

**Inside the Mind of the Chazzan:**

# A Conversation with Cantor Joseph Malovany



Photo: Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

*antor Joseph (Yossi) Malovany has been the chazzan at Manhattan's Fifth Avenue Synagogue for the past thirty-eight years. Born in Tel Aviv, he studied at the Bilu Synagogue and School for Cantors, and took his first position in Johannesburg, South Africa, at age nineteen. Five years later, he became the chazzan of the Edgware Synagogue in London, England, where he also earned a degree from the Royal Academy of Music before moving to New York. Cantor Malovany serves as the distinguished professor of liturgical music at Yeshiva University's Belz School, and also as dean of the Moscow Academy of Jewish Music. Possessing a magnificent tenor voice, he has appeared at most of the world's major concert halls and has made many recordings.*

*Cantor Malovany was interviewed for Jewish Action by David Olivestone.*

**JA:** Every year, as the chazzan starts the first few notes of the special Kaddish for the Yamim Noraim on the first night of Selichot, the mood of Rosh Hashanah inevitably wells up in me. What are you thinking at that moment?

**CM:** People always say to me when I meet them before Rosh Hashanah, “Have me in mind when you *daven* on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.” In Neilah, we say: “*Sha’arei Shamayim p’tach, v’otzarcha hatov lanu tiftach*” [“Open the gates of Heaven; unlock for us your storehouse of goodness”]. It is we—the *shlichei tzibbur* [cantors]—who have to work hard to inspire *teshuvah* in people, in the hope that through our sincere singing—with the authentic melodies that were perhaps even sung in the Beit Hamikdash—we will open the gates of *Shamayim*. And so as soon as I begin “*Yitgadal*,” I feel a heavy burden descend on me that does not leave until after Neilah on Yom Kippur.

**JA:** What’s the most inspiring moment for you in the whole *davening* of the Yamim Noraim?

**CM:** I feel a lot of *kavanah* [inspiration] during the psalm “*LeDavid Mizmor*,” which we say at the end of Ma’ariv. “*LeDavid Mizmor*” is not a praise of God—well, everything is a praise of God—but it is a plea: *Mi ya’aleh b’har Hashem?* Who can ascend to God’s heights? In that chapter of Tehillim, as the *shaliach tzibbur*, as a *ba’al tefillah*, as a chazzan, I confront the congregation and I confront God. I am telling the people: “You appointed me as your *shaliach tzibbur*, so now I—as your teacher, as your mentor—am here to remind you that only a person who is *neki chapayim uvar leivav*, who has clean hands and a pure heart, can do *teshuvah*.” At the same time, I am also talking to God. “God, please remember who is coming to You, who wants to get closer to You—those who try to be *neki chapayim uvar leivav*. Okay, I am doing my job, asking them to become better people; now You please do Your job and accept them.”

**JA:** Do you feel yourself to be adequate in that role, or maybe inadequate?

**CM:** Inadequate. And of course the inadequacy is spelled out in the *tefillah* that I say in the morning before Mussaf—the chazzan’s *Hineni*. In *Hineni*, it says a chazzan has to have a beard, a nice voice, and so on, and above all, he has to be acceptable to all those who appointed him. Yet you feel that you may have sinned—let me talk about myself, that *I* may have sinned. And if I sinned during the year, I have to do *teshuvah* too, so what right do I have to ask God for forgiveness on behalf of others? For me, the ideas of the *tefillot*, the music of the *tefillot*, highlight the inadequacy, as you say. But even so, my task is to use those ideas and that beautiful music to inspire those who *daven* with me.

**JA:** As a layman, if I am asked to act as the chazzan on a Shabbat morning, or even during the week, I find that

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**Traditional** **Tangy**  
**Pungent** **Good** **Spicy**  
**Hot** **Mmmm**  
**GOOD**  
**Original** **Good** **TANGY**

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**Original** **Traditional**

**“It is we—the *shlichei tzibbur*—who have to work hard to inspire *teshuvah* in the people, in the hope that through our sincere singing we will open the gates of *Shamayim*.”**



Photo: Marcin Wegner

**I’m concentrating on saying the words properly and getting the *nusach* right more than on the meaning. As a professional chazzan, how much do you have to concentrate on the music, the phrasing, and so on?**

**CM:** Not so much, because I’ve been a chazzan for so many years. But when I finish *davening* even on a regular Shabbat morning, I’m worn out, because I’m always trying to inspire the people through the music and the interpretation of the words. I want people to ask me after the *davening*: “Why did you emphasize this word or that word? Why did you sing that paragraph in this particular motif and not in a different motif? Is it because of something in the news? Are you sending us a message?” Whatever they ask, they are right. When they ask these questions and involve themselves in the *davening*, they become part of the community. Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, *zt”l*, once explained that there is a distinction between *tefillah b’tzibbur* [praying with a

community]—that is, physically *davening* alongside others—and *tefillat hatzibbur* [communal prayer], coming together as a spiritual unit. As a *tzibbur*, we are a group of people who pray and sing together, and in order to do that in a unified and proper way, you need the chazzan.

**JA: Isn’t there inevitably an element of performance in a chazzan’s *davening*?**

**CM:** To be truthful, yes. Anybody who will tell you differently is incorrect. Now maybe at the beginning of a chazzan’s career, the notion of performance is much more emphasized than later in life. Speaking for myself, I, thank God, have already made my reputation. I’m not there to impress anyone with my *davening*. I’m now, more than ever, a real *shaliach tzibbur*, a real *ba’al tefillah*. If I sing a major piece on Rosh Hashanah, I give a little more voice, yes, it is true. For example, I like to sing a piece that the great chazzan Moshe Koussevitzky sang, “*Al Kayn*

*Nekaveh*,” at the beginning of *Malchuyot*, which is very, very *nusachdik* [full of the traditional themes]. In the middle of it, there is a melody that sounds almost like an aria, but it is very much in the same *nusach*. Sometimes I say to myself maybe I shouldn’t be singing it, maybe it is a little too showy; in fact, I sing it as a concert piece, too. But look, I’m a chazzan, and people expect to hear something more than if I were a simple *ba’al tefillah*. To give you another example, on Rosh Hashanah I sing Yossele Rosenblatt’s “*Meloch*.” It makes a tremendous impact; it interprets the text; it creates moods, and on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, one of the tasks that I have as a chazzan is to create a mood, and that helps me do it.

**JA: What’s the most annoying thing the congregation can do during the *davening*?**

**CM:** Talk. For some people, it’s a reunion. They haven’t seen each other since last *Motzaei Yom Kippur*, so they



Cantor Malovany teaches a class at Fifth Avenue Synagogue. Courtesy of Fifth Avenue Synagogue

have a lot of ground to cover. It's very annoying when people talk, but I have taught my congregants a lot of melodies over the years, and most people sing along.

**JA: Is it physically very demanding to daven Mussaf on Yom Kippur, standing still for over three hours while you're fasting?**

**CM:** The former director of the opera house in Mexico used to daven in my shul (he recently passed away). He used to say that vocally, the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur davening is equivalent to singing about five Verdi operas. But it doesn't bother me, because I am so involved in the tefillah. I must have a watch in front of me; otherwise, I would go overboard. When we have a little break before Minchah, I don't go out of the shul. I sit, and that's when I feel all the effort. But I don't let myself relax too much, because I still have to daven Neilah.

**JA: What goes through your mind during Neilah?**

**CM:** I think of my family; I think of my children; I think now of my grandchildren; I think of my congregation. It's the time of *neilat hash'a'ar*, when the gate is about to close and God assembles all our prayers as He's making His decisions. I like to sing happier melodies also during Neilah, because by doing that I show, at least to myself, that I'm confident that God has accepted our *tefillot*, our prayers, and that it should be a better year. At the end of Yom Kippur there is an element of relief, but when I remember that I still have to daven on Sukkot, in just five days, the relief is not that great! ■

You can hear Cantor Malovany sing "LeDavid Mizmor" at [www.ou.org/ledavidmizmor](http://www.ou.org/ledavidmizmor) (recorded live at a Hachnasat Sefer Torah ceremony in the Remah Synagogue in Krakow, Poland, 1988). To hear his rendition of "Kol Nidrei," go to [www.ou.org/kolnidrei](http://www.ou.org/kolnidrei) (recorded at a concert in 1996).



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