

She's a natural fit for cantor role

Sharone Rosen marks her 20th anniversary

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GRANADA HILLS - She had her sights set on the musical theater stage but her Jewish soul led her away from Broadway to a religious stage, the bimah at Temple Beth Torah.

Cantor Sharone Rosen's powerful voice has been calling people to prayer at the Reform congregation for 20 years this September.

Rosen, the temple's choir and musical guests will celebrate her anniversary tonight with a concert featuring a potpourri of Jewish songs, ballads and Broadway show tunes.

"The first time I saw a woman cantor was at Stephen S. Wise Temple when I was in the 11th grade. 'I'd like to do that,' is what I was thinking," said Hollywood-born Rosen, who graduated as a theater major from California State University, Northridge.

Traditionally, as it still is with Orthodox Judaism, a cantor, who leads a Jewish congregation in prayers, is male.

"People are surprised when I tell them what I do. For the most part, people are open to me being a cantor," Rosen said, "but I just recently heard someone say, 'Oh, I don't know if I can get used to a woman cantor.'"

The first woman credited with the title, Sheila Robbins, who did not have college training to become a cantor, became one in 1955 at a Reform temple in New York. Barbara Ostfeld Horowitz was invested as a cantor in 1975 by the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.

The late Cantor Allan Michelson, who served at Adat Ari El in North Hollywood, took Rosen on as a cantorial student. She studied informally with Michelson, a renowned cantor, for several years.

Rosen's initial connection to Temple Beth Torah 20 years ago was through her cousin, Rabbi Jerry Fisher, then the congregation's rabbi. She was a soloist and a substitute cantor before auditioning and being hired.

"I grew up in a pretty secular home. But I was drawn to my Jewish roots. To be able to sing and sing Jewishly, that was appealing to me," said Rosen, who often plays a guitar while leading the congregation in the Shabbat prayers.

Rosen wears a few hats at Temple Beth Torah: cantor, choir director and substitute rabbi. In her nonclergy life, she is just as busy.

She has been the morning drive traffic reporter on KFWB radio for many years. She has a connection to KCSN, the radio station at CSUN. She fills in as host for the classical music program.

She once was the host of the station's now-defunct "L'Chayim" show, that featured Jewish music and news on Jewish events.

Rosen went back to school and became a doctor of chiropractic in 2001.

When she became the cantor she also inherited the choir director's job. She had never conducted and it was an odd feeling to her to be the boss. Her humor and innovative ideas have given her a loyal following with the singers.

A current member, Meggan Taylor, got to know Rosen when they were both standing on a rock as performers during a 1973 production of "Brigadoon" at CSUN.

Years later, Rosen invited her friend to come and sing with the Temple Beth Torah Choir. Being a Roman Catholic, Taylor was hesitant because she thought people would think it was weird. She accepted the invitation and has been singing for 16 years with the Temple Beth Torah choir.

"Sharone is very relaxed, very creative and fun. She takes your input," Taylor said. "I've always known she had a beautiful voice but when I heard her sing the Shema Koleynu, I burst into tears because she had this in her."

Rosen has challenged the choir and the congregation to learn different melodies and arrangements for Shabbat and holiday prayers while not totally abandoning the familiar.

"The role of the cantor is to help people reach a more spiritual plane during a service," Rosen said. "I think I've tried to show people how to be spiritual and traditional without being dogmatic."

Shirley Berg, a longtime choir and temple member, said Rosen has a varied repertoire from "hazzanish" to very modern.

"She's always bringing in something new. We have fun. That's what keeps me in the choir," Berg said. "When we've been in between rabbis, she has kept our congregation glued together. She is the glue."

Rosen is looking forward to tonight's concert because she will be singing songs that she said she would never get the part to sing, like "Never-Never Land."

"I'm never going to be Peter Pan," she said, laughing.

Rosen and Taylor will team up with "The Grass is Always Greener" from Broadway's "Woman of the Year."

"From B'rachot to Broadway" concert, 8 p.m. today, Temple Beth Torah, 16651 Rinaldi St., Granada Hills. Tickets: \$20. Upcoming: Cantor Sharone Rosen will lead the Shabbat service, 8 p.m. Aug. 17. Call (818) 831-0835 or see www.bethtorah-sfv.org.

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