

Cantor Josh Breitzer
Kabbalat Shabbat Mikeitz
Fri, December 19, 2025 | 30 Kislev 5786
6th Night of Hanukkah | Rosh Chodesh Tevet

[Clarinet solo, ["Vay'chulu" \(Goldfarb\)](#) - play in concert Cm]

Happy Hanukkah – and Shabbat shalom!

It is an honor and a pleasure to share some words with you on this, my final Shabbat at CBE before going on a six-month sabbatical. As we learned around this time last year, just before Rabbi Timoner went on her sabbatical, the custom of rabbis and cantors taking extended time away from their communities derives from the Torah's commandment of *shmitah*, letting the land lie fallow every seven years, in order for it to be renewed and refreshed. From the bottom of my heart, I thank our congregation's leadership for encouraging and prioritizing this custom for our clergy team.

In 2018, when I took my first six-month sabbatical from CBE, the four Breitzers spent four of those months living in Israel, where Jonah finished kindergarten, Gideon went to a *gan* for preschool, and Donna and I both found renewal and refreshment as we reconnected with extended family and enjoyed life at a more leisurely pace (or at least as "leisurely" as you could get, parenting a 5 year-old and a 3 year-old). While we were there, I taught first-year students at the Hebrew Union College campus in Jerusalem, worked on my guitar technique, and enrolled in the Clergy Leadership Program of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, as Rabbis Timoner and Kolin have also done, developing practices of mindfulness and meditation which sustain me to this very day.

And thinking back over all the years since 2018, we have lived through some very dark days. To name but a few:

the Tree of Life shooting in Pittsburgh; the entire COVID-19 pandemic; navigating school and community life while staying masked and socially distant; the horror brought on by the October 7 massacre and the devastating war that followed; the global rise in antisemitism; growing divisiveness among the American Jewish community; the results of the 2024 presidential election; and the still-fresh 2025 mayoral election.

But during those same years, the sun has shone on many dazzling CBE successes: welcoming a few new rabbis; merging with Union Temple of Brooklyn; experiencing unparalleled growth in our membership and programs; forging a relationship with Antioch Baptist Church and inspiring a feature-length documentary; inaugurating the annual Hope for Our Future award; establishing the Center for New Jewish Culture; hiring our first-ever Assistant Cantor; living the Judaism of our time.

To paraphrase Rabbi Tarfon, “the days are short, and the work is long.” I gratefully accept the opportunity to step away from CBE for half a year. And you may ask, what do I plan to do this time around to find renewal and refreshment?

Before I reveal the answer, let me share a verse from this week’s Torah portion, which hints at some of what I have in store. Parashat Mikeitz famously depicts Joseph’s rise to Egyptian fame and fortune through divine providence, impeccable timing, and some truly insightful dream reading. Joseph ascends from the depths of the dungeon to the heights of power, establishing himself as Pharaoh’s right-hand man. And in Genesis 41:45, we hear the following:

וַיָּקֹרֶא פְּרֻעָה שְׁמַיּוֹסֵף צָפֵנָת פְּעִנָּת
[וַיִּפְרֹלְוּ אֶת-אֱסֹת בַּת-פּוֹטִי פְּרֻעָה כִּיּוֹ אָז לְאַשָּׁה וַיֵּצֵא יוֹסֵף עַל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:

“Pharaoh then gave Joseph the name **Zaphenat-paneach**; [and he gave him for a wife Asenath daughter of Poti-phera, priest of On.] Thus Joseph went out unto the land of Egypt.”

To mark such an unlikely, miraculous promotion, Joseph receives a new Egyptian name - and a seemingly incomprehensible one at that. But [the sages of Midrash Bereshit Rabbah](#) are up for the challenge, and they come up with some pretty impressive possibilities:

In trying to decipher the name **Zaphenat-paneach**, Rabbi Yohanan said: “He reveals hidden matters [*tzefunot*] and it is easy [*nohot*] for him to state them. Rabbi Hizkiya said: “With knowledge, he reveals hidden matters [*tzefunot*], and assuages [*meniah*] the spirit of people with them.” Other rabbis [prefer to read it as one long acronym, and they spell it out for us as such, kind of like the letters on a dreidel]: *tzadi* – *tzofeh* [observer]; *peh* – *podeh* [redeemer]; *nun* – *navi*, [prophet] *tav* – *tomekh* [supporter]; *peh* – *poter* [interpreter]; *ayin* – *arum* [prudence]; *nun* – *navon* [understanding]; *het* – *hozeh* [visionary].

Observer, redeemer, prophet, supporter, interpreter, prudent, understanding, visionary.... Eight characteristics of an effective leader, eight ways God has related with our ancestors, eight qualities to which we all might aspire. And one for each night of Hanukkah, I might add.

In this light, it appears the rabbis want us to understand Joseph’s new Egyptian name as a sort of sobriquet specific to the kind of leader he became. In other words, **Zaphenat-paneach** is both Joseph’s superhero name and the title of his office.

And as the verse concludes, ♫ *vayeitzei Yoseif al eretz mitzrayim* — he officially began his term by going out into the land of Egypt, and getting to know the people he had been charged to lead.

As it happens, I too recently came into a position of leadership. This past summer, I was installed as president of the American Conference of Cantors, the Reform movement's professional organization serving some 500 cantors all over the world. It was in that capacity that I served as a delegate to the World Zionist Congress last October. And in that same capacity, I will be using much of my sabbatical to go on a "Presidential Listening Tour," visiting Reform cantors throughout North America to get to know them, learn from them, pray with them, sing with them, and help their communities appreciate all the good they do — which, believe it or not, often goes unnoticed and unappreciated.

That has never been my experience here at CBE. Since my first day on the job back in summer 2011, our rabbis and lay leaders have always treated me as a full clergy partner, which I sincerely appreciate. But as I have come to learn, many of my cantorial colleagues feel "othered," or "less than," in spite of their years of seminary training and fully authorized ordination. This synagogue leadership power dynamic hearkens back to a hierarchy of leadership widespread in American Jewish communal life throughout much of the last century, when the cantor was subservient to the rabbi or rabbis, and often seen as little more than a glorified soloist. But as I know you all know, we are so much more than that. And in the United States, cantors were actually the first Jewish clergy to be legally recognized as such, even before rabbis were!

Earlier this month, ACC board member Cantor Vlad Lapin wrote in [an op-ed for the website eJewish Philanthropy](#), "I am here. My colleagues are here.

“We have always been here — often in the front of the room, sometimes in the background, but always holding the soundscape and soul of Jewish prayer. It is time for the hidden cantor to be seen, counted and taken seriously as clergy.” Throughout my listening tour, I intend to help raise the profiles of the cantors I encounter, to help them be seen, counted, and taken seriously. For inherent to the nature of our sacred work are all the qualities that the sages identified in Joseph, **Zaphenat-paneach**: observer, redeemer, prophet, supporter, interpreter, prudence, understanding, visionary, *chozeh, chazon...chazzan*.

My vision for the American Conference of Cantors is one in which each *chazzan* leads by example. By our words and by our deeds, we will model what it means to be 21st century cantors at varied stages of our careers. We will be generous and compassionate colleagues, celebrating one another’s accomplishments past and present, and showing up for each other’s highs and lows. We will own and hone our musical expertise, constantly learning and growing as practitioners and teachers. We will continually refine our artistic gifts and strive for excellence as weavers of melody, chant, and prayer. We will live in the liminal spaces, in moments of nuance and uncertainty, and work together with our Reform movement partners to make them meaningful. We will experiment boldly and thoughtfully, unafraid of failure. We will encourage and empower anybody anywhere who is innovating in Jewish music. We will fully embrace our roles as curators and conveners of communal ritual and song, now and for decades to come. This vision was wholly inspired by what I do at CBE.

[Clarinet solo, [“Vay’chulu” \(Goldfarb\)](#) - play in concert Cm]

That melody, [composed about a century ago just over in Cobble Hill](#), is meant to orient the listener to this precise moment in sacred time: the very heart of Shabbat evening liturgy.

It whisks us back to the last hours of the first week ever, when God had completed work on the heavens and the earth, and everything in them. This section of our Friday night service is called the *Mei'ein Sheva*, “kind of seven,” referring both to the seven blessings of the Shabbat Amidah and to the seven days of creation itself. The part of the *Mei'ein Sheva* we know best at CBE begins ♫♪ *Magein avot, v'imahot bid'varo...* and it ends ♫♪ *zeicher l'ma'asei, l'ma'asei v'reishit.*

In reading Bereishit, our sages speak of *Or HaGanuz*, the “hidden light” which filled all creation for 36 hours, prior to the creation of the sun, moon and stars. That hidden light is stored away for the righteous in the world to come. Remember earlier this evening, when we sang ♫♪ *Or zarua latzaddik*, “light is sown for the righteous?” That’s the light the psalmist means, our sages say. And they further equate those 36 hours of primordial glow to the 36 candles we light during the eight nights of Hanukkah.

But if you do the math, and/or if you read the fine print on your box of Hanukkah candles, you’ll see there aren’t 36 candles; there are in fact... 44. Why? Because eight of those candles are the *shamashim*, the “servant” lights used to kindle the others. Looking back at Jewish history over the millenia, one of a cantor’s most common duties was to act as a *shamash*, serving the earliest synagogues in whatever little ways were necessary, in some cases literally being the first one to light the fire every morning and the last one to blow them out at night. From this vantage point, then, we might recognize cantors as the true heirs to the *Or HaGanuz*, kind of like those eight extra candles in your Hanukkah candle box: occasionally taken for granted, yet everpresent and absolutely essential for igniting the flames of faith, resilience, and joy.

When you think about it, Judaism looks at numbers through a pretty murky lens. We call the weekday Amidah the Shmoneh Esrei (18), one for each blessing – but there are actually 19 blessings. A fully lit Hanukkiyah on the eighth night of Hanukkah contains 9 candles. A Hebrew year usually has 12 months but some years there are 13. A Hebrew month usually has 29 days but some months, like Kislev, the month concluding right now, occasionally have 30 days. And a sabbatical, while originally intended to occur every seven years, has in my case taken eight years – and in Rabbi Timoner's case, took ten years.

Maybe “living the Judaism of our time” means understanding that numbers, like names, can be subject to change and to multiple interpretations. After all, Joseph wasn’t the first Jew to receive a new name at an important inflection point in his life. Abram became Abraham when entering into a covenant with God. Jacob became Israel when wrestling with a divine being and living to tell about it. In 2007, I became a husband; in 2011, I became your cantor, and in 2012 and again in 2015, I became an Abba. No matter the number of titles I obtain, no matter how much authority my peers bestow upon me, no matter how many more years I may merit to walk this earth – may I never take my relationships for granted. I am deeply indebted to Donna, Jonah and Gideon for supporting my plan to spend much of the next six months on the road, and to the CBE clergy and music teams, especially our Assistant Cantor designate, Leslie Goldberg, for keeping our spiritual fire burning bright. And above all, I credit the Source of my life, my health, and my strength, whom our siddur calls *haBocheir b'shirei zimrah*, “the One who chooses melodious song.”

As I step away from CBE for the start of 2026, I carry you all with me. I pray that I return refreshed and renewed. I pray that the cantors I encounter feel seen, heard, and energized by my presence.

And I pray, in the words of the closing paragraph of the *Mei'ein Sheva* which you can find on page 172, that my prolonged Shabbat, my “Shabbat-ical,” be pleasing, satisfying, heart-opening, and holy.

[Clarinet solo, “Vay’chulu” (Goldfarb) - play in concert Cm]

[Invite up Ethan Breitman, segue “R’tzei Vim’nuchateinu” (Alter, arr. R. Goldstein)]