Truly and really, there is no such thing as Orthodox, Conservative or Reform hazzanut. There is only good and bad hazzanut.

Cantor Adolph Katchko, from his address at the second convention of the Cantors Assembly, February 22, 1949

Becoming a Cantor

There was a conservative synagogue called Congregation Kneses Tifereth Israel, KTI, in Port Chester, NY. I heard that they were looking for a religious school teacher and I accepted the job of teaching fourth graders. They had classes on Saturdays and one day during the week. Teaching the Saturday class was interesting because you couldn't write on Shabbat. It was actually a great concept – the children came to class, and then the teachers walked them into the sanctuary toward the end of the service for "Ein Keloheinu" and "Adon Olam" – they experienced *kiddush*, candy and community. I loved teaching them, and as a new graduate, I knew exactly what I wanted to share with them.

The Saturday class became my Elie Wiesel experience for them. They were only in fourth grade, but I started reading *Night* to them. I did not read anything that would give them nightmares. I read them the words of my beloved teacher in a way they could process. I then read them Wiesel's sequel, *Dawn*. It was an incredible experience. At the end of the year, I had them write personal notes to the author asking him any questions they might have.

I maintained an unusual and wonderful friendship with Wiesel through writing letters. I shared my life's milestones, and he always wrote me a lovely note back. Throughout my life, I received notes from him, which were like guideposts and energy boosts. I knew the students would be fortunate to get a response, but I had no idea that he would respond to each one.

June 8, 1980

My dear Debbie Katchko-Zimmerman,

Your letter – your pupils' letters – moved me deeply, very deeply.

I am answering all of them individually –

With best wishes to you all –

Elie Wiesel

I tried to explain to the students that it was a great gift to receive a personal letter from Elie Wiesel, and to treasure it their whole life. The lessons and impact of listening to *Night* made an impact on them, but it was only many years later that I learned how deep that impact was.

Fast forward to 2005. At a new member event at my synagogue in Ridgefield, each family introduced themselves going around the room. One woman got very excited and said that she was in my class at KTI all those years ago, and it inspired her to go into education. She was a principal at a school in town and sent me a beautiful letter about her memories of that class I taught.

July 2, 2006

Dear Debbie,

Last August, I attended a prospective member breakfast at Temple Shearith Israel. It was then that our paths crossed again. How unusual that after 15 years, I would run into you again. Seeing you and recognizing you brought back all the memories of my year as one of your Hebrew School students. I remember that you read us Elie Wiesel's books: *Night* and *Dawn*. Although it was many years ago, I can remember it so clearly. I recall being profoundly changed as a person and as a Jew. I remember crying for those lost and feeling the strength and sorrows of those who survived. Those books, those stories of our people, shaped me. I believe that hearing those

stories at the young age of 9 gave me a deeper understanding what it means to be a Jew. I have since been a Religious School teacher myself. I have tried to make learning about our culture and religious fun and valuable.

I have few memories of what I learned in Hebrew School other than your class. I will, however, always remember the lessons you taught me so many years ago. Thank you Debbie. I will never forget you and always be grateful for what you gave me.

With sincere gratitude,

Stephanie Bell

(Dr. Stephanie Bell is a professor and presenter at national conferences and is principal of Pound Ridge Elementary School, Pound Ridge, NY.)

The idea that this young student was so inspired and ended up as a renowned educator and proud Jew has stayed with me as a profound gift. My mentor's teaching can truly change your life, as it did for this young woman, now an educator sharing values, ethics, and morals through her teaching and leadership. I love everything about this.

A Conservative Pulpit, 1981

I was so excited to audition for a real cantorial position! I was very nervous as I was twenty-three years old, and had limited experience. I had led the Conservative services for the High Holy Days at Boston University Hillel and I had spent about six months leading mostly Shabbat services in a very Reform temple. I knew how to read a *haftorah*, and I had learned cantillation at JTS, but I was far from a regular Torah reader at this point. At my weekend pulpit in Wellesley, MA I trained students, but never had to chant Torah regularly. The conservative pulpits only had a Friday evening service for me, so Shabbat morning Torah and Haftorah were not required. I knew a full-time Conservative pulpit would require more learning and I was ready to do it on the job.

I also had my secret weapon, my dear father, Cantor Theodore Katchko. He was excited to teach me whatever he knew to help me succeed at this pulpit. My father had some trepidation about my stepping into such an important and public role, but it was less about my abilities than the culture of rabbi/ritual chair/president politics that can sometimes be difficult and career ending for cantors. There are many horror stories about cantors being treated less than respectfully by jealous rabbis, and I am sure he was worried that could happen to me, a young girl with very little experience in the world.

However, I think it brought us even closer, as he would share little snippets of his childhood, most of them fairly traumatic. His famous father was so busy with his cantorial students that he had no time for his own son. My dad told me that he would sit outside the door of his father's study as he taught other cantors. That's how he learned. The very image of it breaks my heart. He would often tell me how lucky I was to learn directly from him, as he could only learn through a closed door from his renowned father. I will always be grateful to my father for his generous and loving heart.

I called Rabbi Jonas Goldberg at Congregation Beth El in the spring of 1980. I had left the Yorktown Heights job where *kippot* and *kashrut* were not welcome, and I needed a new job. I asked him if he would audition a woman for the job. His answer still makes me laugh.

"My dear, we have auditioned eighteen men. At this point I would audition a monkey!"

At first, I thought he was funny and kind. I found out that he was much, much more. Thoughtful, a brilliant Torah scholar, humble, and warm. Rabbi Jonas Goldberg believed in me and helped me make history in l981.

I walked into the synagogue with my guitar in one hand and my father's hand in the other. My mother was my accompanist, but she would play for services at this

synagogue later. I don't remember much about the audition, but I do know I got the job. It made national news, as at the time, it was thought that I was the second female to have a full-time Conservative pulpit. Cantor Elaine Shapiro, of West Palm Beach, Florida, was the first full-time traditional cantor to take a pulpit position. She graduated from the Cantors Institute at the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1977, but got a master's degree rather than a cantorial degree. That was later changed. Cantor Linda Rich also began serving at Temple Beth Zion in Los Angeles as a Conservative cantor in 1978. We are all pioneers. The Associated Press had a field day with a national news story when I got the pulpit in Norwalk, Connecticut in l981.

I worked extremely hard at Congregation Beth El to catch up and fill in the blanks in my cantorial studies and experience. It was learning while doing, learning quickly and often sitting down with my father and a cassette recorder and a prayer book. I knew Shabbat and High Holy Day liturgy well, but I needed a boost to lead the liturgy for the Three Festivals (Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot), Hallel, Rosh Chodesh (the celebration of the new moon), funerals, weddings, and weekday services. My father was thrilled to teach me, and I also reached out to the master teacher Cantor Jacob "Jack" Mendelson in White Plains, New York for extra support.

Cantor Jack Mendelson is beloved the world over. His traditional *hazzanut* is revered and provides a beacon of light for all cantors. He teaches cantorial students in Reform and Conservative seminaries and there are two movies and a play written about him. He is larger than life and a fountain of knowledge. "I can't believe I'm teaching Katchko to Katchko!" he would exclaim at our lessons. He kept me laughing and learning; to this day I call him "the great coach!"

I knew I wanted to be a cantor, but the road was not smooth. There were lots of bumps and potholes along the way. Nevertheless, I was inspired by Elie Wiesel's teachings. His lessons of Jewish wisdom and the miracle of Jewish survival stayed with me and inspired me to continue in a family tradition. What could be more meaningful than to keep the family tradition going? After studying the Holocaust and researching my family tree, it was heartbreaking to learn that my grandfather's two brothers, also cantors, and many singers in the family had perished during the

Holocaust. Elie Wiesel taught me to live a "doubly Jewish life." Don't light candles just for yourself, light them for someone whose life was cut short and would have loved to do it as well. I took these lessons to heart.

At some point in my early days, a woman was very moved by my singing and offered to finance a cantorial album with full orchestrations. It was very exciting. We did a photo shoot, she hired the wonderful arranger Bob Reisenman, and we began planning this album. I asked Elie Wiesel if he would endorse it. I got a lovely note saying he would, and an incredible endorsement soon after, which I have used throughout my cantorial career.

Cantor Debbie? For me she will always remain the young student eager to learn, to remember and to communicate the thousand and one ways of being Jewish.

Both perceptive and sensitive, Debbie is well equipped to translate Jewish experience in song and prayer. This she will do with grace and passion. In fact, this she is doing in this record.

Listen to her. Debbie will enable you to hear and feel the exquisite yet melancholy beauty of Jewish melodies that must never be forgotten.

Elie Wiesel

I had some *chutzpah*, some feistiness, and some feminist energy that kept me asking, "why not?" Just because something seemed to be set didn't mean it was right or correct. I asked a lot of questions and saw things differently. "The quest is in the question!" as Wiesel would say. I thought that women cantors deserved to be heard and supported, and I decided to do something about it.