

contents

notes

newsmakers

police log

- Gazette home
- Gazette archives
- Harvard News Office
- Feedback



Rabbi Norman Janis (right) and his predecessor and mentor Rabbi Ben-Zion Gold.  
*Staff photo by Jon Chase*

## Singer, scholar, rabbi is a man of many parts

By Ken Gewertz

Gazette Staff

One of Norman Janis' earliest memories is standing on the beach at Coney Island at the age of 6 and singing "HMS Pinafore" to his parents and their friends.

The scene is not difficult to imagine. Janis, a compact, bearded man whose wiry frame is constantly in motion, seems to retain the boyish energy and enthusiasm of that youthful entertainer. Engaging, outgoing, a gifted raconteur, he is still unmistakably a performer.

But Janis' performing impulse has since been molded to other purposes. Now an ordained rabbi, he has become leader of the Worship and Study Congregation at Harvard Hillel, taking over from his longtime friend and teacher, Rabbi Ben-Zion Gold, who arrived as Hillel's rabbi the same year that Janis entered Harvard College.

"I was a 17-year-old Harvard freshman, and Rabbi Gold was 35. Over time he became my teacher and my friend. We are very, very close."

Janis' path to his present position has been anything but linear. As an undergraduate, he embraced his Jewish identity, but knew little about his religion. Graduating from Harvard in 1962 with a bachelor's degree in ancient Greek, he entered the graduate program in linguistics. He completed his course work, but left in 1968 before writing his dissertation.

Janis spent the next several years at a variety of occupations, including diamond importing and real estate. He also began to become more deeply involved in the Jewish community at Harvard.

"I started to take part in Rabbi Gold's services and they drew me in. He knew I was a singer, and he asked me to take on a cantorial role. Eventually, I became the principal cantor for the Harvard community that assembled at Sanders Theatre for the High Holidays."

Serving as a cantor helped Janis understand how the various parts of himself -- his spiritual self and his performing self -- could be unified

"As a cantor, you're a servant of the people. You're singing to, and of, the text, and you're also a conduit. It gave me a sense of what was possible for me."

Eventually, he reenrolled in Harvard's graduate program, but under the influence of what he had been learning in Rabbi Gold's congregation, the focus of his studies switched from Greek to Hebrew. He wrote a doctoral dissertation titled "A Grammar of the Biblical Accents," which analyzed the relationship between the meaning of the biblical text and the way it is chanted.

Being involved with Judaism as both a cantor and a scholar also led Janis to enroll in the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York with the intention of becoming a rabbi. But an unforeseen development in his personal life prevented him from completing his studies.

His wife, Patricia, recently had given birth to their second child. Just as the couple made the move to New York, the baby was diagnosed with a genetic abnormality resulting in severe retardation.

"It threw our lives into turmoil. I withdrew from rabbinical school. I just couldn't manage it."

Returning to the Boston area, Janis founded a musical organization called Jubal's Lyre, after a character in Genesis who is credited with being the father of music.

As a musical performer, Janis had sung in church groups and secular concerts. The idea for Jubal's Lyre germinated from the realization that many of the Latin texts he was singing were translations from the Hebrew scriptures in which he had been immersing himself.

The concerts followed a unique format. Janis would select a certain biblical text, often one of the Psalms or a section of the Song of Solomon. He and other performers would perform different musical pieces based on that text, ranging through the centuries from a Hebrew chant to an Anglican hymn, to a setting by Bach or Palestrina, to a modern piece.

"We would bring all kinds of fantastic things together around the same text. The aim was to get away from listening to music just for its taste, its flavor, the effect it has on the ear. I wanted people to realize that the words were full of meaning that could really matter."

Janis calls the concerts a form of "musical *midrash*" --*midrash* being the traditional Jewish approach to interpreting biblical texts. It is an open-ended tradition, Janis points out, in which one interpretation is appended to the one before it, not necessarily in contradiction, but rather to point out that there is more to consider. The Hebrew phrase for this is *davar acher*, meaning "another thing." Janis directed Jubal's Lyre from 1991 to 1996, performing in various venues as well as on the radio. In 1994, he expanded his musical and educational activities, becoming a cantor and teacher at Temple Shir Tikva in Wayland, Mass.

Having regained some stability in his life, Janis decided to resume his rabbinical studies, receiving his ordination April 13, 1999, at the age of 58. Meanwhile, his friend and mentor Rabbi Gold had retired as leader of the Worship and Study Congregation at Hillel. This year, the congregation offered Janis the position.

"I think he wanted this to happen," Janis said. "I don't know how it could be more gratifying as a succession story."

Gold agrees that Janis is the best person for the job.

"I think highly of him in every way," Gold said. "He's a man of many parts and all of them interesting. He is knowledgeable and sensitive, and he knows the community. He's a perfect fit."

From within the context of Hillel, the Worship and Study Congregation's special focus is on the Harvard community at large, comprising faculty, staff, graduate students, and families. Janis becomes one of four rabbis leading congregations at Hillel, joining Robert Klapper, an Orthodox rabbi; Shai Held, a Conservative rabbi; and Sally Finestone, a Reform rabbi.

*For more information on activities at Hillel, including the upcoming celebration of the High Holidays (Rosh Hashana, Sept. 30-Oct. 1, and Yom Kippur, Oct. 9), please call (617) 495-4696 or visit the Hillel Web site at <http://www.ministry.harvard.edu/main.html#hillel>.*



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