

# Cantor Sarah Transitions Roles at Fairmount Temple

by Shana Wallenstein

I've had the privilege of knowing Cantor Sarah Sager for 20 years, as she was one of the first people I met when I moved to Cleveland from Los Angeles. I reminded her of this when we caught up over the phone, excited to learn more about what was in store for the noted local cantor who would be transitioning from her role at Anshe Chesed Fairmount Temple.



She was outside on a walk and apologized for not having arrived at her intended destination in time for our call. She immediately asked me to remind her of our first meeting, and laughed as the memory came into focus. This was so typical of an interaction with Sarah. She would immediately pivot to the person she was with, wanting to check in and hear about him/her. It's a large part of why she's such a beloved cantor. Her depth and warmth exudes from within and each conversation feels like a hug.

Originally from Lincolnwood (next door to the more renowned Chicago suburb of Skokie), Illinois, Sarah graduated from Niles West High School and was finishing her undergraduate studies at Brown University when she decided to enroll in the New England Conservatory of Music in a master's program, intending to become a professional singer. While finishing her work at the Conservatory, she learned that the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion School of Sacred Music (now the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music) was accepting women and thought the role of cantor would make good use of her love of Jewish studies and her musical prowess. Her persistence paid off. Although the school hadn't planned to enroll women until the following year, Sarah had applied, interviewed, and began her coursework within a week. She would become one of just a few female cantors when she graduated.

Since 1980, Sarah has served as a member of the clergy at Anshe Chesed Fairmount Temple. She was the synagogue's first invested cantor and is now the longest-serving member of the temple's clergy. Sarah was a pioneer when she began at Anshe Chesed, one of the first female cantors in the nation. Today, she speaks proudly of the number of women serving in leadership roles in congregations across the country, including her daughter, Jennifer, who serves as a rabbi at Temple Israel in Minneapolis.

When Sarah announced her transition plans in November 2018 to a new role of Cantor Laureate, it left many community members speechless because Cantor Sager has been a touchstone for three generations of families, and has ushered congregants through life and temple changes for forty years. Her touch extends well beyond the congregation's walls. Cantor Sager is a nationally recognized and coveted speaker on Women in Judaism, Jewish music, Torah, and Judaism and Feminism.

Cantor Sager is one of the most authentic, sincere, and gracious people I've ever had the pleasure to know in my lifetime," said Todd Silverman, president of Fairmount Temple. "She is always sitting in the right seat at the right time doing specifically what she was born to do, blazing a path forward in a role that she has defined.

"Sarah is a true guiding light who gives everything she has every day to the spiritual well-being of everyone around her,"

Todd added. "She shows complete joy and passion in her singing and those causes dear to her. In one word, she is engaged at all times!"

Senior Rabbi Robert Nosanchuk shared the following at Fairmount Temple's 2020 Meeting on May 17: "Cantor Sager is an incredible part of our clergy. She has been our temple's chief musical officer and a gifted teacher and pastor to our congregants for four decades. Even though we have had to delay the formal gala celebration of her unparalleled career due to the COVID-19 crisis, the entire synagogue is grateful for Sarah's integrity, her devotion to bettering the community, and the positive example she has set for generations of families at our synagogue. We look forward to celebrating her on June 13, 2021, at a gala that will be open to all in the community!"

"Sarah Sager's Jewish authenticity and integrity have shined here in Cleveland for four decades. In my 18 years as her colleague I have admired Sarah's ability to use the Torah as a guidepost throughout her life as a person and teacher. She not only lives a life of Torah, she embodies it," Rabbi Joshua Caruso shared. "It is this authenticity that draws the community closer to her, trusting her with their life stories. She is a pastor, teacher, mentor, and treasured friend. My rabbinate has been enriched through the partnership we have formed, and I am a better person for it. I look forward to growing these bonds in the coming year

as she assumes her new role at temple as Cantor Laureate."

Pam Berkson added, "Cantor Sager has literally been with me my entire Jewish life. At my conversion, wedding, all of my children's life cycle events, and when I served as president of the Women of Fairmount Temple. She has been a mentor and guide, and more importantly, she has been a friend every step of the way."

It is clear that this new role of Cantor Laureate was crafted for and by Cantor Sager. It came from a place of wanting to give more and do more, but in a different way: Cantor Emerita, as honored as it is, felt much too passive. I want to be contributing to the spirit and heart of our learning community, with a focus on our aging population, she said, laughing, of which I am one!

Cantor Sager is proud of her training as a Wise Aging Facilitator by the Institute for Jewish Spirituality. In that capacity, she has been working with the boomer population of the congregation and looks forward to continuing in that capacity. She feels that age is one of the last socially sanctioned prejudices that needs to be retired, and has loved the role she has played in joining with others to explore this vibrant time of life. In addition, she will continue to be available for life cycle events and pastoral outreach, and plans to remain active within the community and the congregation.

Of course, the transition means she will have more time to visit her grown children and their families. Her daughter, Jennifer, and son-in-law, Mike, have two children in Minneapolis; and her son, Jonathan, who works in New York for the Cleveland-based company NRP, lives in Brooklyn with his fiancée. In the meantime, and through this pandemic, she makes do with FaceTime and Zoom to check in on family and congregants alike.

I did my first stone setting via Zoom this last week, Sarah shared. While not optimal, I felt the spirit of the family's engagement there with me. I hope that I'm able to bring people a bit closer to G-d during their time of need. That is truly the greatest gift and responsibility of all.

Through 40 years of service, Cantor Sager has received countless awards and honors. When asked if any one achievement or memory stood out, she demurred in her response. It is always an honor to be nominated and to receive recognition is of course meaningful. There are so many things for which I am grateful, but the proudest are the moments, from time to time, when I'm able to connect someone to God's presence. And I'm certainly proud of the recognition received regarding *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*. As a scholar-in-residence, I had the opportunity to address first District 3 Region and then the National Convention of The Women of Reform Judaism. I challenged them to commission the creation of a Women's Commentary to the Torah. They enthusiastically embraced the idea and ran with it. Just a few years later, the Women's Commentary became a reality.

She never imagined how inclusive and far-reaching the volume would be. Virtually every major living Jewish woman scholar plus 200 women poets were included. It was a project of

great fulfillment for me. It was my idea, but it's not mine. It belongs to all of us, which is much more enduring and meaningful.

July is right around the corner; has she been thinking about the transition and her next steps? I'm approaching this time with curiosity and an openness to what might be and what might develop. I'm a great believer that answers evolve over time. It's also a bit of a challenge to imagine being in a new space when you fully occupy the one you're in currently. Coronavirus is so invasive in our lives right now, it makes it a bit difficult to think about tomorrow, let alone beyond! I'm nervous and curious.

We talk about the challenges COVID-19 has brought to our world, in ways both large and small, Sarah added. I am often asked for advice in a variety of contexts, not just our current crisis, and I frequently share the following: All we have to do is put one foot in front of the other and sometimes, standing still is good enough.

I'm lucky to know Cantor Sager and have her in my life," Todd said

with gratitude. "Cantor Sager has had a most profound impact on the lives of many and will continue to do so for years to come!"

I leave Sarah wrapping up her walk, but my phone buzzes a bit later. It's Sarah, with an addendum to her plans for the future. Certainly, I am looking forward and hoping to teach in a variety of contexts as I love to teach Torah, anything related to Judaism, music, books, history. I look forward to continuing exploring ancient wisdom and the benefit of a mindful approach to the here and now. I hope to pursue learning and teaching the

mindful goal of a compassionate attitude towards situations, relationships and one's self, and what it could mean for all of us to be fully present for our lives as they unfold.

This idea makes me smile. Even at a time when she could be focused on herself and has certainly earned the right to do so, Cantor Sager's grand plans include helping each of us be more learned, thoughtful, and compassionate. I think of the advice she gives others, how deeply it resonated with me, and I smile. Something tells me Sarah won't be standing still too long.

*A Personal Story from  
Todd Silverman, Fairmount Temple President*

I had back surgery in 2006 and was hospitalized for three days. I do not remember much, but will never forget Cantor Sager's visit at one of the most difficult times in my life to ease some of the pain and stress. Few people have her ability to connect with others, comfort them, and provide support in nearly every situation. Cantor Sager is thoughtful, considerate, and always has the best interest of our temple and its members at heart. Time and time again, she goes to the edge of the world in an attempt to help someone else.



Rabbi Joshua Caruso, Rabbi Robert Nosanchuk, and Cantor Sarah Sager  
*Photo by Mariana Edelman Photography*