apart again. There was no amount of prodding that could get people to commit to that—even the board people. I still remember those old days when the president sat on the bimah. I go to other congregations around the world, and the president is sitting on the bimah, and I like that. I like the look of it. I like the feel of it.

Petnick: It was nice to see [our current president] Donny Friend on the bimah during the High Holy Days. He spoke well—it was great. I could go for more of that, too.

Barak: I think it makes an impression; I think it says something about commitment, and I like it.

Petnick: It does, and also because then for Shabbat services, if the president is there, you see one another at the oneg, and you can talk together about the services and temple affairs. It creates more contact and rapport between the congregants and the president, the person serving as a liaison between the general congregation and the board.

Barak: Well, you’ve also got to know that there are people here who may need to express something, and they can’t express it to the rabbi, for whatever reason. They may have to say something, and they want to talk to the president. And it’s good to have the president here, and you set an example for people of commitment to this place, of showing up here. If the president doesn’t show up, why should anybody else? Or if the board members don’t show up, why should anybody else? But I will say that in the last few years, board members are much more pro-active here, and they do come. I see them out in the congregation, and it’s wonderful and a source of pride. Glad to see that that’s working.

Petnick: I’m thinking about people who have been strongly supportive of you. I know that the Shensons loved you … can we talk more about them, the Doctors Jess and Ben Shenson? Tell us about them, your relationship with them and their support, and also who else has been a patron and supporter here of music at the level that the Shensons were.

Barak: Well, you know [the brothers] Ben and Jess were doctors and great arts philanthropists in the city. They loved good music, and they were very proud, I think, that there were some wonderful things going on musically here at Congregation Emanu-El. When Ben died, Jess wanted me to do a concert in his honor. It became a yearly thing, and it was quite wonderful. We got artists
from all over the city to come and take part because they all knew the Shensons. And we had a big dessert reception outside afterwards. It was just beautiful. And then when Jess died, their nephew Fred Levin was amenable to continuing something, so I decided to start the yearly Shenson concert, and from that came the idea of Music at Meyer. That was a shoestring budget, I must say; that was a challenge because there wasn’t a whole lot of money at the beginning to do that, but somehow I managed to get people to come and perform for nothing. I didn’t even pay some of these great artists.

Petnick: For Music at Meyer?

Barak: And then Ingrid Tauber became one of the main donors to fund Music at Meyer. I’m not sure I can say who, but one of our congregants also contributed some money to Hebrew Union College in my honor. I think that person would rather like to remain anonymous, but that was a lovely thing to start a cantorial long-distance learning program at Hebrew Union College. There was a huge donation that was given for that. What I’m saying here is that people have been supportive of me and of music here over the years.

There was another family—Jean Hartman’s—who wanted a yearly concert as well, who gave a donation to the temple. I had hoped that Music at Meyer would be funded by various families in memory of someone, and that each concert would be dedicated to one person, but it didn’t pan out. I didn’t really go and solicit very hard for that. I was a little hampered, because—honestly—the board has other development goals, and I wasn’t really given the green light to raise the money for that. But it would have been a nice idea.

Petnick: So in addition to people who have been financially supportive, I know that there have been people who have helped you in other ways to put on the concerts.

Barak: Judi Leff has been amazing. Judi and I have worked together since I first came here. We wrote pageants together, and we did all sorts of things. Judi’s like my right hand. She’s like a buddy. We’ve seen this place change, and we’ve been through everything together, so I feel like she’s almost a sister, you know. She feels really close to me, and I feel really close to her. Judi’s been incredibly helpful. And I would say that Mike Tekulsky and Ron Wong have been incredible for Music at Meyer. Tekulsky was my producer for Music at Meyer. And there’ve been really wonderful people from the symphony and the opera who have stepped up whenever I needed a benefit or something. They would come and be part of that. It’s an amazing community: they’re wonderful!

Petnick: Tell us about classes you have taught at Emanu-El in liturgy and music, classes that would help congregants to be better participation in the service, or to understand the service more deeply. Have you taught classes of that nature?
Barak: I’ve taught classes consistently over the years, not only for anshei mitzvah, which … I taught people how to read Hebrew and pray a lot of the prayers. I’ve taught a lot of liturgy courses. I’ve taught Rosh Hashanah liturgy, and piyutim—liturgical poetry. I’ve taught a lot of music courses—music of the diaspora, Yiddish songs, Ladino. I’ve done all that over the years as part of the Adult Ed courses.

Petnick: Let’s talk about music itself: to what degree would you say that music is objective and to what degree is music in the mind of the listener? I see you smiling. I’m probably not expressing this correctly, or perhaps using the right terms, but I want to leave this open-ended: how would you talk about that?

Barak: Well, you know, music is an art form, but it doesn’t have to be inaccessible. I don’t think music is an objective thing at all. I think music is extremely subjective. I think what affects you is not going to affect someone else. I think that’s all based on your background, what you grew up listening to. Some people will start tearing up every time they hear a Christmas carol because music affects the emotions that way. I think almost every Jew is going to react to Kol Nidre in an emotional way: when you hear the opening sounds of that prayer—actually, it’s not a prayer, it’s a declaration—just when you hear the opening sounds of that declaration—it touches something. It tugs.

I don’t think a lot of people who are not trained artists in music are very cognizant of the levels of performance excellence. When I go to a performance— for example, tonight I’m going to go hear a singer, and I was looking forward to it because the piece she’s singing is one of my favorite pieces in the world. In fact, I sang it for the original performer, and I won the competition; I love to go hear that piece whenever I can. I was looking forward to it because I read somewhere that this woman has a beautiful voice, and then I heard, “Oh, no she doesn’t.” (Laughs). I heard that from another singer. And I thought, “Uh-oh, I’m going to sit through this and be anxious.” Because when I hear singing, I can pinpoint right away if there’s anything wrong with the singer because I’m listening from a technical standpoint. If I’m unsatisfied, it’s really a devastating experience for me. But other people sit there and go, “Oh, that’s lovely.”

I went the other night to a performance where I heard a singer who was just god-awful. And I could hear people around me going, “Oh, isn’t that lovely.” And it’s—it’s so hard to explain to people that what they are hearing is not necessarily what … They could hear it so much better. (Laughs) But most people don’t know the gradations of the human voice and how different it can be. And so I get letters from people, who say things to me that make me feel like I’ve touched them because they’re feeling something, and then I feel I’ve done my job. But, you know, it’s really hard because you sound like the biggest blowhard and snob when you say, “No, that wasn’t a good
performance,” and other people are going, “Well, it sounded fine to me.” But some people do honestly acknowledge, “Oh, you’re the trained singer—I guess you know what you’re talking about even though it sounded okay to me.” And that’s okay. It’s really … it’s a devastating thing to do. Don’t take me to a concert because I’ll sit there and just grumble unless the performers are superb.

I went to hear—may she rest in peace—Lorraine Hunt Lieberman. She was singing Mahler with the San Francisco Symphony, and I just wept. My eyes were just … I just wept, and I had to go back and talk to her. She was exquisite, and I said, “Wow. You know, you hear that once in your lifetime, and you’ve heard something.” And then I go hear other people, and I just wind up being disappointed. It’s hard to share that with people because they think you’re just a critic all the time, and you don’t want to be a critic, but you also want to tell the truth about what you heard. From a professional standpoint, I see it differently. I think anybody who’s a professional should be able to understand that because they also probably would sit around and look at other people’s work and say, “Hum, that’s not very good.” So I don’t really like to talk about it. I have my opinions, and they’re based on my training and what I know. I think I know a lot. I think I know a helluva lot about music and performance. Usually when I discuss it with other musicians, we have the same opinions, so I think I know a lot, but I’m not going to force it on anybody, and I’m not going to be obnoxious. I just think that everybody has their own subjective experience of what they’re hearing, and I respect it, and I move on.

Petnick: Here’s a question for you. People sometimes talk about a “Jewish sound.” Do you think there is a Jewish sound? Given that Jews live all over the world, and Jewish music covers so much time and so much geography, could there possibly be such a thing as a Jewish sound? What do you think about that?

Barak: No, Jews are in the Diaspora; they moved around; they adapted other cultures. I don’t know that there is a Jewish sound, but there is something, that when you hear it, you’ll go, “Ah, that sounds Jewish.” I would imagine that hearing a cantor is something that sounds Jewish. Hearing a violin playing “Schindler’s List” is something that sounds Jewish. But I will say that there’s a whole lot of stuff going on these days that doesn’t to me sound particularly Jewish, and I think it’s only what the text is presenting that is the Jewish part of it … not the music or the performance.

Petnick: Then there are some things that we might think of that are thoroughly Jewish and are not. I just read about this, and I laughed so hard because I’ve been singing this ever since I was a kid and just found out that the Ein Keloheimu melody really comes from a 16th century German Christmas song.
Barak: It’s possible. It’s definitely a German tune. There are a lot of German tunes—Adon Olam … Ein Keloheinu. Listen to the music of Lewandowski … you think you’re hearing Schubert. These were composers that were influenced by their surroundings. Listen to what you’re listening to today [in the synagogue]; it sounds like Peter, Paul and Mary. Basically, we take whatever we’re given around here and make it somehow Jewish, even though it may not be very Jewish.

Petnick: At this point I want to make a list of musical works you’ve commissioned during your long tenure as cantor. We’ve talked about them, but they are scattered throughout the interviews, so would you just verbally make a list of what you have commissioned during your twenty-eight years at Emanu-El?

Barak: I commissioned David Schiff for a Hallel setting, which was only performed here once. I commissioned Ben Steinberg for a Sacred Service for Saturday morning. I commissioned a man named Raymond Goldstein for a High Holy Day piece, which he sent me, but it was unacceptable, so I rewrote it (Laughs). I commissioned Ami Aloni for [the poem] “Birth is a Beginning,” a setting for choir and cello and organ. And also seven pieces, the Haftarot of Consolation—and they’re magnificent—for choir and organ and soloists, and I sing the solos. And I participated in the commissioning of a couple of works of Michael Isaacson—the Havdalah. Rabbi Pearce was a friend of his, so he spearheaded that—it’s Rabbi Pearce’s poetry interpolated into the Havdalah service. And also, I participated in the commission of [the album] To Recreate the World, which was written for the Year 2000, for the children’s choir. Those are some of the things I’ve done. I’m sure there’s more, but I can’t remember right now.

Petnick: What do you think of the acoustics of the Main Sanctuary?

Barak: They’re complicated. They’ve been improved. I remember it was a little dead in here when I first came, and then they re-did some of the acoustical material on the walls, and the reverb got a little better—I think it’s two seconds reverb, or something, two or three. We’ve always had to use the mikes, and the only reason for that is because the organ and choir are overpowering, so you must have a microphone here. I think there’s more complication with the Contemporary Service, as far as sound. They always need a sound-mixer and everything. For me, I stand at the pulpit and sing into the mike. I’ve never been into all that electronic stuff. I’m an acoustical singer.

Petnick: How do you feel about the prayer books that we use here? And also what input cantors may have had into the creation (cellphone rings) of the prayer books? I know that at the Central Conference of American Rabbis … I remember Rabbi Pearce going to a meeting of the Central Conference of
American Rabbis about ten years ago to work on the next version of the prayer book.

Barak: I worked on it. I was on the committee; my name is in the book. I was on the editorial committee for Mishkan Tefilah, but I didn’t do a whole lot of work on it. I don’t think my opinion was … I never got the feeling that anybody’s opinion was respected in the room. There was an editor, and it was kind of whatever that person wanted. And then that person got sort of shot down, and things were changed, but I don’t know—I don’t know whether I should talk about it.

I’m disappointed. I’m disappointed in a lot of things. I had liked the Gates of Prayer, honestly. That’s the one I knew first. I had even liked the Union Prayer Book. I think it’s beautiful and elegant language. The problem with the Gates of Prayer was—I think all it needed was to pare it down a little. There were too many Friday night services and too many Saturday morning services. And also, just to put in transliteration and to make the language egalitarian. I think it would have been fine. That’s the same thing I feel about Gates of Repentance—the machzor. I think it’s a perfectly fine book. Why mess with success?

Petnick: In a recent interview, we were talking about Heschel and his essay on the vocation of a cantor that began with the question, “What can a person hope to obtain when they attend a service?” and your response, as I recall, was “feeling” … that you would hope that they would have some feeling. So today the question is what would a person hope to give? What could a person hope to give or share with others when they come to a service?

Barak: That’s an interesting question. It depends. If you’re a friend, it’s one thing, and if you’re a stranger, it’s another. I think … when I come in to a service, I just kind of want to sit by myself and be in my own thoughts and do my own thing. I like to sit in the back, which is why I always resented being told, “Move up, sit next to somebody, hold their hand”—you know, “Sway.” It’s not my thing. I know that it’s supposed to be a communal experience, but I’m a very private person when I’m praying. I’m not unfriendly. I’m definitely friendly. Afterwards I’ll talk up a storm. When I’m in a prayer space, I kind of want to be in my own space.

Petnick: So then what you like is individual prayer in a communal setting.

Barak: Yeah, I do. I mean, I want to have a minyan I want to make sure that there are bodies in the seats—I like to see that. But I want to be able to feel that it’s a private moment for me, and when I’m … I think me and God are like a private thing. And then, when I hear a sermon, I want to be able to think and concentrate on the words and take it in. So that’s where I’m at with that.
Petnick: So the last question for today is that I want to read you something beautiful that ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin wrote and then ask for your comment: “Just as a winding river shapes the banks, so the shift and changes in American Jewish life shape and re-shape the office of the cantor.”

What do these words evoke for you? What do you think of that?

Barak: Well, I think cantors are pretty well set now with what we’re supposed to be doing. And some of us may tweak it a bit, but I think we’re all expected to lead the congregation in the music of the prayers. We’re expected to be able to have enough training to teach others. We’re expected to be able to chant the Torah. We’re expected to be able to train the kids for bar and bat mitzvah, and also have some role in the religious school or with the youth. We’re expected to step up to the plate and do everything the rabbis do and also to be able to sing. We’re expected to be full-clergy partners in most settings—some congregations may not expect that, but most do. I think that’s definitely more than the cantors used to do. I think most chazzanim who became famous just sort of showed up and davened, and everybody went, “Oh!” and, “Ahh!” And that was it. They weren’t teachers; they weren’t necessarily part of the life of the synagogue. A lot of them were itinerants. So it’s definitely changed, but I think for now it’s going to be a very stable thing what’s going to be expected of cantors, and I don’t see that changing for quite some time.

Petnick: Do you feel a sense of peace and goodness in your own heart about what you were able to give in your years here? Do you feel satisfied?

Barak: I feel very—I guess the word is—clean. I feel like I’ve done a good job here. I regret not being a little more attentive to individual congregants at times. I think because it can get so overwhelming that I would just go home at night and retreat to just kind of revive myself. But that’s the only thing I regret—that I didn’t spend a little more time calling people and spending more time with people. I probably pulled back from that just to preserve myself, and that’s what I regret. But otherwise, I feel like I’ve done all I could do here. I’ve done really well, and perhaps I could have done more, but there was such a huge team here that it’s hard. There are a lot of people working here, so I did a lot, and I think I taught well. I think I comforted people when they needed comforting. I think I contributed to this community and to this synagogue. And I think, in the end, what people will probably remember most is the sound of my voice, and wherever that comes from, I’m very grateful for it. I’m very grateful that I could use it and be successful at it. People thank me sometimes for using my voice for God, and I feel good about that.

And it wasn’t only the voice. It was all the other relationships. So I’m walking out on my own terms and with my head held high here. And if I’ve offended anyone, or ever blew it in any way, I am deeply sorry for that. I would like to
be made aware of it so I could do the proper *teshuva* or apology, but I feel okay. I feel okay. I feel good.

**Petnick:** I think of your spiritual growth, starting with when you came here, so new and fresh from cantorial school, and so young, really, and all the years leading to today, and I wonder what the impact of giving all these services and being around all these people, and offering all these prayers has been. How has your spirituality been affected by your work here these many, many years?

**Barak:** It definitely was a lot heavier than I expected when I signed up. (Laughs) It’s a very sobering thing to stand on this pulpit and try to comfort a family in grief, and try to keep it together for everyone out there, when you’re really grieving yourself. I know for a fact that had I not been a cantor, I never would have been at so many funerals in my life. It was very eye opening to be involved in so many of the life cycle events of families. There are the joyous ones, but also the sad ones, and the sad ones take a toll. They add up. There were some people that I feel should still be around. It was not fair—it’s never fair. There were some younger people who were adored here, and that was really tough. So that’s tough, you know. You think, “Boy, did I sign up for that?” I remember one or two years after I came here, we had to bury a baby, and … why do you want to make it your life being the one doing that? But somebody has to do it. And if my voice gave any comfort to people during that time, I feel like, “Okay. All right. I have a task,” and I did it. But as I’ve said, it’s been very sobering; it’s been much heavier than I expected. There’s joy, too, but it’s tough. I think, speaking personally now, the fact that I didn’t have a partner for so many years was really hard because I would have to go home and be alone. And that was tough because you had nobody to talk to. There was a therapist once in a while, which was good. That was a good thing.

**Petnick:** You give so much in your role as clergy, and then to come home and not to have that nourishment given to you by someone else …

**Barak:** That was the toughest part, and I don’t know if people realize how hard that was because everyone else had a family.
**Interview 12: October 5, 2015**

**Petnick:** I’d like us to talk more today about your experiences with the rabbi who hired you at Emanu-El, Robert Kirschner. I see this as important because your traumatic experiences with him led you to studying counseling. From what I understand the Kirschner episode had a huge effect on you. We’ve mentioned him throughout, but I want to explore this more deeply.

**Barak:** When I met Rabbi Kirschner I thought, “This guy is really something.” He was very dynamic—he was a go-getter. He seemed forthright, and he was an impressive personality to be with. He was very intelligent. I had a good rapport with him, it seemed. We got along fine. I was really impressed with him. What I did not know was that Rabbi Kirschner also had another side to him—a temper and an irascibility that came out later. In the beginning he was very happy. One great thing was that he was a good colleague: he was never, it seemed, controlling, and he worked in a partnership with me. [At that time] the pulpit was constructed for one reader. I asked, “Where do I stand?” He said, “When you sing you get up.” I went, “Well, no, because then I look like a ‘pop-up singer’ instead of a cantor.” Immediately he commissioned the redesign of the pulpit so that two people could stand there. I really was impressed with that. Mind you, previously I had only had wonderful experiences with rabbis, except the one rabbi with whom I had had a lot of contention at Hebrew Union College.

Rabbi Kirschner never seemed threatened by my presence, and we seemed to be totally in sync. I really liked the way he read the liturgy. He was fair-minded about everything, and we had a great partnership. I thought we were just amazing together on the bimah. It was a beautiful experience to hear his sermons and hear the way he was reading liturgy. And then I would sing. People seemed to be favorably impressed. We were packing them in on Friday night at the Rinder Chapel. We were overflowing, which is why he made the decision to remodel the Martin Meyer Auditorium into a flexible space sanctuary. He never did get to make use of it because by then he had to be leaving the temple.

**Petnick:** Why was that?

**Barak:** It seemed that he possibly had a lot of secrets. I did not catch on to that for a long time. In fact, I never really knew what was going on, and I still do not know the extent of everything. There was a lot of guessing. Assistant Rabbi Mark Schiftan and I bonded during a lot of the period of trauma that went on. We clung to each other very closely and started making lists of people we thought were involved.

It turned out that Rabbi Kirschner was being accused of inappropriate behavior with a rather large number of women at the temple. At the beginning
it was only a few women, but then the list started to grow. That behavior was ranging supposedly from inappropriate remarks to women to more serious line-crossings.

Petnick: These are allegations?

Barak: Allegations, right. I, of course, was totally in the dark about a lot of this. I never knew about any of this behavior. But there were things that happened—situations that occurred—that were odd, and there were some dramatic moments in those situations that Rabbi Schiftan and I would kind of—our eyebrows would raise, and we would go, “What is going on here?” There was some crazy stuff going on. Of course, I am not at liberty to mention names or talk in any detail about it, but let’s say there were some things that happened along the way that we would just sort of go, “Hmm, what is happening here?” Eventually the board of the temple was served with papers from several women who were claiming that he had in some way abused his position with them. The clergy were called into a meeting on a Friday afternoon right before services, and we were told that he was not going to be our rabbi anymore. I was just weeping. I said, “I don’t believe it. I don’t believe it.” I was crying and had to go into a service after that, which was really very difficult.

The next day I made a call to a close friend who had studied with the rabbi for conversion. Without revealing anything to her I asked a few questions about their sessions, and in due course she confided some of their conversations, which validated a lot of what I had been told regarding his inappropriate behavior with women. I was shaken to the core because I previously had believed it was all fabricated accusations. We were under gag orders not to speak, but the press was hanging around, and reports were coming out on television, and pictures were being put up.

It was very, very shocking and very, very painful. At some point it hit me that every therapist in town must have known about this but could not talk about it.

(Laughs) I started to think of the pebble falling in the pond and the ripples going out, and it was very painful. It was very painful to think that this whole community was suffering from this experience. It really was a very destructive thing. I had so much emotion around it, and it was so hard because I really admired him as a rabbi and as a mentor to me. I felt I learned a lot from him. Because Mark [Rabbi Schiftan] and I had to clean up the mess in a way—Mark more than me, for sure.

I felt this was a betrayal. It was very hard. When Rabbi Kirschner came to us and was saying his good-byes, he put on a good show for me. I remember thinking, “Damn, I wish I could just say, ‘Get off it and tell me what the heck you were thinking.’” I could not do it. He did not leave the door open for me to do that. He kind of was making a speech—he was making a pronouncement
of how wonderful it had been to work with me, and all this, and how sad it was. But he did not really leave the door open for dialogue, so I could not say anything. I held it all in for many, many months until I finally wrote him a letter. The letter was a pretty strong letter. It started off with how much I had learned from him, and how valuable he was, and how brilliant he was, and how impressed I was, and how I had just been knocked over by some of his sermons and his wisdom. Then I said, “Here is the bad news. How could you have done this? How could you have destroyed our community the way you did?” That was my own personal experience of it. Then I looked back on certain encounters I had had with him, and I thought, “Why didn’t I catch on earlier? Why didn’t I realize?” There were things that had happened in dialogue with him before it all came to light that made me think [in retrospect], “Oh, boy. Wow. There was a clue—there was a big clue.” (Laughs)

I just chose not to see that because I could not believe that he would do that. I just could not believe a man of his intelligence would ever get himself in a situation like that or ever behave like that. It was really hard to believe even though I observed some tension with, I think, his personal life; there were some things that were pretty obvious that were going on that were not pleasant. Again, I figured, “Ah, he is under a lot of stress. He is a rabbi.” Anyway, that was a very tough time. I have always said that that was the worst trauma I had ever been through, right. And to this day.

Even the loss of my parents was not as traumatic because my parents—God bless them, I loved them—they were ill. It is the natural course of things that you lose your parents. It happens. Something about holding someone up to a higher standard and looking up to them and being mentored by them and then the crashing disappointment that occurs when you realize they are just human. (Laughs) My image had always been rabbis are more than human, and I had to emulate that. I had to be more than human; I had to be always in a higher plane in my behavior. It was so crushing. I remember the day I found out that this was all true, which was the day after we found out he was not going to be with us anymore. I got off the phone, and I was in bed, and I pulled the covers over my head, and I just shook. For about an hour I could not stop shaking. Man! That is a crazy one. I still remember it.

Petnick: Because you had put so much faith and trust in him, and you had an idea of him as being -

Barak: He was more of a concept than a person. The other thing that was very painful was that his assistant, Muriel Cohn, had been with the temple for about fifty years. She had started off, I think, as religious school secretary and eventually became the senior rabbi’s secretary. She was like a mother to him; they were very close. She took care of him and mothered him, and she adored him.
Petnick: I remember her—she was so kind. She was Rabbi Pearce’s secretary when I first came to Emanu-El.

Barak: She adored him, and she was an amazing person. She knew everything about the temple, all the ins-and-outs, and every person. She was the Go-To. You had a question—you went to Muriel. She was a wonderful woman. Even my mother got close to her. This was too much for Muriel. She did not believe it. She never believed it. She could not take it in. It was impossible for her to believe this. She thought it was a witch-hunt. She called me and was decrying the whole thing. Although I already knew that it was true, I could not say anything to her.

Then Bob Kirschner’s wife, Risa, called me, and she was crying that it turned out that one of the so-called “victims” was her best friend. Risa called me, and she was distraught, and I could not say anything. It took me a while to actually discuss things with her. It was surreal. You would walk into the temple, and there would be reporters and … There was one woman reporter I remember who was saying, “As a woman, don’t you have some views on this?” I would say, “No.” We could not talk. We could not say anything.

Petnick: Were you told not to say anything or was it that there was a culture of secrecy?

Barak: We were more or less told, “Don’t engage with the press.” I could not. I was still serving the community. I could not be discussing this. There were legal issues involved. There were lawsuits involved. In addition to the one friend I had called and found out that this behavior was definitely part of his gestalt, a woman called me who had moved away from San Francisco. She and her husband had eight children, and they could not afford living here anymore and had moved to the Midwest. I was close to her because she had volunteered, and we had done some work together at the temple. She called me one day and said, “Cantor Barak, I just heard what happened, and I need to tell you what happened to me.” Then she launched into this story of something of an encounter with the rabbi and some things that he had said to her, and I was incredulous. I said, “Are you kidding me? He said that to you?” She said, “Yes.”

Petnick: These were sexual innuendoes or—

Barak: They were innuendoes. The language that he used was kind of crazy. In fact, I remember thinking, “This man with this brain said that to this woman?” I could not believe it. I could not believe he used such—it was in such poor taste, and it was so poorly done. I was just thinking, “Boy. Wow. This is … ”

Petnick: I want to go back and try to stay with the impact of this on you … and we will limit what we say about him because I want this to be about you.
Barak: It had an impact on me because I was—I was feeling, “Oh, boy, people may be coming to me [for counseling], and I probably need a little more training in this.” That is when I decided that if I had the opportunity I would ask the congregation to send me back to school. This is what spurred me on to go for my master’s degree in psychology.

Petnick: Say that again. You were thinking it could easily happen that other people who also had shattered feelings, or feelings about what happened, might come to you as a member of the clergy for counseling?

Barak: They did. Some people did come to me for counseling. I needed more experience in this. I was only five years out of school. We had had one very perfunctory counseling course with Rabbi Pearce, but it was not in-depth. It was just enough to get us by.

Petnick: It was just that one course—that one semester at Hebrew Union? That was all the school provided?

Barak: It was only one course. Yes, that was it. Not much, and not enough to handle what I was handling.

Petnick: So what happened? Where did you go to school?

Barak: I found a school in San Francisco that was designed for older people who worked during the day. It was called Professional School of Psychology. It was close to where I lived. I took courses from five to nine in the evening, and in two years I had a master’s in clinical psych. I did about fifteen hundred hours at the Salvation Army working with a population—the underbelly—that I had … I had never seen such … or worked with anyone like this before. They were mostly people with substance abuse problems and some real criminals. I did group therapy, and I did individual [counseling] with them. I think I was pretty terrible at it, actually. I do not think I was prepared for that population at all. I decided to keep my day job, but it was nice to have that degree and those credits, so if I ever felt that I wanted to go into counseling full time, I could do it. It seemed like a good Plan B.

Petnick: This was clever: if you ever lost your voice, which was Plan A, you could become a counselor and mostly listen, which would be Plan B.

Barak: It was very helpful. We delved into pathological behavior. We learned about narcissism. We did all that stuff. It was an object relations orientation. I was fascinated with it. I really liked the people that were in my class—we were all very active and vibrant people, interesting people. They were coming to study from all walks of life. It was a good experience. The school changed its name to San Francisco School of Psychology. I think it no longer exists in San Francisco, only in Sacramento.
Petnick: What were some of the root emotional issues that the incident touched for you? I understand it shattered your idea of Rabbi Kirschner, but since it affected you so much emotionally … what was the more personal piece?

Barak: This was only like a year and a half after the Anita Hill hearings, and juxtaposed with that, the timing could not have been worse for Rabbi Kirschner because there was a lot of emphasis on this sort of thing. This issue kept coming up.

Petnick: These issues of power abuse and sexual relations between non-equals?

Barak: Absolutely.

Petnick: I think similar situations were coming to light in several other religious institutions around that time.

Barak: There was a book that came out that was delivered to the board called *Sex in the Forbidden Zone*.

Petnick: When is this, the early nineties?

Barak: The whole thing came to light at the end of ‘91, but the congregation did not know. Only the clergy and the board knew. ‘92 was when he actually resigned, right at the beginning of ‘92.

Petnick: I thought he resigned immediately but, no, it went on for some time.

Barak: The board, I believe, was trying to work something out because they were all in shock, too, and they loved him. Certainly the executive committee wanted to figure out a way to keep him as rabbi, but to have him get some help. I believe he rejected that notion and made this pronouncement: “There is now a stain on the office of rabbi, and it will never be the same, and I might as well just resign.” So, they let him resign, which I thought was very gracious of them. Because, honestly, people nowadays would say, “Oh, nonsense, they should have fired him right away.” Well, that is not how things happen all the time, and in those days, there was no formula for how to do this. There was just no roadmap. You had to see how it played out. They did the best they could. Honestly, they did. They really tried.

We had a town hall meeting, which was very, very painful, where people were screaming at the board for letting him go. “This is a witch hunt!” Da-da-da-da-da. One guy got up and said, “Those Jezebels should be—we are going to take the word of Jezebels?”

Petnick: (Laughter) Jezebels! Oh, my goodness! They were blaming the victims!
Barak: It was terrible. That was awful. That was awful. I even remember the guy who did it, and it was awful. What happened was the temple got kind of a pass because all the people accusing the board of mismanagement here were humbled because suddenly students from the Graduate Theological Union came forward, and it was printed in the *Jewish Bulletin* that students at the GTU came forward when they heard the story and said, “Oh, he was approaching us inappropriately as well when he taught here.”

Once the congregation realized there was fire where there had been smoke, they calmed down, and they went, “Oh, we guess there is a problem.” But that took a while. It took weeks and weeks and weeks for things to settle down and people to say, “Oh.” But there were still people who did not believe it, and still people who were angry, and I understand that. Look, a rabbi has—a clergy person has been in your lives for very significant moments, and you are very attached. It was much too painful for some people to deal with.

Petnick: Yes, of course, there are very deep trust issues and—

Barak: Absolutely. I did not believe it either, the first time I heard it, and then the next day I went, “Oh, dear. Oh, dear. Oh, this is bad.”

Petnick: The image of your pulling the covers over your head and of shaking all over surely indicates how deeply affected you were.

Barak: It was horrible. I was sick. I was sick. Then when they were showing news reports about this, they would pull up any footage they had in the past of Congregation Emanu-El, which was usually the Martin Luther King weekend: the Third Baptist Church in the temple, and me sitting on the *bimah* in my robe. They were showing me on the screen, and they were talking about sexual abuse and ... I just wanted to take a shower—it made me feel so slimy. I have never felt so debased as by this whole thing. And I did not do anything, but I was just in the mix. Then some colleague of mine from back East—some idiot—called me and said, “I just heard what happened. Did he sleep with you, too?” People just said god-awful stuff. And I did not get a whole lot of support. There was just no support from colleagues except for one. One cantor from L.A., who is still a dear friend of mine and will always remain a dear friend, called me up, and all she said was, “It sucks, doesn’t it?” I remember taking a breath and saying, “Oh, my God, somebody gets it.” I have loved her ever since. She is going to perform at my party on October 18th.

Petnick: Have you had any contact with Rabbi Kirschner since then?

Barak: Yes, I could not avoid it. He came up a few times to do some things. The last time I saw him he was very contrite. I am trying to find the words for his attitude toward the whole thing because he was ... it was not self-deprecating. It was self-disgust. The way he spoke about his behavior then was tinged with
disgust. I really felt he had done a lot of work on himself, and that he was a very changed person. What he did say was, “I never should have been a rabbi. I was not the person to be a rabbi.” He is self-aware now, I think. I still wonder what is he going to produce in the future? The brain there is limitless. It is very sad. I know he is the director of the Skirball [Cultural Center] down in L.A. I think it is kind of strange that he wound up in a museum, because I think he has got a lot to offer. There are still a couple of things I cannot forgive him for, but they were not related to that. They were related more to his Machiavellian personality. He was always trying to throw you off the track and cover his tracks. He was pulling all kinds of deals not involved with this but other stuff. One thing he did to me was really kind of nasty. I held onto that. I say, “Don’t get too caught up in feeling sorry for him.” But I do. I do feel terribly sorry for him.

Petnick: I think we are finished talking about Rabbi Kirschner and about counseling. Yes? Okay then. So Music at Meyer, is there anything more you want to say about that series that you haven’t told us previously.

Barak: I started this series, I think, in 2004 on an absolute shoestring. It was just a shoestring—it was crazy. There was no money. People were coming and playing for no money. I put together eventually a seven-concert series starting in January and ending around May or June. The first few years were just hilarious because I kept getting incredible crazy luck. Artists wanted to come play, and they would come for nothing. I called up old friends from school who were now kind of well known, and they wanted to come out. Local people wanted to play. Frederica von Stade sang on the very first concert with Sheri Greenawald, and they did not take any money—we did not have to pay them. I got the Borodin String Quartet coming through. They were passing through San Francisco on their way to a concert up in the North Bay, and they did not want to take what we offered them, but then in the end they said, “Oh, all right,” and they came and played a concert. The Borodin String Quartet came and played at a concert at Music at Meyer for very little money. We had the Kronos Quartet, we have had Chanticleer, we have had the San Francisco Girls Chorus—we have had all these great organizations come and play and give these fabulous concerts. I have had jazz bands; I have had what you would call world music type of stuff. It has just been such a joy.

I even performed sometimes. I gave my own recital back in 2013; I gave a recital as part of our tenth anniversary concert. I sang art songs and some pop stuff, and I ended with this terrific song called My Dogs, which was perfect. Then my dog, Bijou, came out on stage at the end. It was adorable. We had a good time. I have had a good time.

I have had an awfully rich experience running that series and getting to know more people—more musicians in the Bay Area and out of the Bay Area and
also getting some of my old classmates from New York to come out and play, some who live here now. I have had Elmar Oliveira, a fantastic violinist who is world-class, and I went to school with him. He came out and played. I had a couple of pianists: Aleck Karis and David Rubenstein, they came out and did some concerts. It has just been fun because I have not seen some of these people in years.

Petnick: It will be hard for the series to go on without you because it is you who have all these great connections in the music world.

Barak: I am hoping we can keep it going, but it all depends on what is going to be happening in the future. Now that I am going to be an interim cantor—if things go well there may be other interim positions open that I may want to check out because some of these … It is an awful lot of fun to go to a different community. I will see. I am a bit at the end of being a full-time cantor. I want to move on and teach more and do other things and travel. But if I still have any energy left, I may want to do it for a few more years and see how it works out, assuming there are positions. Interim cantor is something that is fairly new—it only just started.

Petnick: Let’s review this so that everyone understands: You have just completed your last contract at Emanu-El, and your twenty-eight years of service are finished. You have been invited by Temple Emanu-El in Dallas to serve as Interim Cantor. Please tell us tell us about that.

Barak: There was a position listed with the American Conference of Cantors, and I got a call from our placement director, and she said, “There are, perhaps, some interim positions coming up.” And there were two: Emanu-El in New York and Emanu-El in Dallas. The one that I thought was a better fit for me was the one in Dallas, and she thought so, too.

Petnick: Why was that? Frankly, I am surprised you did not choose New York because of all your personal connections in New York.

Barak: It is not really the right time there for me. I think they are going through some pretty big transitions in Emanu-El in New York.

Petnick: In terms of what is going on in the temple?

Barak: Yes, they have a new rabbi, and there are new transitions. And the Dallas position is a very, very stable clergy with a rabbi that has been there twenty-five years and a clergy team that has been around for a while. For me, at this point in my career, it is better for me to be in a place that is a little more stable.

(Pause)
Petnick: We are moving toward the end of the interviews, so let’s now talk about the wonderful life you’ve had. Perhaps you would share some insights you have had of having been gifted with this great talent—this voice—and having lived the life that you have lived.

Barak: This was not the life I had planned, for sure. Growing up listening to all the music that I did, I definitely had an eye toward a classical career, either in art song or opera—preferably art song with a little opera thrown in. And then there’s Broadway. Every time I hear Rodgers and Hammerstein I cry. I just feel like I have a voice that is cut out for Broadway musicals, but there were certain issues that kept me back from doing that, and I still grapple with them at times.

Based on some of the more metaphysical things that have happened in my life, I really feel that I was supposed to be a cantor and that the cantorate is where I have had the most impact and grown the most as a person and affected people in a positive way. I know that I always feel I am not doing enough in the world to make the world a better place, but people tell me, “You are. What you are doing is really significant.” I tend to downplay it because I think, “Well, I just open my mouth and sing,” but for other people it seems to have a very profound effect. I have to honor that and accept it and say I would not have had the same effect or the same relationships or the same feeling of value about myself, or the same relationship to sanctity, if I had not been a cantor.

Again, it was not what I planned. I always thought women should not be cantors because I had grown up in an Orthodox synagogue. The first time I ever heard that women were being cantors, I got completely indignant about it: “What!” But that changed. I see that women can indeed be cantors, very fine cantors and have a wonderful relationship and place in the synagogue.

It is all a tradeoff. You do not always get everything you want or you dream of, but then something else happens, and you realize that it was probably for the best. In my case I think it was for the best. I cannot say that I do not look back sometime with a little bittersweet feeling or a little regret about this or that, but it still is important work, and it has gone way beyond just my singing to the teaching and the life cycle events of people’s lives, and it has made me a better person in a very profound way.

Petnick: When you were talking I thought about how if you had had a different type of career that I would have—and thousands of us would have—missed the twenty-eight years of your cantorate. The idea of it really, really breaks my heart; it makes me cry. You have had a huge impact on my life and on the lives of so many people, more people than you will ever, ever know, really.

Barak: I thank you for that. I know I just did a little unveiling [a ceremony of the unveiling of the gravestone at the cemetery a year after the burial] yesterday.
Just knowing that I could unleash people’s emotions, and that they can stand at the grave and remember someone they loved … It does not mean they would not do this without me, but at least I am there, and I see it. I feel that I have made these lifelong connections now.

Petnick: You are famous. You have a nice way with people. I just watched the entire video of the two-hour memorial service for Warren Hellman. It is a great service. It is so full of music and there is laughter and tears, and your beautiful singing of *El Malei Rachamim*. It takes a certain kind of person to be able to create an event of that quality. You have to really be able to be with people. You are able to be up here and be on a very, very high level—really above us—but you are also very much able to be with us when we need you.

Barak: It was a process. I do not think I was as warm when I first came. I was a little overwhelmed and intimidated by everything, by this position. I think over the years I just let it hang out a little more: I revealed myself more. I have always been funny, that always helps. I always have had a good time with making people crack up—I love it. I always laugh at my own jokes, too. I think the humor has helped a lot.

Petnick: That’s great. Along with your career, at the same time at home all these years—or most of these years—what was so deeply important to you was your son, Danny.

Barak: My son was my life. He was the center of my life. I did everything for him. I became a cantor because of him because I knew that my marriage was going to end, and I did not want to be a secretary. I did not think I could support him, and I wanted to support him, and that is why I became a cantor. It was suggested to me to become one, and I went, “I think the income is pretty good,” so that is what I did. He was the reason I did this, and he was the most important thing in my life, and he still is. David Olick is a big part of my life, for sure, and I love him dearly, but my son has been with me for a longer time (laughs)—almost forty years now. Everything I did, I did for him. I am sure I was not the best mother in the world. I was kind of young and stupid, but he is forgiving, and he is a great person. He is a seriously smart guy and very, very sarcastic, which means that we have a constant banter. We are almost like Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy, back and forth, bam, bam, bam. But it is fun. It is fun.

(Sound of door opening. David enters and is greeted.)

Petnick: [Speaking to David] We are just going to finish this recording. Go ahead, Cantor.

Barak: I am proud of Danny. I am very proud of him. He is a little bit of a late bloomer. He cannot deal with change easily, and I understand that because he
has had a lot of transitions in his life. I am very proud of him. He did go to law school. He is an attorney. He is working very hard. I wanted him to be an actor—I thought he had acting talent. He made my hair stand up on end when I watched him when he was doing his forensics stuff in high school. He was a star. He won the debates. He won the individual events. It was astounding how talented he was. Then when he went on tour in the musical *Nine* and when he did his commercials, he was a talented little boy, and he was so delightful to be around. He was so much fun—so smart, so funny. He is extraordinary, and he is the love of my life, absolutely.

**Petnick:** There is one more thing that I did want to ask you about. We have talked so much about Emanu-El, and we talked a lot about Rabbi Kirschner, but would you tell us about your relationship with Rabbi Pearce and his leading the recovery from the Kirschner debacle?

**Barak:** Rabbi Pearce came in. We had known each other for a long time. In fact, he had been the rabbi at Temple Isaiah for several years. I was the cantor there about ten years after he left, so we had that connection. Plus, he was my teacher in Hebrew Union College in the counseling course. I had even been given, at the end of the year, the Stephen S. Pearce Award for Excellence in Human Relations, which was an honor. Steve was always just a wonderful, wonderful guy—easy to talk to and easy to work with. He came in at such a time of crisis in the temple, and I think everyone felt they found someone who was going to be stable and upstanding and would not cause any grief and problems such as we had had [with Rabbi Kirschner]. They knew they had hired an upstanding person.

I had visited Steve in Connecticut years before and saw his beautiful home with his wife, Laurie [Pearce], and I knew his kids, Sarah and Michael, when they were young. It just felt like family came to work.

I think it was a bit of an overwhelming situation for Steve in the beginning. It was much bigger than he anticipated. In fact, the very first thing that happened to him—he got off the plane to move here, and they ran to the airport and said, “You have got to come and do a funeral—someone has been shot!” That was the first thing that happened to him when he came. It just fell on him. I was not in town. I was on vacation, so it was really, really hard for him.

As I’ve said, it is a different mix of people here in San Francisco, and it is a different way of engaging in the world. It takes some adjusting, and I know that it was a big adjustment for him. I was still dealing with the Kirschner thing, which was tough for me, and I do not think I was gracious. I wanted to be gracious, but I do not think I was as gracious to Rabbi Pearce in the beginning as I could have been. We had a little bit of conflict for a while, but luckily it all worked out.
Working with him was always very, very pleasant and easy on the bimah. Our styles were similar in worship, and we appreciated each other for that. He is just a good friend and a good confidant, and I always felt I could go to him with anything. He has been so supportive and so lovely. Now that he is retired, and I am about ready to retire, we go to lunch, we schmooze, we talk. It is good. It is all good. He is a really decent human being and a very fine rabbi. People who have had the opportunity to be with him and sit with him and be counseled by him have always been gratified by that, very pleased with the experience of that.

This is my favorite Steve Pearce story: about six months after he came I had gone to sit with a friend and do a little project with her, and I had sat in a chair for a very long time, and my back went out, completely out. I was a mess. I was not well. Steve came to my door and rang the bell, and I said, “Who’s there?” and he said, “Delivery.” I recognized his voice and buzzed him in, and he came upstairs, and he had a basket, and in the basket were apples and cans of chicken soup.

He said, “This is for you to get better.” I do not think there is a rabbi alive who has done that for his cantor. I have to just say that. I have to say that that was such an act of kindness, and that is who he is. He is kind. He will help anybody. He is so kind to people who are troubled. We have a few people in the congregation who are not well heeled and not scions of society. They are just normal, regular people. Some of them are very troubled people, and he always has time for them. I would always see after services that he would stand with them and talk to them and spend time with them.

He always had a kind word for everyone coming through the line on Friday night. I gave a little speech about it at his farewell party. It was all about how he would always stop and say, “What a beautiful pin you are wearing, Mrs. Levy,” “What lovely shoes you have today.” My first reaction to that was to think, “Oh, cut it out.” But after a while it kind of transferred to me. I adopted it too because I realized, “Gee, we are really making people feel good.” He is saying a kind word. And I learned that from him, and it made me happier. It made me a more pleasant person. I have learned a lot from him, and I really value and cherish our friendship. He has been great.

Petnick: Anything else you would like to say? Does this complete your life story?

Barak: We haven’t discussed my experiences in Germany, and I would like to add my thoughts and memories about that before we close. My first trip there took place in 1995. I was invited to sing in Germany by a former executive of Siemens. This was a man who had converted to Sufism and believed that through the power of music, the monotheistic religions could come together and strive for world peace. Through a mutual acquaintance, this man got in
touch with me and asked me to be the Jewish musical component of a concert he was planning in Munich.

I had seriously negative feelings about Germany. However, although I was hesitant, I was intrigued by the idea and chose to go. The final experience was positive, and I was glad I went; it was the catalyst for future appearances in Germany as well as the production of my CD, *The Jewish Soul*. I returned to Germany many times after that, sometimes to concertize, sometimes to visit, and eventually I was invited to teach at the Geiger College in Berlin that had established a cantorial program alongside its rabbinical program. I’ve had some interesting interactions with both the Jewish and non-Jewish population of Germany, and it has been a very rich and rewarding experience to travel, perform, and teach there. I’ve been interviewed for German radio and TV and reviewed quite favorably in the newspapers. I’ve had a chance to see the work that’s been done in Germany to confront and acknowledge the horrors of the past. During one trip in November, the *Kristallnacht* commemoration occurred and there was nothing on the television that day except for films and discussions of Germany’s actions in World War II—it was all out there for everyone to see, no holds barred. I gave a concert in Hamburg during that time, and it took place in a church. It was a concert with cantors and choirs, and the program contained only Jewish music.

I saw people streaming into the church and sitting with their heads in their hands, weeping. These were not Jews. It was very moving for me to witness raw repentance, and I will never forget that sight. I believe in building bridges, and I believe in repentance and forgiveness—and the truth is, most of today’s Germans are not the guilty ones. I have continued my association with the German people through friendships I’ve made with the German consuls in San Francisco, and with all the friends I made in that country throughout the years. Although I grew up in an atmosphere of serious German-hatred after the war, I was finally willing to let it go by virtue of these experiences and relationships. I always loved singing the music of German composers, and I loved singing in the language as well—in fact, I seemed to have an affinity for German art song and studied much repertoire of that genre. So the anomaly of German actions in the war compared to the beauty of the music and culture was always a source of grief for me. I still shake my head at this dichotomy and seeming contradiction, and will never be able to fully understand the madness of it all. However, for now, I enjoy Germany, especially Berlin, and always look forward to traveling there—and the very fact of a Jewish seminary there is a tangible symbol of victory over the insanity. *Am Yisrael chai*: the people of Israel lives.

The timing in my life has been good. I have had a good time, and I think I have had a lot of extraordinary input from wherever—from another realm. I think I have been guided. I hesitate to say it because people will go, “She’s
nuts!” or they will say, “She is deluded,” and it may be true. (Laughter) But I feel very strongly that there is another force at work, and I give that a lot of credit for everything that has happened to me.

Petnick: Thank you very much for all you’ve given and for sharing your life story and yourself with us.

Barak: Thanks, Basya, I have enjoyed this.

[End of Interviews 1-12]
Temple Emanu-El, San Francisco, California
Basya Petnick is the founder and owner of Books & Lives, a San Francisco company that produces oral history and memory projects for families, communities, and institutions. Petnick has studied and practiced oral history for twenty-five years. She directed San Francisco Ballet’s 75th Anniversary Alumni Memoir Project and served as consultant and planner for the Tibet Oral History Project and the Kingston Trio Legacy Project, in conjunction with the Library of Congress. For many years, she served as co-director of the Legacy Oral History Program at the Museum of Performance + Design. She is a member of Temple Emanu-El in San Francisco.
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