

CANTOR BRYCE ... UNPLUGGED

We were excited to sit down with CRJ's new cantor, Cantor Bryce Megdal (via Zoom) for a get-to-know-you Q&A:

Ma Koreh: Is there a story behind your name?

Cantor Bryce: My parents weren't inclined to have children; however, three different family members passed away in 1989, which partially inspired my parents to continue the family lineage. One of the family members who died was my mom's father, and his name was William. Everyone called him Bill, so my parents decided they wanted to give me a name that started with a "B" to honor him. They came up with Bryce; regardless of gender, that was going to be my name.

MK: How did you get your singing start?

CB: I joined the Tucson Jewish Youth Choir (TJYC) in fourth grade, when Cantor Janece Cohen and the late Karla Ember started it. Even though I went to a Jewish Day School at the time, the TJYC had a huge impact on me. I learned and was exposed to countless Jewish melodies and songs—many of which were and are still popular to this day—that I grew to love. I also sang at Temple Emanu-El, which my parents and I joined a year before my Bat Mitzvah. There, I had a plethora of opportunities to sing, develop my voice, and lead worship. It was on Temple Emanu-El's *bima* that I felt most comfortable singing in front of people. I attribute the beginning (planting the seed) of my singing journey in the Jewish world to the Tucson Jewish Youth Choir, and the continuation (blooming) of it to Temple Emanu-El.

MK: How did you pursue becoming a Cantor?

CB: Well, my mom said I should be a cantor when I was sixteen, because I was really involved at my temple, but I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life then. Once I was a student at the University of Arizona, I was leaning toward pursuing a career in the Jewish world, but I also had a passion for the arts, so I ended up double majoring in Judaic Studies and Studio Art. I stayed involved at Temple Emanu-El while in college.

Once I graduated from the UofA, I took a year to decide what I wanted to do next – either a Master's Degree in photography or enroll in Cantorial School. Here I am now, as CRJ's new Cantor! I applied to the Academy for Jewish Religion California in the Spring of 2013, and in September of that year, I moved to Los Angeles and began my six-year academic career there. I received a Master's Degree in Jewish Studies with an emphasis in Music in Jewish Life from ARJCA in 2015, and in 2019, I was ordained as a Cantor and received another Master's Degree in Jewish Sacred Music.

MK: How did you meet your husband, Marc?

CB: We met at a Jewish Halloween party. He was dressed as Facebook.

MK: You'll have to explain that.

CB: Marc had someone he had just met write the phonetic version of 'book' in Hebrew—*bet-vav-koof*—on his forehead in black Sharpie. I went as a reverse domino. I wore a black short-sleeved dress with white circles made out of paper taped onto it. There were three circles on the front and three on the back, diagonally aligned. Each circle had two letters, so the front spelled do-mi-no. The back three spelled do-mi-yes. Get it? Do-mi-**NO** and do-mi-**YES**? Ha!

MK: Dad joke!

CB: Yes, I attribute my humor to my dad. So, I went up to Marc, who was hanging out with his friend, James. There were a bunch of girls surrounding them, so naturally I wanted to see what these two guys were about. Me being the Hebrew nerd that I am, the first thing I said to Marc was, "You know the Hebrew word for book isn't 'book.' It's *sefer*." And the rest is history!

MK: How did you choose CRJ?

CB: I interviewed with many places, including Conservative congregations, but I knew in my heart I wanted to serve a Reform congregation. Around mid-March, it came down to CRJ and a temple in Sacramento. Interestingly, the way I heard about CRJ was through Joanne Fink. It's funny, because we had never met in person, but were somehow friends on Facebook. She messaged me and encouraged me to take a look at the job description. I soon realized that what was listed checked off everything I desired in a job as a Cantor. After my first virtual interview with the CRJ Search Committee, I spoke to Fred Schott (the Committee Chair), who was so warm and welcoming, my first glimpse of the wonderful CRJ community. Later down the road, he *really* convinced me that CRJ could be a great fit for me, particularly when he said, 'We really want you, Bryce Emily Megdal. We want you to be part of the CRJ family.' This was right before everything shut down due to COVID-19. I was still in Sacramento when this conversation took place; it happened to be the day after the Sacramento temple had offered me a position. But, like our hearts are supposed to incline toward Jerusalem, my heart inclined toward CRJ. I hadn't even visited it in person, but after FaceTiming with Rabbi Engel and falling in love with the chapel ceiling (Rabbi gave me a virtual tour), and weighing all of my options with my husband, I was ready to make the decision.

MK: How's Orlando so far?

CB: We haven't explored Orlando at all due to COVID-19, the *really hot*, humid weather, and the mosquitos at night. I've also just been unpacking at home, a daunting task that has taken almost two weeks. If people have suggestions for safe, pandemic-friendly activities to do in Orlando, please email me (bmegdal@crjorlando.org). Restaurant recommendations are welcome as well!

MK: Do you have any advice for future Bar and Bat Mitzvah families?

CB: I think the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process is really about learning about yourself, what your definition of Judaism is, and building relationships with the clergy. CRJ is a safe space where you won't ever be judged; it is a place filled with love and light. Try to remember this when you are on the fence about having a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, or when you're worried about being in front of people. Rabbi Engel and I will guide you from Day 1 of preparation, through the day of, and onward! The main take away: You will grow in more ways than you think.

MK: Lastly, we need your guilty pleasure song.

CB: I'm not sure I can just pick one. The first that comes to mind is Celine Dion's *A New Day Has Come*. I also really like Brandi Carlile's *The Story*. Fairly recently, I was exposed to Judy Collins' *Singing Lessons*; that is *a must* listen. It's SO beautiful.

MK: That fits.