

## The rabbi replies: Rabbi Kim Harris

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Rabbi Kim Harris takes a panoramic view around her office at Congregation B'nai Chaim in Morrison, and points to one of her two certificates of ordination on the wall, the one when she was ordained as a rabbi by Hebrew Union College in 2017, the other when she was ordained as a cantor in 2002.



*Rabbi Kim Harris*

That first one might have been harder to achieve than the second one, 15 years later, she says.

“We could go on and on about this equal stature thing,” lightheartedly referring to the differences in the clergy world between becoming a rabbi and becoming a cantor.

“Even though we are trained at the same institutions, and we take many of the same classes, the rabbi is regarded as the liturgical specialist,” Harris says. “Cantors are capable of knowing the meaningful ways to lead a service.”

“I’m glad I get to be both.”

Harris’ experience as a cantor influences her rabbinical attitude on the pulpit.

“Services can’t be boring, so I try to make them as engaging as possible,” says Harris.

“When you’re reading out loud, you’re focusing on what you’re saying. You’re not necessarily focusing on what the words are, right? So I try to make an interesting segue between prayers.

That Harris entered the clergy at all wasn't the original plan. Harris was, first and foremost, a secular educator, teaching first graders in elementary school in Columbia and Charleston, South Carolina.

She loved music, and in the early '90s found herself, along with her husband Brian, performing in the choir at two synagogues in Charleston. Kim played the flute, piccolo and eventually vocals, and Brian — whom she met in band while students at the University of South Carolina — played the clarinet. They became a familiar duo in Jewish circles.

"Someone then asked if we could do the music for her daughter's Bat Mitzvah. Then it led to, 'Will you do my wedding?'"

Things snowballed from there with some unexpected high-profile networking, followed by what some might call divine intervention.

"After one Bar Mitzvah service, this person approaches us and says, 'I'm Rabbi Barry Greene. I've worked with a lot of cantors and you're the best cantor I've ever heard.'"

"I responded by saying, 'I'm not a cantor.' Greene said, "Well, you should be."

Greene, who was the former rabbi at Congregation B'nai Jeshurun in Short Hills, NJ, was visiting the service in Charleston. Greene was friends with Izzy Goldstein, the former head of the School of Sacred Music at HUC.

After that, Kim and Brian were asked to perform at a regional Union of American Hebrew Congregations Biennial in Charleston.

"A lady sitting to my right turns to me and she said, 'You have such a nice voice. Have you ever thought about going to cantorial school?' I told her I didn't have a degree in music."

The woman was Marjorie Spritzer, then on the board of governors of HUC.

Greene and Spritzer both offered to write letters of recommendation to the cantorial school at HUC. Harris was weighing this potential career choice vs. her established job as a teacher. In 1997, there was a sign — from her car radio.

"I was driving my son (now 36) to a doctor's office and it was a day when I was really thinking about the idea of cantorial school," Harris remembers. "Every single song that came on had lyrics like 'getting stronger every day,' and 'it's gonna be OK,' or 'love lifts you up.'"

"I felt like G-d was basically hitting my head, as if to say, 'What do I have to do to get you to do this?'"

Soon afterward, Harris was off to Jerusalem to start cantorial studies at HUC.

That Harris became a member of the Jewish clergy would have appeared improbable. Growing up in South Carolina in, as Harris puts it, "the bubble of fundamentalism," Harris always felt uncomfortable with religion, calling her religious affiliation "nothing."

As she entered college at the University of South Carolina, both she and Brian — dating at the time — began questioning their faith. Brian was brought up Baptist; when he discovered in 1977 that he had Jewish relatives, both he and Kim investigated the Jewish faith.

"I didn't know any Jewish people growing up; I never met a Jewish person," says Harris. "I knew maybe three Catholics. Everybody else was Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist, whatever."

"You questioned everything back then. I wanted to learn about what Brian was talking about."

"So I went to the library, checked out all these books on Judaism and I bought a notebook."

Kim and Brian converted to Judaism. They married in 1983.

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- JUL 6:30 pm - 8:00 pm  
**24** Film Screening: "Disability in America"
- JUL 8:00 pm - 9:00 pm 🔄  
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rabbis are told their graduation thesis has to exceed 35 pages. Harris' "Southern Voices: The History and Music of Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim" is a whopping 228 pages.

"I wanted to do the history of the music of that congregation," says Harris. "It is a historic congregation, and I felt the thesis was sort of like a gift to them for all they had done for me."

**H**arris' tenure at B'nai Chaim in Morrison came after the High Holidays of 2013. "A lot of small congregations can't afford both clergy, so they have a rabbi during the year and then bring in a cantor for the holy days," says Harris. "I got that High Holiday position, and from the moment I walked in the door, I just loved it."

By January, 2014, Kim and Brian moved to Colorado permanently. Harris has had nine years to mesh her musical cantorial leanings with her rabbinical smarts near Red Rocks.

"Congregants ask, 'Do I have to wear a *kippah*, or a *tallis*, or whatever,'" says Harris. "I just feel like the meaning of something is more important than just checking a list. So, if it's going to bring you meaning and you are going to feel holy with the *tallis* around your shoulders, and if you feel G-d is protecting you with that, great.

"If not, that's OK too."

B'nai Chaim has 70 families, down from about 80 at the onset of the COVID pandemic.

The congregation's religious school has dipped a bit in terms of the volume of students, and Harris hopes that turns around soon.

Most striking is how a woman of the South has made her home in the Rocky Mountains.

Harris says: "This really has been a wonderful fit."

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