

# 50 Years at the Amud!

To Many, He's The World's Greatest Chazzan

# Cantor Chaim Adler

What is it that ranks him as one of the world's foremost *baalei tefillah*? Is it his scintillating rendition of the *Selichos*? His heart-stirring interpretation of *Unesane Tokef*? Or is it his extraordinary ability to turn even a weekday prayer into a deeply soulful experience, as we discovered during our face-to-face meeting with this world-renowned personality?

- Yakov M. Wagschal

In preparation for the upcoming *Yamim Noraim*, the period when the role of the *chazzan* is larger-than-life, we arranged a meeting with Cantor Chaim Adler in his home. Who could better explain to us the nuances of *chazzanus* than the man many consider the King of Cantors?

His amazing, ringing clear voice is only the entrée when it comes to Cantor Adler. Beyond mere vocal chords, booming as they are, Adler's voice comes with a heart; a heart that dictates the words and infuses them with life; a heart that brings out the nuances manifest in each and every word.

Adler also uses his head when he leads the prayers. From the first *Ashrei* of *Selichos* to the final words of *Neilah* he makes sure that every word is pronounced properly. Every utterance is based on a correct understanding of the meaning of the words. By his own admission he spends as much time studying the meaning of the *tefillos* as he does preparing the *chazzanus*.

That, in one sentence, codifies the essence of Cantor Adler: the synthesis of heartfelt prayer and soulful singing in which every word comes alive with meaning, accompanied by a gorgeous voice. That is why so many people think of him as "the world's best *baal tefillah*."

We were treated to an example of this masterful blend when we *davened* in the Great Synagogue of Yerushalayim, the בית הגדול, the *hachnasat הגדול*, where Cantor Adler serves as the chief *chazzan*. We experienced him at his best as he enthralled his congregants with a dazzling performance, his voice dancing through the prayers flawlessly, stirring the heartstrings of all present.

Later, we enjoyed an encore when we met him in person in his private quarters. Perhaps it would be more accurate to refer to his quarters as his studio, which any room can automatically become once Adler enters. It is not unusual for the master *chazzan* to digress in the midst of a conversation with a brilliant cadenza. He may be attempting to "clarify" a piece or illustrate a point regarding *chazzanus*. The walls of his

home may be accustomed to this by now, but we were left quivering by this powerful human loudspeaker.

We were amazed as he demonstrated how his voice bends to his will, climbing the scales to the peak of his incredible vocal range and dropping to a deep bass at whim. Too bad the printed page precludes us from sharing the experience with you!

When sitting with the man, it is easy to forget that he is already 73, may he live to 120. It was a delight to hear him praying with inspiring intensity when repeating the *chazzan's* introduction to the *Mussaf* prayer: "וקבל וקולו תפילתי כתפילת זקן ורגיל ופרקו נאה וזקנו מגודל וקולו נעים—Let my prayer be accepted like that of the elderly and experienced... whose voice is sweet...."

We approached *Chazzan* Adler after *davening* before our interview to thank him for the wonderful performance. We shamefacedly commented that the compliments of laymen may not carry much weight with such a virtuoso. But Adler waved away our unease as he smilingly shared the following humorous anecdote:

*A Jew once approached the Vizhnitzer Rebbe, the Imrei Chaim, zt"l, after davening on Rosh Hashanah, and declared, "The Rebbe's prayers have gone up to heaven."*

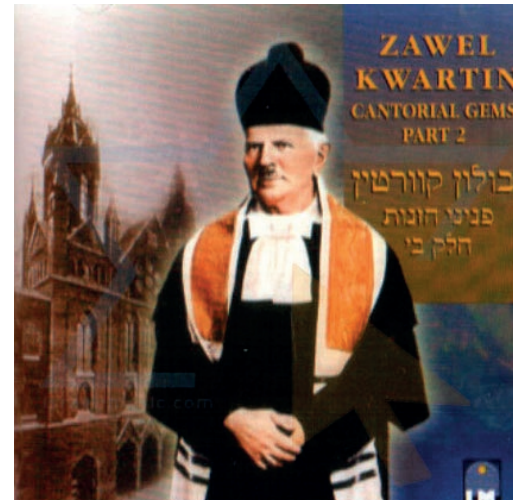
*The Rebbe looked at him intently and asked, "Are you a maven regarding what reaches the heavens?"*

*"I meant to say... it could be heard all the way upstairs in the women's gallery," the man replied.*

## Class Chazzan!

**When did you discover that you were endowed with an exceptional voice? Did your love for chazzanus begin in childhood?**

*Chazzan* Adler tells us that he definitely enjoyed *chazzanus* as a young boy. He loved to go to *shul* to listen to the beautiful voices of the various *baalei tefillah*, and his father would take him to hear professional *chazzanim*. The young Chaim Adler was deeply



Album covers from two of the most outstanding *chazzanim* of the last century, Yossele Rosenblatt and Zevulun Kwartin.

touched by their singing and he "always dreamed of being a *chazzan*."

Of course, becoming a *chazzan* means much more than just appreciating *chazzanus*. I mentioned that I am also an avid fan of *chazzanus* and that I have memorized virtually every composition ever recorded. But much as I'd like to be one, I am no *chazzan* by any stretch of the imagination! Like it or not, you have to possess the right voice to enter the field. So we asked:

**When was the first time you sang? When did you discover that you have a talent for singing?**

*It began way back as a four-year-old child, with the help of my father, Reb Tzvi, z"l. He was a tremendous talmid chacham who authored five volumes on Yoreh Deah regarding the laws of removing the forbidden parts, treifos and especially treifos of the lungs. But he was also a fine baal tefillah and he used to lead the shacharis on Yamim Noraim. He wanted me to help him out at certain points, so for example he trained me to do the following: "When I say 'וכולם מקבלים עליהם' you hum 'aaaah.'" That was the beginning.*

*Later, in fourth grade, at the age of 11, it was Rosh Chodesh Cheshvan and the melamed asked who was cut out to be chazzan at the amud. Who can recite the*

*Hallel? Each of the boys wanted to show that he was the best candidate, and so they all began to show off their voices. At the end I asked him to hear me out as well. When I finished, the melamed announced, "Chaim Adler is the class chazzan!" After that, I led the Hallel in our class every Rosh Chodesh.*

From that start, leading *Hallel* in a classroom of 20 children, his fame spread. It didn't take an expert to recognize that he had a voice of rare beauty and ability. Chaim Adler later sang in the choir that performed before Rabbi Yisrael Alter, zt"l, the "Beis Yisrael" of Ger.

Once, while Adler was studying in a yeshiva in Yerushalayim, he joined three other boys on a visit to the mentor of all *chazzanim* in Yerushalayim, Shlomo Zalman Rivlin. Rivlin had sung together with such noted *chazzanim* as Reb Yossele Rosenblatt, z"l, and Zanvil Kwartin [see *Zman* 21—*Tishrei* 5772]. Each of the four wanted to hear Rivlin's expert opinion regarding their potential as a *chazzan*. After hearing the four, Rivlin turned to Adler and said, "This one will grow up to be something special." Rivlin also told others, "Chaim Adler will grow up to be a great *chazzan*."

When he returned home from yeshiva, his father informed him that *Chazzan*