

Report COZ 18: 27 November 2020 Jalda Rebling and Jack Kessler

Nusach Wars #2 —How to Keep the good old Nusach alive

	<p>COZ 18: Tuesday 27 October</p> <p>Cantor Jalda Rebling actress, singer, specialist for Jewish music from the early middle ages to modern times. Received Semicha from ALEPH in 2007. Teacher at EAJL London and CY Jerusalem</p> <p>with Cantor Jack Kessler Director, ALEPH Cantorial Program Faculty, Davennan Leadership Training Institute Klingon Klezmer. Atzilut: Concerts for Peace (Arab and Jewish musicians)</p>	
<p>Spiritual leader of congregation Ohel HaChidusch Berlin www.jalda-rebling.com www.ohel-hachidusch.org</p>	<p>https://www.hazzanjackkessler.com https://aleph.org/cantorial-program www.dlti.org</p>	

This session can be seen streamed on

<https://www.facebook.com/138818510938797/videos/391568765333371>

Nusach Wars #2 —How to Keep the good old Nusach alive

COZ 18: October 27 2020, Cantor Jalda Rebling and Cantor Jack Kessler

Geraldine introduced the featured speakers: **Jalda Rebling** grew up in Berlin with her mother who was a Holocaust survivor and singer. She studied hazzanut in the USA with Cantor Jack Kessler, then returned to Berlin to found congregation Ohel HaChidusch and the European Academy for Jewish Liturgy with Cantor Jaclyn Chernett. She has released 11 CDs. (See these and her full biography at the end of this report)

Jack Kessler studied at JTS and at Brandeis. He is the founding director of the cantorial program at Aleph—Jewish Renewal Movement (aleph.org), and also runs the Davennan Institute retreat. He has performed with the group Atzilut, which blends Jewish and Arabic music, and Klingon Klezmer, which performs “Jewish music from other planets”. (fuller bios at the end of this report)

Jalda opened the presentation with a reference to the **Yiddish folk song** *A Khazn Oyf Shabbes* which Charles Heller talked about last week at COZ #17. She gave a warm rendering of the song to introduce this week’s topic of nusach.

Jack outlined how nusach was one element in Jewish liturgical music, the others being trop and communal melodies. Jack emphasized the relationship of nusach to the calendar: music carries memory, and a nusach motif from a particular time of year will recall memories of that time. Nusach is constructed of a distinctive scale and motivic building blocks. In all our discussions we are referring to our own nusach which is western Ashkenazi, although it has links to oriental music: for example our freygish mode resembles the oriental *hijaz* maqam; and our *shohen ad* nusach (Shabbat morning) is built in oriental style on tetrachords (4-note units).

Improvisation is key to nusach, and the practitioner must develop expertise in it, even though it is an art which cannot be taught. Our liturgy is often non-metrical but a congregation can be trained to sing along with it.

Jalda asked: **Where does nusach come from?**

Jack quoted his teacher Dr Johanna Spector: Every melody has a composer. Someone composed it and others passed it on. Maybe some of our *nusach* has been handed down from the Temple itself.

Jalda: **Why is nusach important?**

Jack: The melody will evoke memory. The hazzan will mould it according to circumstances. The hazzan is not performing to an audience but is creating spiritual energy. '*Nusach* boots up the soul for Shabbos consciousness, it's an artistic creative process that is a springboard for expressing spiritual energy'.

Jalda: **Why are fewer people coming to shul?** Why do they say shul is boring?

Jack: We are in shul because we have a tribal need to be together. Jack quoted his teacher Max Wohlberg who quoted the old joke: "Goldberg goes to shul to talk to God, I go to shul to talk to Goldberg." In the 19th century the Jews were a self-sufficient ethnic enclave, but now they are one religious group amongst the rest with an option to assimilate. The disengagement of liberal Jews from davenen is due to their poor education and their infantile concept of religion, for example conceiving God as The Old Man in the Sky. People who wish to develop their understanding of our liturgy are encouraged to read Marcia Prager's book *Path of Blessing*. The Renewal movement gives more space for earth awareness and feminism, for example in its understanding of the Shechinah.

Jalda: **When I was growing up in Berlin** our shul comprised Shoah survivors who were there for mutual support, but there was not much time for children to express joy, How can we get people back to shul, to appreciate nusach, to change it to make it acceptable to them?

Jack: You need to get them all involved. Jack sang through an example of singing *Modim* phrase by phrase, in call-and-response (using the Conservative siddur which eliminates the *Modim d'rabbanan* of the Orthodox siddur, since that would require the congregation to be able to recite prayers on its own). He also sang some passages in an unembellished style of hazzanut in English and French. (You can hear how he does this here [watch anytime on https://youtu.be/0W99kN4w-M8](https://youtu.be/0W99kN4w-M8))

This opened up the discussion which focussed on the low level of knowledge of Hebrew in our congregations and the difficulty of finding affordable and effective Jewish education.

Eliyahu Schleifer praised Jack's attempts at using vernacular for the liturgy, but it was felt by most that Hebrew is too full of resonances and nuance for any translation to replace it adequately. **Jack** referred to the French idiom *C'est de l'hebrieu* (it's Greek to me) to imply it's unintelligible—not a good state of affairs in a shul. The Jewish community has enough money to support free day schools.

Daniel Katz emphasized the role of improvisation. He also commented on the idea that we have very ancient musical motifs— in reality we cannot know at all what music sounded like centuries ago without notation.

Jalda mentioned that in Berlin German people walk out if they hear the liturgy sung in German; for her davening in German is impossible. Jack had been told that in France, hearing Jewish liturgy sung in French sounds like a Catholic service.

Jack raised the possibility of broadening our nusach to include serial music. Apart from the fact that hazzanim might not be vocally capable of singing it, serial music does not have a tonal centre while nusach does. It was suggested that serial music does not move an audience, but Charles pointed out that Schoenberg's *A Survivor From Warsaw* always has a great emotional impact (perhaps because it actually quotes nusach?!) Schoenberg himself loved synagogue music.

Jack touched on the reluctance of modern congregations to sing, and demonstrated some simple warm-up exercises. The chat comments mentioned the decline of singing in schools and the toleration by modern society of poor singing.

Jaclyn Chernett described her feelings about getting the congregation actively involved in the service. They should be physically close —the cantor should “feel warm bodies”. The cantor must be aware that some in the congregation are celebrating a joyous event while others are suffering illness or loss. The cantor can sing just one note and others will join in. The cantor may have studied traditional nusach for years but the congregation can only be brought into it through feeling safe.

Jack: Shul should feel like home, nusach should feel like home.

Alex Klein: At the end of the day nusach requires a basic knowledge of Hebrew, beginning with Alef Bet.

Charles Heller was invited to give his comments: He had nothing to add to today’s very fine presentation by Jalda and Jack, but gave his reflections on last week’s COZ #17: He had listened carefully to the recording of the discussion posted on Facebook and reviewed his own position as follows:

1. He is not hostile to change and has no desire to stay in the past. There can be an objective test of new tunes to see if they are admissible: they must promote rather than hinder the function of nusach, which is to unite the community through a shared awareness of time and space. This is not a question of saying “my taste differs from yours.” There are tasteful tunes that go against the nusach and there are tunes that fit the nusach but are in poor taste.
2. He objects to the use of the term “elitist” which has come to mean anyone with some acquaintance with culture eg music by Beethoven.
3. He does not accept the statement “This debate about nusach can go on forever.” Nusach is under attack and time is running out. Remember we are custodians of a world heritage that is 2000 years old and is about to disappear forever.

Notes by Charles Heller

Comments on last week’s Nusach session

from from **Jalda Rebling** and **Jack Kessler** (see their bios below)

Thank you **Alex Knapp**, thank you **Charles Heller** for raising all the important questions last week about **The Death nusach and chazzanut**.

We love this very fruitful discussion. We would love to add some more questions and talk about **How to keep the good old Nusach alive and have it serve the needs of modern Jewish liturgy**

For us as European Jews whose parents survived the *Shoah* it’s painful to use the term “war”. We would rather reformulate this statement into a question:

Why is it that chazzanut and nusach are in such a crisis?

When I wanted to learn *nusach* in Berlin in the 90s no cantor was able or willing to teach it to me. It’s like davening, you can’t learn it from a book. This is more than 20 years ago. Today more people know at least something about nusach.

A few weeks ago a student from asked me: do you have a work book for me that I can learn from the very beginning. Well *chazzonim* know: yes there are meanwhile many books you can learn from. But there is so much more to learn. Different traditions, different *Minhagim*. So:

Is it possible to learn improvisation from a book?

How can you learn the preciousness of our liturgical poetry from a book?

How can you learn to improvise to play with poetry and *nusach* from a book?
How can you learn to feel what is going on in your kahal from a book?
How can you learn to hold your kahal in their different needs: some just got a new baby – what a joy – some just lost a beloved one -they are in deep mourning from a book?
How can you to respect our diversity learn from a book?
How can you learn to hold your kahal in their different needs from a book? Some just got a new baby – what a joy – some just lost a beloved one - they are in deep mourning.
How can you learn to respect our diversity from a book?
My teacher Reb Zalman Schachter -Shalomi taught us: davening you can only learn from a davvener. To become a chazan you need many teachers and you never stop to learn.
Our world is changing too fast. It reminds me of the old Israeli joke of the man in a car who was driving very fast and his chaver said to him: you are driving too fast my *neshama* can't follow.
How can we as Jewish educators and as Jewish *chazzonim* hold on to our fellow Jews?
We have to move ourselves and adjust to the new technology to the fast-changing society.
With Covid 19 we have learned to lead *t'filla* via zoom, a Seder on zoom, lifecycle events on zoom....
After a Pew report in the US showed how difficult the situation for the Jewish communities in the US was, Rabbi Sid Schwartz raised an important question: 94 % of the Jews that were interviewed for this report said: they love to be Jews. What is wrong?
Hazzan Jack and Chazan Jalda want to raise some more questions.
And we hope to continue this very important discussion, we just started. We all will learn from it.
There is no "right" and "wrong". We all together have to find new paths with the good old tools, what saved our people as a people: Tora. *Nusach* is our musical Tora.

Chazan Jalda Rebling Biography cantorjalda@t-online.de

Born in Amsterdam Chazan Jalda Rebling grew up in a Jewish intellectual environment in East Berlin and with the Yiddish songs of her mom Rebekka Brilleslijper, a well-known performer of Yiddish music known as Lin Yaldati, who was liberated in Bergen Belsen. 1972 she graduated the Berlin Hochschule für Schauspielkunst Ernst Busch. 1987 – 1977 she was creator and leader of the first Berlin Yiddish festival, Tage der Jiddischen Kultur an UNESCO project. 1993 she cocreated a Yiddish theatre in Berlin.

By the mid 90's she had produced her well-known CD of Jewish Medieval Music and become active in the creative group of younger Jews in the Synagogue Oranienburger Strasse. She learned how to leyn and wanted to learn Nusach, but there was no cantor in Berlin who was able or willing to teach her.

Through a music cassette she encountered Hazzan Jack Kessler, who is here with her today on this Program. She fell immediately in love how he sang the poetry of the *t'filla*.

In the USA through Jewish Renewal and the ALPEH Cantorial Program Hazzan Kessler became her teacher. In the Program Jalda learned Torah, Jewish wisdom and Nusach *hat'filla* and most importantly Jalda learned: It is a joy to be a Jew.

In January 2007, having received her ALEPH Semicha as hazzan she founded the first Jewish Renewal community in Berlin called Ohel HaChidusch.

In 2010 Jalda met Chazan Jacky Chernet in Jerusalem at the Conservative Yeshiva. They have developed the EAJL program (European Academy for Jewish Liturgy) which offers an array of residential and now online learning opportunities.

Hazzan Jalda has over the last 40 years given concerts blending Jewish music and midrash, and continues to record and teach.

Chasan Jalda Rebling cantorjalda@t-online.de
spiritual leader of congregation Ohel HaChidusch Berlin

For the LP and CD I produced:

I never have been a good business women.

Here is one link

https://www.asinamusic.com/advanced_search_result.php...

<https://www.raumer-records.de/.../jalda-rebling-franka.../>

The CD Rajsele, a recording from a concert at the European Jiddish Festival in Zürich with my mom Lin Jaldati

is online not available anymore, the editor closed and i bought all the CDs from him. I can't find it online anymore.

The **LP Ir me quireo - sefardic romanzas and songs** from 1988 is only second hand available

As the **LP Ein Abend für Anne Frank** recorded in 1981. A program from 1978 where we combined pieces from Annes daiary intervowen with yiddish music and the personal story of my mom and her sister Janny with Anne, Margot and Edith Frank.

<https://www.discogs.com/de/artist/972048-Jalda-Rebling>

Here once more my discografie

1981 LP Ein Abend für Anne Frank

1986 Rajsele - Jiddische Lieder - concert in Zürich 1984

1988 LP Ir me quireo - sefardische Lieder und Romanzen recorded with specialistst for ancient music

1992 Di goldene Pawe

1995 Juden in Deutschland 1250-1750

1996 An alter nign

1999 Juden im Mittelalter aus Sepharad und Ashkenas

2006 Kabbala

2010 Shabbat HaMalka

2012 A brivele fun Vilne - material from Vilna my parents got from the YIVO Vilna in March 1940 send to their adress in den Haag.

2017 Süßkindt von Trimberg (still not available because we produced it for a museum in Perleberg)

Gethsemanestrasse 11, 10437 Berlin, Germany

Wittbrietzener Dorfplatz 11, 14547 Beelitz

fon x49 (0)33204 616780 / mobile x49 (0) 170 272 54 47

www.jalda-rebling.com

www.ohel-hachidusch.org

www.aleph.org

www.eajl.org

www.jalda-und-anna.de

www.happy-hippie-jewbus.de

www.makom-kunstundschule.de

Hazzan Jack Kessler biography Jack Kessler goldenmedina@comcast.net

Hazzan Jack Kessler was ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary Miller School of Cantorial Studies and had a twenty-year congregational career. He has a Master's degree in voice from Boston Conservatory and pursued studies in composition in the graduate department of Brandeis University with Arthur Berger and Harold Shapero. Originally trained as an Ashkenazi Hazzan, his performance and original compositions also embrace Sephardi and Mizrachi styles.

He is the founding Director of the Cantorial school of the **ALEPH Ordination Program**, a rigorous liberal Jewish seminary affiliated with the Jewish Renewal movement, where he teaches the core curriculum of *Nusach HaTefillah*. He has recently made his recordings of the classical *nusach* for the Jewish year available at Aleph.org

He teaches *nusach* and voice as a member of the core faculty of the **Davvenen' Leadership Training Institute** (www.dlti.org) an intensive residential retreat-based training program, now celebrating its 20 year commitment to revitalizing Jewish prayer.

Hazzan Kessler directs two Jewish touring ensembles. **Atzilut: Concerts for Peace** is a multi-cultural ensemble offering a dynamic interweave of Hebrew and Arabic music in a powerful statement of creativity through cooperation. His progressive klezmer band **KLINGON KLEZ**, is known best for its Jewish music from other planets.

Hazzan Jack Kessler
Director, Aleph Cantorial Program
228 West Hortter St.
Philadelphia, PA 19119
alephcantorial@comcast.net
phone 215-422-2611
www.dlti.org
<https://aleph.org/cantorial-program>